

Asia Maior. The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989.

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ISSN 2385-2526

ISBN 978-88-3313-044-6 (paper)

ISBN 978-88-3313-045-3 (e-book)

Annual journal - Vol. XXVIII, 2017

Published jointly by Associazione Asia Maior & CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei "Cesare Bonacossa" - Università di Pavia

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Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

Vol. XXVIII / 2017

Asia in the Waning Shadow of American Hegemony

Edited by

Michelguglielmo Torri, Elisabetta Basile, Nicola Mocci

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THAILAND 2017: POLITICAL STABILITY AND DEMOCRATIC CRISIS IN THE
FIRST YEAR OF KING VAJIRALONGKORN

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In January 2017 King Maha Vajiralongkorn of the Chakri dynasty, who had ascended the throne only one month earlier, demanded a change to the constitution drafted by the military junta ruling the country since May 2014. This change regarded the expansion of the royal prerogatives, de facto augmenting his power vis-à-vis both the army and the traditional elites. Later in the year the king took new initiatives to tighten his personal control over the palace bureaucracy and the immense economic assets of the monarchy. These moves not only signalled a redefinition of the power equilibrium between the king and the ruling military junta but were also likely to have a lasting impact on the role of the monarchy. While the royal powers were reasserted and increased, the junta largely succeeded in maintaining its own power. Uncertainty remained on the date of the promised political election. But anyway, the new constitution does not allow a genuine return to democracy as it confers direct control over key political and economic levers to the army.

Internationally the junta benefitted from the advent of Donald Trump to the White House. However, the relevance of the political and economic partnership between Bangkok and Beijing appeared to be steadily on the rise.

1. Introduction

In May 2014 a military coup removed from office the elected prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra. The declared aim of the coup was to restore peace and promote reconciliation in a country in which political polarisation since the early 2000s had repeatedly produced instability and sectarian violence. In 2016 the military junta (called the National Council for Peace and Order, NCPO) had a new constitution approved in a referendum. Although the iron fist used by the military did not contribute to reconciliation, the referendum transformed the country into a «guided democracy», leaving the army in control of key levers. This paper argues that during 2017 the junta consolidated its power, aided by positive economic growth and an improvement in international relations with the United States and the European Union.

The consolidation of the junta, whose commitment to permit political elections in late 2018 remains highly ambiguous, was accompanied by a major change in Thai politics and society: namely, the role of the king. The main event of 2016 had been the royal succession to the throne, when, after

the death of King Bhumibol, the new monarch became King Maha Vajiralongkorn. Although the new king of the royal house of Chakri had been crown prince for decades, being the only son of King Bhumibol, he was less involved than his sister Sirindhorn in court life and the development projects sponsored by his father. In the recent past, he had increased his public exposure representing the royal family in official events while continuing to spend part of the year abroad.

Only one month after ascending the throne, in January 2017, King Vajiralongkorn took the public initiative to restore and expand the royal prerogatives. Such an assertive role represented a rupture with the style adopted by his father, who could rely on his personal charisma to exert moral suasion.

This radical change in the role of the monarchy was bound to produce a lasting effect on the kingdom. The year under review saw the beginning of this process and possibly a redefinition of the close relations between the army and the monarchy. Accordingly, the largest part of the present article is dedicated to this major process. The article also provides an update on the continuing crisis in the southern provinces and reviews the evolution of Thailand's international relations.

2. A suspended democracy and the new equilibrium between an assertive monarch and an enduring military junta

2.1. Constitutional change and royal prerogatives – an assertive King Vajiralongkorn

The death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in October 2016 was a watershed for Thailand. The king had reigned for seven decades and contributed to the making of modern Thailand. Although the country had become a constitutional monarchy in 1932, his influence on Thai politics and society was immense. As suggested in *Asia Maior 2016*, much of Thai history in the last 10 years can be understood by taking into account the preparation for the passing of the old and frail king and the complexity of the royal succession.¹ The king's only son and designated heir, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, was known for his flamboyant lifestyle, and key sectors of the establishment had reservedly voiced concern for his future as-

1. Pietro P. Masina, 'Thailand 2016: The death of King Bhumibol and the deepening of the political crisis', *Asia Maior 2016*, p. 244. For two critical interpretations of the ways in which the prospective of the royal succession may have contributed to shaping recent Thai politics see, in particular, Giles Ji Ungpakorn, *A Coup for the Rich: Thailand's Political Crisis*, Bangkok: Workers Democracy Publishers, 2007; Andrew MacGregor Marshall, *A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand's Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century*, London: Zed Books, 2014.

cent to the throne. A major cause of anxiety for the traditional elite was his alleged closeness with deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.² In recent years, however, the position of the crown prince had consolidated also thanks to the clear backing of the army.³ The 2014 coup staged to depose Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, had the objective to facilitate, although possibly also to control, the royal succession of Prince Vajiralongkorn.⁴ Just a few hours after the death of King Bhumibol, NCPO Head and Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha clarified that the roadmap for the ascent of Vajiralongkorn to the throne was confirmed, although the crown prince had decided to dedicate two weeks to the mourning of his father before the formal succession. The army had partly justified its coup with the need to protect the royal authority against the disorder produced by the previous government and by the supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra.⁵ Due to lack of popular support, the legitimacy of military rule depended on the sanction it received from the court. For his part, the new king, who did not share the popularity and the prestige of his late father, had much to gain from the support of a military government that had succeeded in silencing the opposition and extended its firm grip over the entire country. Both sides had, therefore, an interest in reproducing the symbiotic relationship between the monarchy and the army that had characterised the long reign of King Bhumibol. The solidity of this marriage of convenience, however, was tested at the beginning of 2018, only one month after the ascent to the throne of Maha Vajiralongkorn.

In less than a decade the army had seized power twice, on both occasions dismissing democratically elected governments. In 2006 it ousted Thaksin Shinawatra and imposed a new constitution, replacing the liberal one approved in 1997. The new legal and institutional framework, however, once the country returned to democracy, could not prevent the victory of Thaksin's party in 2007 and then the election of Yingluck Shinawatra in 2011. The lesson was learned by the army and a new constitution was drafted after the 2014 coup.⁶ This time the changes were more radical, *de facto* creating the basis for a long-term transformation of the country into a «guided democracy» in which the army could maintain control over the government after new elections. The army obtained the right to appoint the Senate that, in turn, had the power to stage a no-confidence vote against the

2. 'Return to sender', *The Economist*, 14 January 2017.

3. Kevin Hewison, 'Thailand's long succession', *New Mandala*, 3 December 2016; David Streckfuss, 'In Thailand, a King's Coup?', *The New York Times*, 9 April 2017.

4. 'Sworn to monarchy, Thailand's military remain power brokers in royal succession', *The Straits Times*, 14 October 2016.

5. Chico Harlan, 'Five reasons a coup was staged in Thailand, again', *The Washington Post*, 23 May 2014.

6. Jonathan Head, 'Thailand's constitution: New era, new uncertainties', *BBC News*, 7 April 2017.

government. As the prime minister must obtain a vote of confidence of the two legislative houses, voting jointly, it would be enough for the appointed Senate to receive the support of one-fourth of the representatives of the Lower House to impose its will. Furthermore, the new electoral system was designed to reduce the weight of big parties and so obtain a fragmented and politically weak House of Representatives.

This new constitution was widely criticised by the main political parties and by independent legal experts. In August 2016, however, it was approved by a national referendum. The vote was highly controversial as any form of electoral campaign against the text imposed by the junta, or even any form of independent information, was harshly repressed. Nevertheless, the referendum was presented by the army as a source of popular legitimation for the NCPO and its work.⁷

The adoption of the new constitution, in effect, confirmed that the army had succeeded in consolidating its grip over the country. However, to become effective the new constitution required the endorsement of the king. The NCPO's need to obtain the monarch's final approval resulted in an episode that was interpreted by some as an indicator of a latent friction between the army and King Vajiralongkorn⁸ – an episode that in any case allowed an unexpected glimpse of the power struggles within the inner circles of Thai political power.

On 10 January 2017 Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha revealed that King Vajiralongkorn had requested changes in the constitution regarding the royal powers and that the government had already agreed to make them. Premier Prayuth tried to dismiss the request as one of «three to four issues [...] need[ing] fixing» and suggested that «this has nothing to do with the rights and freedom of the people». The premier also clarified that these changes would require up to three months before becoming effective, because of the need to change the text of the constitution.⁹

Notwithstanding the government's attempt to present the king's request as a technical matter of minor importance, the significance of this incident was extraordinary. While the monarchy exerts great influence over national politics, explicit interventions of this kind are rare. The incident made clear to the public that the constitutional draft had not been negotiated with the king. Among the articles to be revised, one of them regarded the role of final arbiter at times of political conflict. Whereas the new constitution assigned this role to the Constitutional Court, King Vajiralongkorn requested that it be returned to the king, as in previous constitutions.¹⁰ This highly unusual public intervention by the new king

7. 'In Thailand, a King's Coup?'

8. *Ibid.*

9. 'Thai king's office seeks changes to draft constitution', *Reuters*, 10 January 2017.

10. 'Return to sender'.

was, therefore, a clear signal: Vajiralongkorn had no intention of sitting in the background.¹¹

Another change requested by the court of Chakri was the removal of the rule that the king should nominate a regent when travelling abroad.¹² Vajiralongkorn had lived part of his adult life abroad and even after his advent to the throne, had continued to spend part of his time in Germany. Without the need to nominate a regent, he would be able to maintain his royal prerogatives even when not residing in Thailand. The issue here is more substantial than it appears. As already discussed in *Asia Maior 2016*, the Thai monarchy is a complex power structure that goes beyond the king himself and even the formal institutional framework. It is rather 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».¹³ When Vajiralongkorn was crown prince, it is most likely that his relations with the inner circles of royal power were less than idyllic. It is probable that the new king had decided to send a clear message about his intention to exert his authority directly, without the constraints and limitations of a very sophisticated court bureaucracy. In any case, immediately after he became monarch, Vajiralongkorn proceeded to reshape the royal household, appointing and promoting officers loyal to him and removing senior members, many of whom had held the post for decades under King Bhumibol.¹⁴ Half of the Privy Council was changed, increasing the representation of those with a background in the army. The king, however, did not go so far as to replace the most trusted adviser of his late father, 96-year-old Chairman of the Privy Council Prem Tinsulanonda.¹⁵

Among those promoted, notable was the case of Suthida Tidjai, a former Thai Airways stewardess, who has often been seen at Vajiralongkorn's side since 2008, namely well before his accession to the throne. Though Suthida has never been announced as Vajiralongkorn's wife, she is now officially named Suthida Vajiralongkorn na Ayudhya, which implies that the pair are married. Suthida was elevated to the role of general of the king's own bodyguard on the same day as Vajiralongkorn's accession to the throne.¹⁶ In the following months, she received further promotions and honours. As the king had already been married and divorced three times, Suthida is his fourth wife. At the end of the year, she attended the ceremony for the cremation of King

11. 'Thailand's new king shows his strength', *Reuters*, 14 February 2017.

12. 'Thai constitutional changes would mean no regent required: media reports', *Nikkei Asia Review*, 12 January 2017.

13. Pietro P. Masina, 'Thailand 2016: The death of King Bhumibol and the deepening of the political crisis', *Asia Maior 2016*, p. 246, based on Duncan McCargo, 'Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4, December 2005.

14. 'Thailand's new king shows his strength'.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

Bhumibol along with the current king. However, just a few steps behind her was Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi, supposed to be Vajiralongkorn's new lover.¹⁷

In the following months, the king further consolidated his powers. In May the agencies supervising the royal affairs and security – the until that moment had operated under the control of the government, the army, and the police, came under King Vajiralongkorn's direct control. In the same month, a royal decree established that privy councillors, civilians, and military and police officers working for the royal agencies were officials under the king's custody – not civil servants or state officials – and that the king could give military or police ranks to, or remove ranks from, any official under his custody at his pleasure.¹⁸ A further, noteworthy, step was made in July: King Vajiralongkorn took full control of all the assets of the Thai Crown. On the basis of a new law, the king himself, and no longer the minister of Finance, has the authority to control the Crown Property Bureau, whose assets are estimated to be in the region of US\$ 30 billion.¹⁹ Although the late King Bhumibol was already *de facto* able to dispose of the assets of the Crown, the new law gave King Vajiralongkorn complete control also *de jure* as his own private property.²⁰

On 6 April King Vajiralongkorn eventually signed the new constitution – the twentieth since 1932. The date chosen for the elaborate signing ceremony in the Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall was noteworthy: it was Chakri Day, which commemorates the current royal dynasty. The king's office requested a 21-gun salute and prayers to be chanted by Buddhist monks in temples around the country, possibly as a way to associate the new constitution with the beginning of the new reign.²¹ Moreover, tying the promulgation of the constitution to Chakri Day would signal that the constitution was presented as a gift to the people from the monarchy, further boosting the role of the new king as the arbiter of Thai politics.²²

The assertiveness of the new king probably surprised a junta whose authority after the 2014 coup had seemed unlimited. It also created a sense of incertitude about the longer-term intentions of King Vajiralongkorn: the reaffirmation of royal prerogatives may permit him to continue living as he pleases but could also be a means of redefining the monarchy's relationship with the military.²³

In any case, the approval of the new constitution represented a major achievement for the junta. The text created the basis for a lasting military

17. Jonathan Head, 'Thailand's constitution: New era, new uncertainties'.

18. 'New law issued to regulate Royal family assets', *The Nation*, 17 July 2017.

19. 'Thailand's king given full control of crown property', *Reuters*, 17 July 2017.

20. 'New law issued to regulate Royal family assets'.

21. 'Thailand's constitution: New era, new uncertainties'.

22. 'In Thailand, a King's Coup?'

23. *Ibid.* See also, Pongphisoot Busbarat, 'Thailand', in *Southeast Asia Outlook 2018*, Perspective, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, Issue 1, 2018,

influence over Thai politics through a hybrid political system only partially democratic.²⁴ The appointed Senate and institutions dominated by the royalist elite, such as the Constitutional Court, would be able to exert control over the government and, if needed, to remove the prime minister. Even a 75% majority in the House of Representatives would not guarantee the stability of a government in contrast with the army's interests. Furthermore, the constitution prescribes that future governments are bound to follow the 20-year strategy defined by the military junta before holding new elections.²⁵

2.2. Ambiguity on the date for new elections

At the time of the coup, the army declared that the new constitution would enable a return to the polls in a couple of years. However, once the constitution had been promulgated, the army continued to avoid committing to a date for the elections. The promise to allow general elections at the end of 2018 was formalised by Premier Prayuth during an official meeting with US President Donald Trump at the White House in October; the same day, though, Prayuth told at a meeting with the Thai community in Washington that, most likely, the elections would be held in 2019.²⁶

The uncertainty regarding the date for new general elections revealed the junta's continuing fear of a return to the polls, notwithstanding the semi-authoritarian legal framework devised within the new constitution. The activities of existing political parties continued to be banned under the draconian rules enforced by the army – resulting in strong protests from the two parties that had dominated political life in the previous 15 years: the Democratic Party of Abhisit Vejjajiva and the Pheu Thai created by Thaksin Shinawatra to replace the proscribed Thai Rak Thai.²⁷ At the last elections in 2011, these two parties had won 424 of the 500 seats in parliament. The junta needed viable alternatives if its normalisation process was to succeed. In November 2017 Premier Prayuth neither confirmed nor denied that the junta was involved in the creation of a military-backed political party.²⁸ Insistent rumors from well-informed sources suggested that concrete projects for the creation of a new party were underway, as well as projects to gain the support of former MPs of existing parties, especially from the conservative sectors of the Democratic Party that had staunchly opposed the govern-

24. Jonathan Head, 'Thailand's constitution: New era, new uncertainties'.

25. *Ibid.*

26. 'Abhisit, academics criticise «risky» new election delay', *The Nation*, 9 October 2017.

27. 'Mounting questions for Thai Premier Prayut Chan-o-cha with November poll still uncertain', *The Straits Times*, 3 January 2018.

28. 'PM leaves door open for military-backed party', *The Nation*, 8 November 2017.

ments formed by Thaksin and his sister Yingluck.²⁹ By the end of the year, however, no one could be sure if elections would be held at the end of 2018 and what their eventual outcome might be. The main question continued to be if – notwithstanding all the odds – the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai party could still win a majority of seats as it had in all previous elections since 2001. Given the volatile situation, the possibility that Prayuth could continue to serve as Prime Minister after the general elections could not be ruled out either.³⁰

2.3. *The trial of Yingluck Shinawatra*

National reconciliation was one of the proclaimed objectives of the junta when it removed the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra. Reconciliation was a popular catchphrase for large sectors of public opinion, especially among the Bangkok middle class. Since Thaksin's first election, political polarisation in Thailand had often taken the form of mass demonstrations and rallies that had paralysed the country for long periods. Pro-Thaksin Red Shirts and conservative royalist Yellow Shirts had repeatedly marched through Bangkok to occupy key public places (including parliament and ministries) and strategic infrastructures (such as Bangkok's international airport).

The Prayuth Chan-ocha-led junta certainly succeeded in restoring calm using an iron rod but did not take any steps towards true reconciliation. Any such steps would have required dialogue and, accordingly, some form of agreement, if not directly with Thaksin at least with his sister. On the contrary, the junta tried to silence Yingluck Shinawatra by staging against her a trial for corruption that could result in 10 years imprisonment had she been found guilty.

The charge was negligence for failing to prevent excessive losses and corruption involving a rice subsidy scheme implemented by her administration.³¹ Through this scheme, the government paid farmers nearly twice the market rate for their rice. Yingluck's government considered the scheme a useful instrument to support the income of poor farmers. Its foes denounced it as the handing of billions of dollars to Shinawatra supporters, especially in the north and northeast of the country, where poor farmers constitute the strongest Red Shirts' base. The elimination of the scheme was one of the first targets of the junta, who denounced it as a waste of over US\$ 8 billion of public money.³²

29. Duncan McCargo, 'Will Thailand return to electoral democracy in 2018?', *Nikkei Asian Review*, 2 January 2018.

30. *Ibid.*

31. 'Thailand's political trial of the decade explained', *BBC News*, 27 September 2017.

32. 'Yingluck Shinawatra: ex-Thai PM sentenced to five years in jail', *The Guardian*, 27 September 2017.

The allegations made against Yingluck were very popular among Bangkok's middle class and the conservative elite, who had resented the populist but progressive measures adopted by Thaksin and Yingluck over the years – such as universal access to healthcare, a higher minimum wage, and development funds for rural villages. Trying to eliminate Yingluck through judiciary means, however, represented a risk for the military. Whenever she appeared in court, the attractive and telegenic leader used it as a podium to present herself as a victim of the country. Each time hundreds of people defied the strict ban on political gatherings to show their support. In the last court appearance at the beginning of August, she declared herself a «victim of a deep political game» – a claim that was difficult to deny.³³

A verdict was expected on 25 August 2017. For Yingluck, there was the risk of a long jail term. For the junta, the political risk was equally daunting. A prison sentence would have certainly resulted in mass protests staged by the Red Shirts, with unpredictable results. By itself, this would have discredited a military government that had claimed to have brought peace and order to the country. Conversely, an acquittal would have resulted in an angry reaction among the conservative sectors that the junta represented, undermining the legitimacy of the junta itself.³⁴

The day the verdict was expected, Yingluck failed to appear in court. She had left the country, possibly for Dubai, where her brother Thaksin had been living since 2008 in self-imposed exile to escape a corruption sentence. Her escape was most likely the result of a tacit agreement with the junta.³⁵ When the court convened again, on 27 September, Yingluck was condemned to five years in prison *in absentia*. The political crisis that the sentence could have provoked had been averted.³⁶

Yingluck's escape represented a major blow for the Pheu Thai party, which lost its most charismatic leader. What exactly will be the consequences in terms of votes, however, is difficult to predict. The party maintains an emotional hold over the north and northeast, making up about 40% of Thailand's voters.³⁷ Yet, given the new electoral system and years of repression targeting pro-Thaksin media and organisations, it is likely that the party will pay a price if and when new elections are held.

33. Richard Bernstein, 'Thailand: The Permanent Coup', *New York Review of Books*, 28 September 2017.

34. 'Thailand's political trial of the decade explained', *BBC News*, 27 September 2017.

35. 'Yingluck trial: Ex-PM «flees Thailand» ahead of verdict', *BBC News*, 25 August 2017.

36. 'Yingluck Shinawatra: ex-Thai PM sentenced to five years in jail'.

37. 'Thailand's political trial of the decade explained'.

2.4. *The repression of dissent and the lèse-majesté law*

The use of legal instruments to control and coerce was not limited to the politically motivated trial against Yingluck Shinawatra. Section 44 of the constitution imposed by the junta gave the prime minister the power to stop and suppress «any act which undermines public peace and order or national security, the monarchy, national economics or administration of state affairs».³⁸ Harassment and arbitrary detention have been used routinely not only against political opponents but also against journalists, lawyers, and academics to instil a sense of fear in the country. In July, in a case that had rather large international resonance, the authorities charged the organiser of the International Conference on Thai Studies, Chiang Mai University Professor Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, and four conference attendees, for violating the junta's ban on public assembly.³⁹

Another powerful legal instrument used to repress any form of dissent through the threat of long jail sentences was the very discretionary use of the severe *lèse-majesté* Thai law. According to article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, the defamation against the king, queen and regent is punishable by three to 15 years in prison. Since defamation can be interpreted in different ways, this law makes it possible to punish anyone criticising the monarchy even indirectly. At the time of the coup in May 2014 just six people were in jail for *lèse-majesté*. In the three years since the coup, more than 100 people were arrested under this law. At the end of 2017 half of them were awaiting trial behind bars or serving jail terms. Even a «like» on a Facebook post considered offensive to the royal family was sufficient reason for a harsh jail sentence.⁴⁰ In June a military court convicted a Thai man on 10 counts of *lèse-majesté* for his posts on Facebook and gave him a 35 years jail sentence – the sentence was actually 70 years, but he received clemency after his confession.⁴¹ At the same time, social media were the object of strong pressure from the Thai authorities to exert censorship on images deemed offensive to the monarchy – in July they tried to avoid the viewing in Thailand of footage of King Vajiralongkorn strolling around a shopping centre in Munich, wearing a cropped top and sporting fake tattoos, together with his new lover.⁴²

38. 'In Thailand, civic life is suffering under the junta's tight grip', *The Economist*, 24 August 2017.

39. 'Thailand: Drop Bogus Charges Against Thai Studies Academics', *Human Rights Watch*, 16 August 2017.

40. 'In Thailand, civic life is suffering under the junta's tight grip', *The Economist*, 24 August 2017.

41. 'Man jailed for 35 years in Thailand for insulting monarchy on Facebook', *The Guardian*, 9 June 2017.

42. 'Thailand's colourful new king brought «his mistress AND his former air stewardess wife» to his father's lavish cremation ceremony with both marching in bearskin hats', *Daily Mail Online*, 27 October 2017. In 2016 the then Crown Prince

The increased number of cases in which people were prosecuted for *lèse-majesté* and the severity of sentences since the military coup was the result of diverse reasons. The law was used by the junta as a powerful tool to crush political dissidents and specifically the Red Shirts' movement. It also allowed the new king to consolidate his power by removing officers he did not like or trust. David Streckfuss, the author of a book dedicated to the Thai legal system and specifically to the *lèse-majesté* law, suggested that the abusive use of the law by the military junta risks undermining the monarchy's authority. The author suggests, therefore, that the king may eventually intervene to pardon or reduce the sentences on political prisoners or people who have been jailed for *lèse-majesté* crimes, or even require emending this controversial law, to improve the political atmosphere.⁴³ This view, however, does not seem to be shared by other scholars. More pessimistically, one of the most famous Thai dissidents, now in exile in Japan, suggests that the harsh use of the law serves the purposes of a king whose authority is largely based on the fear he can impose on his subjects. Among the many accusations against King Vajiralongkorn, Dr. Pavin Chachavalpongpun reports the very sinister story of the Buddha Monthon Temporary Prison that Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn had built in his own Bangkok residence, the Dhaveevatthana Palace. The Thai scholar also gives credit to the rumours that disgraced staff members of the crown prince, including very senior police officers, were jailed in this prison and then died in mysterious circumstances.⁴⁴

3. *The cremation of King Bhumibol – the closing of a long page of Thai history*

On 26 October, one year after his death, King Bhumibol, also known as Rama IX of the Chakri dynasty, was cremated in an imposing ceremony in Bangkok. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary citizens travelled to the capital city to pay their last respects to a beloved king. Many more participated in parallel celebrations in other parts of the country. This event closed the year of mourning for the late monarch and a long page of Thai history.

The cremation paved the way to the official coronation of Bhumibol's heir, Vajiralongkorn, scheduled in 2018. The new king, however, had already consolidated his authority and, as we have seen, had become increasingly assertive. Even during his father's cremation, Vajiralongkorn continued to

had been photographed in similar attire at the Munich International Airport in the company of his unofficial wife Suthida.

43. David Streckfuss, 'In Thailand, a King's Coup?'. See also David Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason and Lèse-Majesté*, London and New York: Routledge, 2010.

44. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 'Land of fear, under Vajiralongkorn', *The Japan Times*, 12 May 2017.

test his absolute power by attending the ceremony with his unofficial wife, Suthida Tidjai, and, a few steps behind, his presumed new lover, Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi; both dressed in military uniform, although the former sporting the rank of general and the latter only that of colonel.⁴⁵ One or the other of the two women had accompanied the king during previous mourning events, suggesting a return to a tradition in which the monarchs had more than one wife.

The main question about the new king, however, does not regard his affairs or his personal life. It regards the ways in which he may (or may not) change relations between the monarchy and other sectors of the national elite. During his first year as Rama X, the new king re-established and extended the royal prerogatives vis-à-vis the army and the political system. He reorganised the palace and took full direct control over the immense economic assets of the monarchy. In the near future, he could even redefine the power relations with other sectors of the Thai elite. King Vajiralongkorn's supporters suggest that this might include challenging the power of the big business families that have long leveraged their royal connections to corner sectors of the economy – a process that has become increasingly relevant since the 2014 coup.⁴⁶

4. The southern thorn – persistent insurgency and ineffectual negotiations

In 2017 the redefinition of the relationship between the monarchy and the military junta overshadowed the other major problem in Thai politics: the insurgency in the three southern provinces, which are largely ethnically Malay and Muslim.⁴⁷ These territories formed part of the Pattani Sultanate, which was conquered by the Kingdom of Siam in 1785. Assimilation – often through violence and coercion – had been resisted by the local population over the years and in the last decades only occasional separatist violence emerged. Since 2001 violence has escalated, peaking in 2004 and triggering on the one hand a wave of terrorist actions by separatist groups and, on the other, an increasing, violent repression, which included severe violation of human rights by the army and the police. Extra-judicial killings, arbitrary detentions and torture, and the impunity of the crimes committed by state officers have contributed to increased tension while strengthening the support of the local population for more radical separatist groups.⁴⁸

45. 'Thailand's colourful new King brought «his mistress AND his former air stewardess wife» to his father's lavish cremation ceremony with both marching in bearskin hats'.

46. 'How stable is post-cremation Thailand?', *Asia Times*, 6 December 2017.

47. Nicholas Farrelly, 'Thailand Triple Threat', *Lowy Institute for International Policy*, July 2017.

48. 'Trampled by elephants: Repression is feeding the Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand', *The Economist*, 10 August 2017.

The composite galaxy of insurgent groups has been variously inspired by, and sometimes connected with, militant Muslim organisations from other regions. In November 2017 the International Crisis Group released a report suggesting that although Southern Thailand's Malay-Muslim insurgency does not share ideologies or objectives with ISIS or al-Qaeda, there is a concrete risk that the region may become a potential seedbed for transnational jihadism.⁴⁹ Separatist groups have hitherto been concerned with local problems, in the search for independence or, at least, for a high level of autonomy for the south. Taking part in a global war promoted by international radical organisations does not seem to be part of their political agenda. However, the situation could change for lack of constructive response from the Thai state.⁵⁰

Hundreds of attacks against Thai officers and the civilian population occurred in 2017. For some of these incidents it was possible to establish a clear connection with the insurgency, while for many others it remained unclear if they were related to criminality or were of a political nature.⁵¹ Among those certainly connected with the insurgency were the two bombs placed in a supermarket in Pattani on 9 May, injuring 60 people, and another placed in front of a military hospital in Bangkok on 22 May, injuring 20 people. Although the political crisis in the south continued to represent a major predicament for the country the military government remained unable to devise a credible strategy to prevent further violence. While the government remained officially committed to negotiating with rebel groups, it largely failed to engage in constructive dialogue. At the same time, the army proved unable to subdue the local insurgents through the use of force.⁵²

5. Business as usual, booming tourism and finding a new friend at the White House

After the May 2014 military coup, Thailand became a pariah in international relations. This was the time when neighbouring Myanmar raised great expectations as the army returned the power to a civilian government led by charismatic leader Aung San Suu Kyi. This was also the time when US President Obama gave more credibility to the Western promotion of human rights as universal values. In 2016 bilateral relations between Bangkok

49. International Crisis Group, *Jihadism in Southern Thailand: A Phantom Menace*, Report No 291, 8 November 2017.

50. Austin Bodetti, 'Will Southern Thailand Turn to Jihad?', *The Diplomat*, 20 November 2017.

51. 'Summary of Incidents in Southern Thailand, December 2017', *Deep South Incidents Database*, www.deepsouthwatch.org.

52. Austin Bodetti, 'Thailand's Forgotten Insurgency', *The Diplomat*, 15 June 2017.

and Washington reached an all-time low when American Ambassador Glyn Davies, after criticising the repressive use of the *lèse-majesté* law, received a direct threat on his personal security from the junta leaders.⁵³ Relations with the European Union were also negatively affected by the suspension of democracy in Thailand.

The international isolation of the Thai military junta was compensated by closer cooperation with China. Relations between the two countries had already substantially improved during the governments led by Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra. The rapprochement reflected a realignment of international relations in the region after the end of the Cold War; in part this was the natural consequence of the growing economic power of China, which resulted in a renaissance of the historical ties between Beijing and its former tributary states. After the coup, Bangkok turned to its powerful neighbour to counterbalance the deterioration of relations with Western partners and to receive economic, technical and military support.⁵⁴ In 2017 the cooperation with Beijing continued to strengthen. Following the purchase of military equipment in 2016, in April the government made a substantial order of Chinese tanks.⁵⁵ The most significant step in the direction of a closer economic integration with Beijing was, however, the approval of a Sino-Thai high-speed railway project, considered to be a major infrastructure in the framework of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁶ The most significant turn in the Kingdom's international relations in 2017 was, however, the improvement of cooperation with Western countries. Three factors contributed to this important diplomatic result. First, the election of Donald Trump completely changed the agenda pursued by Washington and reduced the attention to democracy and human rights in bilateral relations. Second, a weakening of the democratic credentials of most countries in the region made Thailand's military junta appear less isolated. Third, after the majority of voters approved the constitutional referendum of August 2016 and after the completion of the royal succession to the Chakri throne, Thailand was seen as a stable international partner that could not be isolated forever.

During the Obama administration relations remained cooperative but strained. The American president avoided personal bilateral meetings with the Thai junta. Contacts only occurred during multilateral summits. With Trump, things changed remarkably. At the end of April 2017, Trump

53. Pietro P. Masina, 'Thailand 2016: The death of King Bhumibol and the deepening of the political crisis', p. 256.

54. For an interpretation of Thai-China relations after the 2014 military coup see Kevin Hewison, 'Thailand: an old relationship renewed', *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 31, 2018 - Issue 1, pp. 116-130.

55. 'Thailand approves purchase of Chinese tanks to replace old US model', *The Nation*, 4 April 2017.

56. 'Sino-Thai high-speed railway project gets go-ahead', *Asia Times*, 6 December 2017.

took the initiative of making two personal telephone calls to Premier Prayuth Chan-ocha and President Duterte of the Philippines – an army-imposed authoritarian leader and a president internationally reprobated for his support to the extra-judicial murder of thousands of drug-dealing suspects – by inviting them to the White House. The move was presented as a means of increasing support towards the United States among Asian nations in its confrontation with North Korea.⁵⁷ Most likely, though, the main concern was to mend relations with two traditional allies that had become too closely connected with China.

The visit of Prime Minister Prayuth eventually took place on 2 October 2017. The invitation to the White House – the first visit of a Thai head of government since 2005 – was an event in itself. The conservative *Washington Times* noted that it was «a rare instance of a military ruler being feted in Washington before even a nominal return to civilian rule».⁵⁸ The *South China Morning Post*, in an article entitled Diplomatic coup for Thai junta, observed that «Prime Minister Prayuth is a rarity among coup leaders to have been greeted at the White House».⁵⁹ For Trump, the meeting was an opportunity to push Bangkok to import more US military hardware (rather than Chinese) to balance bilateral trade.⁶⁰ Another main point in the agenda was the attempt to press Bangkok towards a stricter implementation of sanctions against North Korea.⁶¹ The agenda of the Thai prime minister was much more limited: it was the US acceptance of his military government. An editorial of the leading Thai newspaper *The Nation* commented that while the junta did not feel it needed Washington's approval, it wanted recognition, «seeing it as a nod to legitimacy in the absence of an electoral mandate».⁶²

The Trump-Prayuth meeting had a domino effect on the European Union, which possibly feared being penalised by its persistence on a principled policy towards the Kingdom. In December a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Brussels decided that it was «appropriate to pursue a gradual political re-engagement with Thailand».⁶³ The document referred to the constitutional referendum and to the alleged commitment (in reality never confirmed by the junta) to hold elections in November 2018 as indicators

57. 'Donald Trump builds relations with authoritarian Asian leaders', *The Guardian*, 1 May 2007.

58. 'Trump hosts Thailand's junta leader at White House', *Washington Times*, 2 October 2017.

59. 'Diplomatic coup for Thai junta, as Trump welcomes military leader Prayuth at White House', *South China Morning Post*, 3 October 2017.

60. 'Trump-Thailand talks: What to expect?', *BBC News*, 2 October 2017.

61. 'Trump-Prayuth meet to seal normalisation of Thai-U.S. relations', *Reuters*, 29 September 2017.

62. 'Prayut can't get us the deal we need from Trump', *The Nation*, 28 September 2017.

63. 'EU resumes official contacts with Thai junta', *The Nation*, 11 December 2017.

that the roadmap for the return to democracy was adhered to by the generals.⁶⁴ This gradual re-engagement included resuming negotiations for an EU-Thailand Free Trade Agreement. Although in the following days Prayuth clarified that the date for political elections could not be set just yet, the European Union delegation confirmed that resumption of talks would facilitate addressing issues of mutual interest, including human rights and the road to democracy.⁶⁵

The improvement in the kingdom's international relations was at the same time a result and the cause of a better-than-expected economic development in 2017, led by a surge in farming output and tourism.⁶⁶ At the end of the year, the Bank of Thailand increased its estimate of GDP growth during the previous 12 months to 3.9% from a previous 3.8% forecast. The reasons for this were an improvement in the export of goods and services, the gradual recovery in private consumption and investment, and the continued growth in public expenditure.⁶⁷ Tourism, in particular, continued to see limitless growth – to the point at which existing infrastructures, such as airports, were being put under stress.⁶⁸ Behind this expansion there was the fast-rising number of Chinese tourists and the appreciation of many Asian currencies against the dollar, thus facilitating the mobility of the regional middle class.⁶⁹

The relatively strong economic growth and improved international recognition of the military junta are likely to cause a further delay in a return to the polls. With the army dominating the country through bold coercive means, opposition to military rule maintained a low profile in 2017 and is likely to continue to do so in 2018. Politically more significant is the complex relationship between the junta and King Vajiralongkorn. However, it remains unlikely that even the eventual open conflict between the two parties would concretely facilitate the return of genuine democratic rule.

64. *Ibid.*

65. 'FTA talks set to resume as EU restores relations', *The Nation*, 13 December 2017.

66. 'Thailand Economy Grows at Fastest Pace in Over Four Years', *Bloomberg*, 21 August 2017.

67. 'Bank of Thailand raises 2017 GDP forecast', *Financial Times*, 20 December 2017.

68. 'Thailand struggles to cope with deluge of tourists', *The Straits Times*, 22 December 2017.

69. 'Thailand's tourism numbers continue to soar', *The Nation*, 25 September 2017.