

News from Southeast Asia

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This section offers thematic essays from ISEAS Fellows and researchers. This issue features essays from the Thailand Studies Programme with a focus on the dynamic Thai political landscape. For more information on the Thailand Studies Programme please visit: <http://www.iseas.edu.sg/thai.cfm>



SOJOURN is an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the study of social and cultural issues in Southeast Asia. It publishes empirical and theoretical research articles with a view to promoting and disseminating scholarship in and on the region. Areas of special concern include ethnicity, religion, tourism, urbanization, migration, popular culture, social and cultural change, and development. Fields most often represented in the journal are anthropology, sociology and history.

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What is to come in Thailand?

Michael J. Montesano

MUCH HAS CHANGED since the 22 May coup last year. However, in truth, Thailand has been experiencing several longer-term transitions which have been changing the complexion of the country. In all likelihood from now on, Thailand will be a polity of citizens and not subjects. For cultural, social, and economic reasons, a vast segment of the Thai population that long conceded domination of the country's politics to officers of the Thai state or to their putative social betters is no longer willing to do so. I would like to offer a few thoughts on four major transitions taking place in the country.

First, the north, northeast and, to some degree, rural central Thailand—and not just political strongmen representing provinces in those regions—will play a larger role in national affairs than heretofore. Their role will in some ways resemble that long played by the upper south through its parliamentary representatives in the Democrat Party. This regional dimension of political change in Thailand also has a pronounced ethnic dimension: the 'Lao' people of northern and northeastern Thailand will play political roles more closely commensurate with their numbers. It had long been assumed, wrongly it is now clear, that the early and middle years of King Phumiphon's long reign had made this ethnic dimension of Thai politics practically irrelevant.

Second, northern and northeastern Thailand will continue to be marked by growing and, frankly, unprecedented

prosperity. Already, between 2007 and 2011, economic growth in northeast Thailand outstripped that in Bangkok by 40 percent to 17 percent. To be sure, some of that growth was due to so-called 'Thaksinomics', to policies branded 'populist'. But some of it was also due to policies whose origins long predate Thaksin Chinnawat's first premiership (2001-2005), to remittances from Bangkok and overseas, and to what may prove a self-sustaining intensification of economic activity in those regions. Inevitable investment in infrastructure and better links to China and Vietnam will only increase the prosperity of northern and northeastern Thailand. That prosperity is, to be sure, tied to China's growth and to ASEAN's integration. While the people of those regions will for some time remain, on average, poorer and less well educated than the people of Bangkok, their political orientation will be informed by aspiration rather than destitution, by feelings of stakeholderhood rather than grievance.

Third, from WWII through to the 1970s, Thailand imposed heavy taxes on agriculture to the advantage of the urban sector. From the mid-1970s onward, successive Thai governments have reversed that flow of resources, in a policy shift typical of economies in which agriculture and the rural sector represent a declining share of total economic activity. Most famous, or infamous, among such policies as adopted by former PM Yinglak Chinnawat was the calamitously designed

Above:
The military junta
in Bangkok 2014.
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'rice pledge' scheme, which cost in excess of US\$20 billion and led to Thailand's losing of its position as the world's leading rice exporter. This policy was almost certainly unsustainable. Nevertheless, such inter-sectoral transfer payments will remain a central fixture of Thailand's political economy in the future.

Finally, the monarchy and its role in Thai life are central to Thailand's current crisis. They will be central to developments in 2015 and beyond. American diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks revealed how concerned senior figures in Thailand's network monarchy were about the coming succession. One needs, however, to understand these concerns in two particular contexts.

One of these contexts is historical. When King Phumiphon returned from Switzerland in late 1951 to live in Thailand for good, senior courtiers and others carefully managed his transition into the role of full-time king. The revival of monarchy as a central institution in Thailand and the leading role in Thai politics that King Phumiphon played for many years reflected the success of this sort of management. Members of today's network monarchy and, it seems, of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta that took power in May 2014 understand that management of the monarchy during the transition to a new reign will be crucial to the monarchy's survival. Today, the junta's praetorianism and a monarchy in transition show every indication of working together quite smoothly.

The second context for concern relates more directly to the future than to the past. The effort in the late 1940s and early 1950s to restore the prestige and influence of the Thai monarchy after the setbacks that it suffered in the wake of the end of royal absolutism in 1932 represented as much as anything else a feat of imagination. Similarly, the future of the Thai monarchy after the end of King Phumiphon's reign will depend on the successful re-imagining of its relevance and the consequent refashioning of its role for a new era. The insecurity that has marked much fretting over the succession represents not least a failure of imagination among figures influential in the later years of the current reign. As, it seems, the NCPO junta eases some of those figures aside, there is little evidence of a determination to adapt the monarchy to the demands and realities of the times. But who is to say how long the junta will last or whether the cast of characters who will end up managing the next reign during its early years will suffer from a comparable lack of imagination concerning the place of monarchy in contemporary Thailand?

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