

# The 2014 Military Coup in Thailand: Implications for Political Conflicts and Resolution

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In 2014, the Thai army staged its thirteenth coup claiming to resolve the decade-long political conflict. This article seeks to analyze conflict resolution efforts by Thailand's incumbent military regime and the way in which these efforts actually affect the trajectory of the conflict. Drawing on the Thai case, I argue that the junta's conflict resolution efforts aggravate the conditions conducive to conflict entrapment because: (1) military rule closes down a channel for meaningful dialogue among conflict parties; (2) the army's association with Thailand's traditional elites implies the continuation of socio-economic inequality underpinning the current crisis; (3) military rule undermines Thailand's development of democratic institutions needed to overcome the ongoing power struggle; and (4) the junta's political partisanship is likely to exacerbate social division in Thailand.

**Keywords** Thailand, conflict, resolution, military regime, democracy

## Introduction

Tønnesson and Bjarnegård (2015) contend that Thailand has gone against the trend of "East Asian Peace." It is the only country in East Asia plagued with three different conflicts: political conflict in the center, ethnic conflict in the southern periphery, and border conflict with neighboring Cambodia. This conflict proneness is due to the lack of state capacity to solve these conflicts peacefully. This article was written in the wake of the latest military coup in Thailand, which was the thirteenth coup in the country's unstable history of democracy. Generally, justifications for these historical coups range from the imminence of a defined threat to national security or corruption by an elected government, to the destabilization of Thailand's most revered institution, the monarchy (Streckfuss 2011, 104-105). The perpetrators of the 2014 coup continued to employ these classic justifications. However, the decade-long political conflict,

which manifested in the tit-for-tat overthrow of the government by mass demonstrations, was their primary justification for staging the coup (Royal Thai Government 2014a).

This article looks at the way in which a military regime's approach to conflict resolution shapes conflict trajectory. It draws its analysis on the case of Thailand's latest military coup staged in 2014 which claimed to end the then civil strife. The article seeks to address the following questions: (1) what has the Thai junta done to tackle the protracted conflict that has divided the nation? (2) what is the discursive basis of its diagnosis of and solution for the conflict? and (3) how have the junta's initiatives actually shaped the conflict trajectory?

The article focuses on Thailand's conflict over governmental legitimacy with its key battleground being in Bangkok, but resources from throughout the country have been mobilized.<sup>1</sup> This article's reliance on a single case can be useful as it offers an in-depth account of the events unfolding in Thailand which reflects the interrelationship between the vertical (state-society relationship) conflict and horizontal (society-society relationship) conflict. Understanding these dynamics can serve to remind us that democratic consolidation, security sector reform, and genuine reconciliation efforts are highly relevant for conflict transformation in Thailand and other coup-prone countries.

## Regime Types and Armed Conflict

The nature of a political regime and its impact on conflict dynamics has been at the center of academic attention for decades. The democratic peace thesis presents the foremost scholarly effort to establish a relationship between a regime type and the evolution of armed conflict. Originating from the international relations literature, the theory posits that democratic states do not wage war against one another. This is mainly because democracy creates political institutions that are accountable to electoral constituents. Due to a close association between democracy and wealth, these constituents may disagree with the government's decision to wage war (with another democratic country) because of the speculation that war would destroy the economy (Rummel 1983; Doyle 1983, 1986; Maoz and Russett 1992, 1993; Oneal and Russett 1999). However, critics of this thesis argue that democracies retain the tendency to wage a war with other non-democratic states. The war may be deemed necessary to spread democratic ideology to these states—as observed in the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (Owen 2005; Gat 2005).

In the domestic domain of politics, the causal relation between democracy and peace is not linear. By classifying democratic regimes in different types, existing studies show that semi-democratic regimes have a higher risk of internal conflict than consistent autocracies or democracies (Boswell and Dixon 1990;

Muller and Weede 1990; Hegre et al. 2001; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Hegre 2014). In addition, Buhaug (2006) finds that the type of armed conflict semi-democracies experience most often is a dispute over government (for instance policies or political legitimacy). This argument holds that semi-democratic governments (also dubbed inconsistent regimes) are relatively open, which in effect creates an opportunity structure for violent mobilization around joint grievances. However, these governments remain autocratic, thereby providing few avenues for the opposition to pursue their demands through nonviolent means (Henderson and Singer 2000; Sambanis 2001). In contrast, full-fledged democracies allow nonviolent collective actions to proliferate, thus decreasing the likelihood that a rebellion will mutate into an armed insurgency (Gleditsch and Ruggeri 2010).

Although scholars have not agreed on a specific type of democratic institution that can prevent the onset of armed conflict, they seem to share the opinion that military rule is most likely to precipitate it. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, military regimes lack political institutions such as parties through which political energies of the population can be channeled and controlled (Nordlinger 1977). Due to its internal hierarchical culture, the military does not usually tolerate the dissension and debate needed to build and maintain coalitions with civilians (Stepan 1971, 263). As a result, military governments—unlike single-party regimes—tend to fail in co-opting challengers through rewards and facilitation. Secondly, because military governments lack political instruments in dealing with contenders, they are more likely to rely on forceful coercion, which is the army's expertise. Instead of mitigating conflicts, this increases the risk of popular resistance to their rule (Wolpin 1986; Wintrobe 1990, 1998; Davenport 2007; Fjelde 2010).

These studies relating military regimes with the onset of armed conflict are the entry point of this article. The Thai case can help deepen the explanation as to “how” a military regime affects an already protracted conflict. Previous studies generally rely on quantitative methodology (large-N) in producing an overarching trend of regime type and its consequential relationship with armed conflict. As a result, we are told that a military regime's characteristics—its ineptness to co-opt challengers and a heavy-handed response to them—create the conditions in which a civil war may erupt. The relationship between a military regime and an armed conflict can be more complex than this generalized pattern. Accordingly, this article relies on qualitative research methods, involving an ethnographic investigation into the worldview and rhetoric of the studied military regime regarding a socio-political conflict, and how such shapes the regime's approach to conflict resolution (Steinmetz 1999). Understanding this dimension is crucial to sharpening the analysis on the impact a military regime has on a protracted conflict. Moreover, Thailand's conflict over political legitimacy is the struggle over social change, which has pitted beneficiaries of the status quo against those

challenging it. At the same time, the conflict has divided society into color-coded camps whose supporters have sporadically clashed. These conflict settings allow us to contemplate democratic alternatives to the military regime, while making reconciliation efforts more meaningful and robust.

### Protracted Conflict, Social Change, and Conflict Entrapment

Trapped in the conflict over political legitimacy and currently stuck with the military junta, Thailand represents a case that has crucial commonalities with countries experiencing social change and conflict entrapment such as Brazil, Ukraine, Turkey, Kenya, and Egypt. The latter in particular has a long history of military dominance over civilian politics—a characteristic also evident in Thailand (Kurlantzick 2014). The conservative role of the middle class, the retreat of the revolution in the wake of the Arab Spring, and the return to military autocracy in Egypt resembles the events unfolding in Thailand (Hamid 2014).

A conflict can become protracted in times of social change. Advocates of the status quo are challenged by new actors empowered by social and economic changes. These new actors may believe that those reaping the benefits from the existing political and economic structures are depriving them of opportunities to move up the social ladder. Meanwhile, beneficiaries of the status quo may perceive demands of new actors as threats to their privileges (Davies 1962; Gurr 1970). Changes in material conditions may result in a shift of attitude and perception (Lederach 1995; Schroder and Schmidt 2001). A group that might have once accepted the status quo may now see it as an obstruction to their progress. The goals of these parties are seen as incompatible (Sandole 1999).

Action and reaction of conflicting parties can appear in five stages: mobilization, enlargement, polarization, dissociation, and entrapment. Mobilization takes place when a group or community finds itself in a protracted conflict with another. If no agreement between groups is reached, the conflict may begin to intensify by involving an increased numbers of parties (enlargement). This process may involve the widening of issues on which adversaries come to confront one another beyond the initial goal clash. Eventually, this aspect of polarization may reach the stage of dissociation where contacts between adversaries are confined to the exchange of accusations and protests. As a result, channels of communication are narrowed. This can set the scene for conflict entrapment where parties start to intensify the conflict. Chances of reaching a mutual agreement which can lead to de-escalation are dimmed (Mitchell 2006, 21-24).

The tit-for-tat protests to overthrow a government representing a section of society might have led Thailand to be entrapped in the protracted conflict. The 2013-14 demonstrations and reactions from the other side virtually brought the

country to the brink of civil war. The army justified its coup to be a necessary step to put an end to this political impasse. The question remains whether this intervention has succeeded in solving the conflict once and for all.

## How It All Began: Overview of Thailand's Conflict over Legitimacy

Thailand's protracted conflict reflects a clash between the political establishment coupled with Bangkok's middle class and rising elected autocrats largely supported by the rural poor. It is a fight over the changing status quo which was being preserved by the political establishment. One of its defenders is the army which often resorts to a coup when its pillar of power faces an existential crisis. Challenges to the status quo are interpreted in a cultural frame that contains a negative view about change and conflict. Such a frame can be applied to explain an episode of street demonstrations that virtually pushed Thailand to the brink of civil war.

### *Thailand's Political Establishment and Its Challengers*

The Thai monarchy, its privy council, bureaucrats, and the army have dominated Thai politics since the 1970s (Riggs 1966; McCargo 2005). The army in particular has rendered a series of forceful defenses of this network whenever it is threatened. Despite its rocky relationship with the palace at the advent of the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy, the army and the monarchy initiated close ties in 1952 (Handley 2006, 156–157; Thak 2007, 51–54, 181; Nattapoll 2010). Faced with a communist threat that swept across Southeast Asia, the army and the palace were sponsored by the U.S. government to keep internal and regional stability (Klare 1977; Lobe 1977; Fineman 1997; Kislenko 2004). Despite its claim to be politically neutral, the palace, particularly the king, can encourage installation of a government by bypassing a democratic election so as to protect the status quo from political threats. This entanglement has resulted in a remarkable number of coups undertaken by the army who has a vested interest in the survival of the political establishment (Vijayat 1989, 67; Connors and Hewison 2008; Chambers 2013). After each successful coup, the former constitution would be canceled, and a new one drafted to restore dominance of the network monarchy. There have been thirteen successful military coups and seven coup attempts in Thailand between 1932 and 2016, with twenty constitutions and charters (Chambers 2015).

The influence of the network monarchy was more or less strangled in the 1990s. The end of the Cold War enabled Thailand to transit from a semi-democracy under General Prem Tinasulanon to political and economic liberalization. The 1992 unarmed uprising—followed by the drafting of the 1997 “people’s constitution”—brought about Thailand’s longest period of

representative democracy (Thitinan 2008). But it was the economic crisis in 1997 that substantially undermined the economic powerhouse of the political establishment. At the same time, it paved the way for the media tycoon and police colonel-turned politician Thaksin Shinawatra to rise. He founded a political party that won a landslide victory in 2001. His allegedly populist policies concentrating on development and welfare began to win the hearts and minds of the rural population, especially in the North and Northeast where poverty is most severe (Pasuk and Baker 2004; Looney 2004; McCargo and Ukirst 2005; Kasian 2006). This was seen as a direct threat to the palace's popular base in remote Thailand. The King began to point out the errors of Thaksin's economic policies in his public speeches (Kazmin 2007, 211).

Intimidated by Thaksin, the political establishment was afraid of losing its economic monopoly. Thailand's political elites have reaped the benefits of rapid economic growth since the 1950s. An outcome of this economic monopoly is gross economic inequality.<sup>2</sup> For instance, data from 2007 shows that the top 10 percent of families controlled more than 51 percent of wealth while the bottom 50 percent controlled only 8.5 percent. Just 10 percent of the population owns about 90 percent of the privately-owned land. Despite an increase in the profits of major corporations in Thailand, wages and welfare of blue-collar workers who constitute the economic backbone of the country remain low (Hewison 2015). Thailand's market-based economy has mobilized the rural poor to the cities, but the economic superstructure makes it hard for them to move up the social ladder without state subsidies in the form of education, housing, and other forms of welfare (Nareumon and McCargo 2011).

Arguably it was Thaksin who politicized this ingrained inequality, ensuring his constituents that their quality of life would be elevated. This move was seen as a threat to the establishment whose wealth is tied with the power to rule. His popularity and alleged involvement in corruption led the political establishment to accuse him of being an amoral capitalist. Thaksin's way of doing politics was perceived to "have diverged from the norms of Thai politics," which emphasizes righteous leadership and the ideals of *dhammic* (moral) kingship (Hewison and Kengkij 2010, 181).

### *The Curse of Discourses*

Thailand's political establishment has sustained their dominance through the reproduction of a conservative version of national identity which highlights order and harmony. The monarchy and Buddhism constitute the foundation of national identity. Being Thai is to be a subject, rather than a citizen, of the Kingdom. A subject has the moral duty to render his or her loyalty to the head of the polity, the king. This polity's survival depends on national harmony and as such can harbor no tolerance for disrespect towards higher authority and open disagreement (Barmé 1993; Thongchai 1994; Connors 2003; Reynolds 2004). The

Thai army has played a pivotal role in safeguarding this national order at times by ousting an elected government (Pavin 2014). A recent poll shows that a large majority of 67 percent of Thais tend to support this role of the army (Bjarnegård and Melander 2014).

Theravada Buddhism-turned state ideology offers political legitimacy to this hierarchical order. The king possesses moral authority by birth and blood. He deserves to rule because he is *dharma racha*—the moral king (Reynolds 1978). At the same time, this Buddhist interpretation aims to convince the Thai subjects to accept the prevalent inequality. One is born as a have-not because of his or her bad past deeds or *karma*, which is unrelated to the existing arrangement of economic and social strata (Tambiah 1978; Thanet 2008). Together with ideas of harmony (*samakkhee*) and national stability, this discourse has served to depoliticize the impoverished masses and prevent an uprising (Morell and Chai-anan 1981; Chai-anan 1990). In addition, the discourse of harmony has formulated the worldview which considers all kinds of conflict to be a bad thing. Public displays of conflict among individuals or groups would mean a loss of “face.” Peter Jackson (2004, 223) explains that this has to do with the “Thai regime of images [which] places the maintenance of public shows of harmony at its core, valuing conforming to displays of orderliness (*khwam-riap-roi*) above epistemological concerns with truth.” At the expense of order, Thais tend to conceal and even suppress conflict, rather than bringing it to the fore in order to deal with the root causes.

#### *Power Struggle from 2005 to 2014*

In many ways, the conflicts that pitted Thaksin and his supporters against the political establishment reflect the contestation between the old and new institutions, order and collective identity. They became protracted because conflict parties engaging in the decade-long tit-for-tat assaults started to form antagonistic views of each other. At the same time, some signs of increased social distance are present.

By the end of his rule, Thaksin was faced with mass protests by the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) or “yellow shirts” (Pye and Schaffar 2008, 38-61; Chairat 2012). These protests culminated in the call for a military coup (Kasian 2006, 35). Soon after, the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) or “red shirts” emerged, calling for mass demonstrations against the junta and its elite supporters. This set the stage for the UDD movement’s enlargement which paved the way for the electoral victory of a new political party backed by Thaksin (Uchane 2010). The political establishment saw this as a failure to prevent Thaksin’s return to power. Soon after, yellow shirts took to the streets again, demanding the overthrow of Thaksin’s political proxy. The constitutional court eventually ordered the dissolution of the Thaksin-backed party (Montesano 2011; Mérieau 2016). Meanwhile, a former key ally of Thaksin was encouraged

to defect, enabling the formation of a new parliamentary majority led by the rival Democratic Party. The UDD found this process illegitimate as the Democratic Party came to power without an election. The movement organized mass demonstrations, accusing aristocratic elites of engineering this government change, and called for a new election. The protests in 2009 and 2010 culminated in clashes and a military crackdown that caused some ninety deaths among UDD protesters, ten dead police officers, and nearly two thousand injuries (Uchane 2010; The Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand 2010-2011, 10; Information Center for Victims of the 2010 Crackdown 2012, 415-421; Thailand Research Fund 2011).

A series of street protests between 2005 and 2010 shaped the antagonistic narrative of the conflict. Identification as red and yellow shirts is now dichotomized. The former is not only defined by their affiliation with Thaksin, but by their instigation of urban vandalism during the 2009-2010 protests. They are seen as poor and uneducated, which is why they are misled to support Thaksin (Chairat 2012; Saxer 2014a, 28-29). Red shirts are labeled “red buffalo” (*kwai daeng*) which is a culturally derogatory reference to being “stupid.” As Thaksin is accused of promoting republicanism, red shirts are at times perceived as disloyal. In a similar vein, yellow shirts are defined as royalist, conservative, and anti-democratic. Bangkok’s middle class are seen to be associated with the privileged aristocrats. Their call for “order and peace” during the red shirts’ protests was criticized as hypocritical because during the yellow shirts’ demonstrations they did little to condemn the movement. Yellow shirts are generally demeaned as *salim* which implies royalist fanatics and urban snobs (Faris 2011). Although this narrative does not correspond with the 2010 survey showing that Thailand is not as polarized as presented in the media (Asia Foundation 2010, 19-21), the narrative stereotyping red and yellow identities shape everyday conversation. At the peak of the street protests, many could not have a decent conversation about politics with their family members or peers who might have held a different political opinion (Matichon Online 2014).

The 2013-14 yellow shirts-led demonstrations helped amplify this conflict narrative. In 2011, Thaksin’s political party—renamed Pheu Thai—achieved a landslide electoral victory. Soon after, protest groups came out to criticize the government’s policies, but they failed to create any substantial impact. This changed after the Pheu Thai party proposed the amnesty bill enabling Thaksin’s return to Thailand. The proposal generated public outrage, particularly among the urban middle class who viewed this move as another piece of evidence for the abuse of power by Thaksin. Resembling the old yellow shirt movement, the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) emerged at the end of 2013 (Post Today 2014; Campbell 2013; Montesano 2014; Thongchai 2014).

The PDRC aimed to force the Pheu Thai government out of power by paralyzing its governance through mass mobilization, disruptive protests, and

vandalism. A host of PDRC protests focused on public rallies and symbolic actions (Matichon Online 2013a; Matichon Online 2013b; Matichon Online 2013c). But it was a series of road blockades and raids as well as occupation of official buildings that instigated intense clashes between the police and protesters. Moreover, the PDRC launched campaigns to disrupt the election scheduled after the resignation of Pheu Thai's Prime Minister (McCargo 2015b, 341-342; Prajak 2016). They demanded that reforms must take place before an election, but the reforms were vaguely defined as a call for "good people" to rule Thailand (Saxer 2014b, 178-179). This radical demand was often followed by provocative protest actions with the involvement of PDRC's armed hardliners. Clashes between them and red shirt supporters, together with armed attacks of PDRC activists by "unknown" assailants accounted for a collective perception that Thailand was on the brink of civil war (INN News 2014a; Bangkokbiz News 2014).<sup>3</sup> This gave ground to military intervention in mid-2014.

### The 2014 Military Coup and the Junta's Conflict "Suppression"

Ostensibly the army played the role of "neutral" third party, intervening to de-escalate the armed conflict between two political camps. Nevertheless, as pointed out earlier, the army is a party to this conflict. Not only has it historically represented the vested interest of the political establishment, but the army itself was a perpetrator in the 2010 crackdown of the red shirts. The coup makers-turned junta had its own agenda, especially to preserve the old order "amidst an impending royal succession" (Chambers 2015, 16). However, by appearing neutral, the army/junta was able to legitimize its rule. Thailand's decade-long intractable conflict is something real, and at the same time serves as discursive material for the junta's political legitimacy. The texture of this discourse can be analyzed in the junta's diagnosis, prognosis, and solution for Thailand's protracted conflict.

#### *Diagnosis: Violent and Disorderly Democracy and Bad Politicians*

The incumbent military regime makes sure the Thai public understands that the causes of Thailand's protracted conflict are rooted in the nature of democracy giving rise to violent street clashes and amoral politicians. The identification of problems faced by Thais is evident in the junta's statement right after taking power. It emphasizes the imminence of violent conflict which has made Thais unhappy and society chaotic (Royal Thai Government 2014a). That is, Thailand has been threatened by an impending civil war. Representative democracy brings conflicts to the fore. It thereby heightens the risk of violence, and as such is a danger. As the head of the junta explained:

If there is still an election in this country, it will create conflicts, and the country will, again, experience the endless circle of conflicts, violence, politicians' corruption, terrorism and the use of war weaponry... This is very dangerous, I have realized... you can see what we (the government) have been trying to do here. Without our intervention, people would have used these weapons to kill one another (Royal Thai Government 2014d).

The association of democracy with violence recurred when the junta faced criticism and popular resistance. Junta leaders pointed out that disagreement and demands for democracy tend to undermine the junta's effort to bring "peace" to Thailand. The popular call for democracy is accordingly inappropriate under the current circumstances. The Prime Minister explained that "the call for democracy is not strange. But what is strange is our past version of democracy creating all kinds of problems... I don't understand why protesters do not care that these problems [of democracy] exist, especially the insecurity of citizens' lives and property" (Royal Thai Government 2014e).

Based on this framing, violent democracy empowers agitating and corrupt politicians. Time and again, the Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, claims that politicians have stirred up conflicts among Thais for their own political advantage. They have mobilized supporters to partake in violent street confrontations. In conclusion, they have made this country "disorderly" (Royal Thai Government 2016). In addition to inciting conflicts, politicians—in the eyes of Prime Minister Prayuth—are inherently corrupt. This is evident in their initiation of "populist" policies which earned them popularity and profit. Although they were elected by the majority of the populace, they have not used power in a righteous way (Royal Thai Government 2014b). Prime Minister Prayuth has never identified by name the politicians to whom he refers, but it is clear that he meant red shirt politicians who clashed with the army in 2010 (Wassana 2010).

*Prognosis: Happiness and Harmony*

Drawing on the analysis associating violence with democracy, the junta promises to bring happiness and national harmony back to Thailand. The analysis is that armed attacks during the PDRC protests pushed Thailand to the brink of civil war, deepening division among Thais. Hence shortly after the coup, the junta launched a program to "disarm" the conflicting parties, however the focus was mainly on red shirt supporters (INN News 2014b). The Prime Minister further announced that these dangerous weapons could be "used to kill our fellow Thais" (Royal Thai Government 2014d). Apart from delivering public safety, the junta organized a large number of festivals, offering free food, drinks, haircuts, and entertainment for ordinary Thais who might have been depressed due to these intense conflicts over the past decade. The junta leader believed "the Thai people, like me, have probably not been happy for nine years... But since May 22 [when

the coup was staged], there is happiness” (Hodal 2014). To be sure, Prayuth himself penned a song which highlights the junta’s mission to return peace and happiness to the nation like the old days (Campbell 2014).

Guided by the Thai Buddhist cosmology, national happiness is interlinked with national harmony. More often than not, the junta explains that the root cause of Thailand’s protracted conflict is the lack of “common ground for understanding.” Accordingly, disagreement occurs (Khaosod 2014). And disagreement is not welcome under the junta’s scheme of redeeming national harmony because it could bring back conflict (Tan 2015). To restore national harmony is to halt a change of the status quo which upholds the supreme authority of the king. Thai society needs to be constantly reminded of the king’s sacrifices and his efforts to consolidate national harmony. An exemplar for this is the junta giving away free movie tickets to encourage citizens to watch *The Legend of King Naresuan Part V*. The film depicts the historic battle between the old kingdoms of Thailand and Myanmar, where the former’s defeat serves as a reminder of the shortcomings of national disunity. On the eve of the opening of the film, the junta’s spokesperson explained, “We need Thais to understand sacrifices made by monarchs in the past, the sacrifice of Thais and the unity of Thais in the past. So Thais today will have love and harmony after many years of political division” (Lefevre 2014b). In sum, the junta hopes that happiness and harmony will work their magic to solve the protracted conflict in Thailand. To succeed, this scheme will require the removal of dispute and dissidence from public space.

#### *Solution: Attitude Adjustment and Reconciliation*

In solving the conflict, the junta introduced two policies: “attitude adjustment” and “reconciliation.” The former aims to curtail potential dissidence which can come from either red shirt politicians and supporters or general critics (e.g. student activists, academics, and journalists). These potential “agitators” are banned according to Martial Law, *lèse majesté* (offences against the monarchy) law, the Cyber Security act, and under Section 44 of the interim Constitution. Regardless of the nonviolent characteristics of dissident activism, alleged violators of these laws are subject to detention which can lead to serious jail sentences (Aljazeera 2014; Prachatai 2014b; Human Rights Watch 2016).

As the term “detention” sounds harsh and can give the Thai junta a bad name overseas, they opted for a more benevolent term such as “attitude adjustment” (*prap thassanakati*). Martial Law allows detention of a suspect without a warrant for seven days. Most detainees were released on the condition that they signed a document prohibiting their future participation in any political activity and/or requiring them to obtain permission from the army prior to travelling abroad (Prachatai 2015). During the period of detention, security forces would “talk” to them about the ongoing efforts of the government to restore order and

national harmony. It is therefore important that people cooperate with the junta. Detainees revealed that what is said to be only a “talk” actually means threats and verbal harassment, and sometimes these detainees are physically assaulted during the session (iLaw 2016). Apart from summoning people for a “talk,” security forces may simply visit offices and houses of those on their list (Lefevre 2015). In mid-2016, the government institutionalized the attitude adjustment program by establishing so-called training sessions for future leaders. The purpose is to “re-educate” regime critics who may instigate a new round of conflict (iLaw 2016). The number of people summoned and detained rose to more than 800 in 2016 (Prachatai 2014b; Head 2016).

For the military regime, attitude adjustment is crucial in suppressing the re-emergence of the protracted conflict. Disagreement and dispute encouraged by democratic values is the cause of this conflict, and thereby conflict prevention entails the curbing (if not removal) of opportunities to voice disagreement. This belief is reflected in the Prime Minister’s response when asked what he thinks about attitude adjustment: “Everyone whose comments cause division, bad intent to the government, criticizing the things the government did not do, causes trouble and blames a government that is trying to improve the country, I will consider [detaining them]” (Chaiwat 2015).

The atmosphere of national disharmony motivates the junta to initiate “reconciliation programs” throughout the country. While the attitude adjustment policy is considered to be instrumental in suppressing potential conflict, the reconciliation program aims to re-educate citizens on orthodox “Thai norms” which include national unity, patriotism, loyalty, and Buddhism. These norms are believed to sustain “peace” which was shattered by the rise of Thaksin and his supporters. Accordingly, the target audience of this reconciliation program is red shirts who have challenged the political establishment and its dominant ideologies (Siwach 2015). This approach is fundamentally contrary to the existing framework of reconciliation which emphasizes socio-political inclusiveness and justice (Hayner 2002; Doxtader 2007; Borzutzky 2007; Robins 2011).

The plan to encourage national reconciliation focuses on local communities, especially red shirt footholds. The army’s Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) has opened village-based centers for reconciliation which aim at “teaching people to live together harmoniously” and about the importance of the monarchy (Royal Thai Government 2015). Despite the junta’s claim to have resolved the red-yellow antagonism, only red shirts in Thailand’s North and Northeast are key targets. Moreover, they are prohibited from expressing their political views during and after the training sessions (Lefevre 2014a; Isaan Record 2014). In this sense, as the junta leaders have reiterated, the success of the reconciliation project depends on the people’s complete cooperation with the government (Royal Thai Government 2014c; Royal Thai Government 2015). The end result of the reconciliation process is to bring “happiness” to the Thai people, entailing the

forgetting of the army's past human rights abuses and red shirt identity (Siwach 2015).

In other words, reconciliation programs serve to “re-indoctrinate” Thais who have strayed from the hegemonic national ideology. This is because, for the junta, the root cause of the conflict lies in people's changing ideas and loyalty. For instance, a history session was held during a reconciliation workshop. The instructor (a military official of course) asked everyone to close their eyes, sit silent, and meditate while she read aloud:

How was it that we kept a hold on our country and avoided being colonized by another country? It was because our king protected our nation...If any outsiders come to destroy our country, we will fight until we die. We need to protect our land and we need to love each other as a united country (Isaan Record 2014).

National history is used to formulate a specific notion of reconciliation revolving around harmony and order, while the socio-economic structures inducing inequality have not been addressed. To be fair, the government founded centers to receive complaints about economic grievances (Royal Thai Government 2015, 398). However, the centers apparently serve the social function of a safety-valve. They allow people to launch complaints so that criticisms external to this channel can be dismissed and punishment of critics justified (Prachatai 2014a). Moreover, the rural poor found injustice being further inflicted on them under the military regime. From May to December 2014, residents in at least 28 rural localities throughout Thailand were given notice to evacuate. Local military units claimed that they received orders from their commanders to evict those “illegally” residing in the officially “preserved” areas. Despite the government's denials, it seems clear that the ongoing imposition of martial law and other draconian laws have served to facilitate arbitrary resource grabbing (Human Rights Watch 2014).

## Consequences of the Thai Junta's Approach to Conflict Resolution

Any assessment of the impact the military rule has had on Thailand's protracted conflict needs to take into account two factors. The first is the reality of this acute conflict virtually driving Thailand to the brink of civil war. The second is the way in which the junta has replied using a peculiar conception of the political conflicts in Thailand which may result in a counterproductive outcome for long-term conflict resolution.

### *Negative Peace*

On the surface, the military coup that took place in 2014 temporarily halted violent confrontation between parties to the conflict. This was partly due to

the imposition of draconian laws that outlawed political activism. In addition, it is believed that the junta's seizure of weapons and suspected culprits could incapacitate the armed ranks of the color-coded camps, especially the red shirts. This led to the absence of street clashes that have characterized Thailand's decade-long conflict. This outcome is acknowledged in the "Global Peace Index" report which in 2014 ranked Thailand as the fourth least peaceful country in Asia due to these street skirmishes (Institute for Economics and Peace 2014, 35). However, the 2016 report assesses that the crisis in Thailand has improved largely because of "peace" imposed by the military government (Institute for Economics and Peace 2016, 14). It should be noted that the current state of peace in Thailand implies the absence of physical threats stemming from armed assaults between red and yellow shirts. It is indeed a negative peace (Galtung 1969). The absence of physical threats is masking the perpetuating conditions that may exacerbate the conflict.

#### *Junta's Approach to Conflict Resolution and Its Consequences*

Given the complex nature of protracted conflict that Thai society has experienced, the junta derives its conception of this conflict from its conservative worldview and is dismissing social change as an underpinning cause. This conception has led the Thai junta to introduce programs such as "attitude adjustment" and "reconciliation" which aim to suppress expressed disagreement and eventually revive national harmony. The belief is that unity and reinforced social order will cure the deep divisions Thailand has been experiencing over the past decade. Nevertheless, instead of mitigating the conflict as it wishes, the junta may generate conditions of conflict entrapment in the future. This implies that the vicious circle of action-reaction by different political camps is likely to persist, while society becomes further polarized. The consequences of the junta's policies for tackling the conflict are likely to be fourfold.

First, the current implementation of draconian laws and policies such as attitude adjustment and (forced) reconciliation close a channel for meaningful dialogue among conflict parties. At the moment, the military regime dominates the public domain in which groups should be voicing their different opinions. This results in repression and exclusion not only of the junta's regular critics, but those suffering from its administrative inefficiency. Peace research points out that these aspects of military autocracy tend to produce conditions for armed defiance of the government (Hegre 2014, 165). For conflict transformation scholars, silencing dissidence reinforces the antagonistic perception among the less powerful party and causes mutual trust to deteriorate (Abu-Nimer 1999).

Second, despite the army's attempt to project itself as a neutral third party, it is in fact a constitutive part of Thailand's political establishment. The ruling elites' ability to maintain the status quo depends on whether or not they can perpetuate socio-economic inequality. It is this inequality that has been politicized to

mobilize red shirts in the streets. The junta's existing approach for dealing with the conflict does little to tackle this power structure. On the contrary, the so-called reconciliation program puts the rural poor back in their traditional place. The junta has purposively enacted a program of indoctrination which convinces the poorer segments of society to be satisfied with what they have. This contrasts with the fact that Thailand has become economically internationalized and increasingly wealthy over the past thirty years. While the rural poor may feel that they should have a fair share of this prosperity, the political establishment fears that distribution would cost them their privileges. And the incumbent military rule represents this fear. Existing studies show that the failure to deal with inequality feeds the politicization of identity (Stuart 2008). Red versus yellow is an outcome of this nexus.

Third, the question of political legitimacy is at the core of Thailand's protracted conflict and should be dealt with by a redesign of democratic institutions. The junta is seen as a party to the conflict and its rule is perceived to preserve power for its allies (Hegre 2014, 165). This failure to share power can further exacerbate the crisis of political legitimacy in Thailand. The junta took power without a democratic election. As a result, red shirts and democracy advocates will never accept its legitimacy. Meanwhile the junta and other pillars of the political establishment may find its interests threatened by the electoral autocracy nascent during the Thaksin administration. It is crucial that democratic institutions are designed to transform this gridlock. They should be based on the respect of one man one vote, consolidation of a system of checks and balances, and the principle of inclusive pluralism (Rosanvallon 2011). Healthy democratic institutions should accommodate interests of different groups and empower the marginalized. This would also imply the cultivation of new values regarding conflicts in Thailand. Conflicts can be constructive and conducive to improving livelihoods as long as they are carried out nonviolently.

Finally, the junta's ongoing reconciliation scheme has done virtually everything to undermine a meaningful process of reconciliation. Forced re-indoctrination is applied to one side of the conflict: the red shirts. For these targeted red shirts, it goes without saying that the junta is siding with the yellow shirts. For the general public, those recruited to join the reconciliation trainings are stigmatized as "not being Thai enough." The junta's fanning of exclusivist national ideology further demarcates the boundary between loyal Thais and the disloyal "other." In this process, red shirts are depicted as the "other" if not traitors to Thailand's most revered institution: the king. Reconciliation cannot be based on demonization, but acceptance of differences, accountability, freedom, and justice. In this sense, existing studies which argue for meaningful reconciliation efforts around the world point out that reconciliation has rarely been successful under military regimes (International Center for Transitional Justice 2014).

## Conclusion: What Can Be Done?

This article has demonstrated the interrelationship between a protracted conflict and a military regime. It draws on the unfolding events of Thailand's acute conflict which has lasted for a decade and recently culminated in a military coup. The intractable nature of the conflict characterized by a legitimacy crisis and mass mobilization gave way to the military seizure of power in 2014. The junta promised to restore peace and unity by introducing policies that sweep the conflict under the rug. I have argued that this tendency to circumvent the conflict is likely to worsen the conflict rather than alleviate it. This is fundamentally because the junta represents the interests of the status quo, which have been challenged by new political and social forces. Instead of mitigating the conflict, the junta has planted a conflict entrapment time bomb which is likely to explode in the future. I have contended that overcoming this conflict entrapment requires deconstruction of the dominant conflict cosmology, reinforcement of democratic institutions, efforts to realize economic redistribution, and acceptance of the diversification of national identities. Most importantly, the army itself should undergo substantial reforms so as to be civilianized and professionalized. These efforts will help de-politicize the army and lessen the incentives to intervene in civilian politics, which only perpetuates the protracted conflict. Democratic overhaul in Thailand—if it happens after the election set for 2018—will need to focus on the reform of civil-military relations. These efforts may be deemed difficult to execute, especially after King Bhumipol's death in mid-October 2016 which has thus far plunged Thailand deeper in authoritarianism. However, it is not impossible. Pro-democracy actors are currently gathering force clandestinely, while waiting for a political opportunity to show itself.

## Notes

1. Despite the impact of the current junta on Southern Thailand's ethnic conflict, this article does not include this topic because it deserves a lengthy discussion in a separate paper due to its historical uniqueness and a divergent development of conflict resolution efforts. Nevertheless, I am aware that Southern Thailand conflict is not completely unrelated to political conflicts at the center. It resurfaced due to Thaksin's hawkish policies. For more on this issue see Askew (2011) and McCargo (2015).
2. Economic inequality is not exactly about "poverty." Thailand has transformed from an Asian agricultural backwater into one of the most competitive manufacturing economies in the region. This has enabled the middle class to triple in number since the 1960s (Kasian 2006, 10-11). However, members of the middle class, especially in Bangkok, see their interests as being tied to the survival of the political establishment. Accordingly, they tend to side with the political establishment in suppressing challengers of the status quo (Saxer

2014b).

3. Violent incidents that took place during the six month-long PDRC protests eventually caused twenty-eight deaths and over 800 injuries. And street protests since 2005 have thus far killed around 250 people and several thousands have been injured (Hewison 2014, 4).

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