



SEATIDE Online Paper 10

Praetorianism and “the People” in Late-Bhumibol Thailand

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Executive Summary

Announcements, orders, and other documents issued by the National Council for Peace and Order junta that seized state power in Thailand on 22 May 2014 have included frequent references to “the people.” These references have occurred in documents justifying the *putsch*, explaining the goals of the junta, instituting a repressive information order, establishing a new body to oversee state enterprises, and touching on the condition of Thai Buddhism. Their frequency reflects the lasting influence on the Thai military of a conception of the place of the people in the country’s political order that originated in campaigns of counter-insurgency against the Communist Party of Thailand. That conception has triumphed over another conception, one influential among civilian elites and grounded in the idea of a special relationship between the Thai monarchy and the people. Each of these conceptions has sought to justify a program of depoliticization. But the twilight of King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s reign, the likelihood that Thai monarchy’s political role will fade markedly, and the pre-eminence of the military’s conception of the place of the people in the political have meant that a nakedly praetorian regime is now in the ascendant in Bangkok.

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In the six months since the Thai military seized state power on 22 May 2014, nothing has symbolized the resultant regime’s often clumsy efforts to mobilize support so clearly as the weekly television broadcasts of the country’s new dictator, General Prayut Chanocha. His program, called “Returning Happiness to People in the Nation,”² has aired every Friday since 30 May. This program has exposed Thais to large and repeated doses of their new leader. Yet its instalments have varied in subtle and curious ways over time. For example, through the evening of 12 September, Gen Prayut appeared in military uniform each week, despite having been appointed premier more than two weeks earlier, on 24 August. Similarly, between the third broadcast of the program, on 13 June, and its eighteenth, on 26 September, the phrase “For Nation, [Religious] Doctrine, King and the People,”³ appeared in the upper left-hand corner of the television screen while the general spoke.

This phrase recalled for any Thai who viewed it on his or her screen the slogan “Nation, Religion, King”⁴ coined by King Vajiravudh (r. 1910-1925) in evident imitation of the British

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² That is, “คืนความสุข ให้คนในชาติ.” One may view videos of these programs at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSbNMvh_0czHteUnSqlQNVA and read their text at <http://www.thaigov.go.th/program1.html> (both accessed 24 November 2014).

³ That is, “เพื่อชาติ ศาสน์ กษัตริย์ และประชาชน.” Note that, in the discussion of Thai-language documents and texts and of Thai political thought that follows, I use “the people” to indicate the Thai term *ประชาชน* [prachachon].

⁴ That is, “ชาติ ศาสนา พระมหากษัตริย์.”

usage “For God, King and Country.”⁵ With its additional reference to “the people,” it amended, amplified and perhaps updated that earlier slogan, which the king introduced as part of his broad campaign to create a Thai nation⁶ to accompany the modernizing Siamese state that his father and uncles had begun building in the decades after 1890. Their primary purpose in constructing that state had been the political and administrative integration of the kingdom’s territory. Vajiravudh’s own effort focused on harnessing the structures of rule thus created to shared commitments that would integrate the king’s subjects ideologically. That the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta⁷ led by Gen Prayut would invoke that earlier campaign of ideological integration of the nation as it moved to address the divisions, sometimes violent, that had scarred Thailand since early 2006 and that had become particularly serious in the six months preceding the 22 May *putsch* might thus appear unremarkable. Worthy of note, however, was the junta’s invocation of a version of Vajiravudh’s slogan that included the additional element of the people, or *prachachon*. For notwithstanding the disappearance of the slogan from television screens during “Returning Happiness to People in the Nation” from 3 October onward, an ideological commitment to a certain notion of the people has stood at the centre of the junta’s program to re-integrate Thailand.

1. Early NCPO Announcements and Orders

The NCPO underlined that commitment to the people in the opening lines of the first announcement issued in its name, dated the day of the coup, on “Taking Control of the Authority to Govern the Country.”⁸ In framing a justification for returning Thailand to military rule, those lines alluded to the risk that recent political violence would spread and affect “the security of the nation and the safety of the lives and property of the people as a whole.”⁹ The passage immediately following outlined in broad terms the goals of the junta’s seizure of power: “quickly to return the situation to normal, to have the people in the nation have the same love for unity as in the past and also to reform political, economic, social and other structures.”¹⁰ And this same stress on the people also marked the final lines of the NCPO’s first announcement. Those lines rooted the unity of the Thai people in their devotion to the country’s monarchy: “The National Council for Peace and Order will be steadfast in its loyalty to and will protect, respect and uphold the monarchy, which is the focus of the heart and minds of the Thai people and which is above all conflict.”¹¹

⁵ See David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, second edition, 2003), p. 216, and Stephen L. W. Greene, *Absolute Dreams: Thai Government under Rama VI, 1910-1925* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1999), p. 69.

⁶ See Walter F. Vella, *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978).

⁷ In Thai, คณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ, abbreviated as “คสช.”

⁸ “ประกาศคณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ ฉบับที่ ๑/๒๕๕๗ เรื่อง การควบคุมอำนาจการปกครองประเทศ.” The “e-library” of the secretariat of Thailand’s National Assembly allows access to a nearly comprehensive collection of the announcements and orders of the NCPO at <http://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/ncpo.html> (accessed 24 November 2014).

⁹ That is, “ความมั่นคงของชาติและความปลอดภัยในชีวิตและทรัพย์สินของประชาชนโดยรวม.”

¹⁰ That is, “เพื่อให้สถานการณ์ดังกล่าวกลับเข้าสู่สภาวะปกติโดยเร็ว ประชาชนในชาติเกิดความรัก ความสามัคคีเช่นเดียวกับห้วงที่ผ่านมา ตลอดจนเพื่อเป็นการปฏิรูปโครงสร้างทางการเมือง เศรษฐกิจ สังคม และอื่น ๆ.”

¹¹ That is, “คณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติจะยึดมั่นในความจงรักภักดี และจะปกป้อง เทิดทูน ดำรงรักษาไว้ ซึ่งสถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์ อันเป็นศูนย์รวมจิตใจของประชาชนชาวไทย และทรงอยู่เหนือความขัดแย้งทั้งปวง.”

Further announcements issued by the junta on 22 May also invoked the people, while again warning of the dangers of conflict among Thais. The fourteenth announcement, “forbidding provocation of conflict or opposition to the functioning of the National Council for Peace and Order,”¹² concerned, for example, the need for the dissemination to the people of correct information, “free of distortions that might lead to misunderstanding.” It barred the media from interviewing figures other than state officials and enjoined authorities to prevent gatherings to oppose the junta. A follow-up announcement ordered 15 satellite, cable and digital television stations and community radio stations to suspend broadcasts, on the same grounds and with the same solicitude toward the people.¹³ Still on 22 May, the eighteenth announcement of the junta, on “the dissemination of news and information to the public”¹⁴ invoked these grounds yet again to order those responsible for mass media of all forms and for electronic and social media to refrain from the presentation of information prejudicial to the monarchy, detrimental to national security, critical of the NCPO, and intended to cause conflict or division or to result in gatherings to oppose the NCPO. It similarly barred the presentation of threats that would alarm the people.

Two days after its coup, there appeared under the name of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946-present) an announcement countersigned by Gen Prayut in his capacity as Army commander that formally named him head of the NCPO.¹⁵ This announcement hewed closely to the line advanced in the junta’s announcements of 22 May. It invoked again dangers to the interests of “the people as a whole” and reiterated the goal of unity among “the people in the nation.” And it closed by stating directly that the purposes of the royal command naming Gen Prayut head of the junta were “peace and order in the nation and the harmony of the people.”¹⁶

A five-page document detailing NCPO head’s own “aims and policies” fleshed out the emphasis on “the people” suggested in these early announcements.¹⁷ Seeking common ground among those with differing views¹⁸ by prioritizing the interests of the nation and “building up the living standards of the people in Thai society”¹⁹ numbered among those aims. All of this was to occur under “government through an everlasting regime of democracy with the king as head of state.”²⁰ The policies meant to allow achievement of such aims reflected, in a broad array of issue areas this same emphasis on the people. The junta would oversee the bureaucracy so that it served all sectors of the Thai people with efficiency and effectiveness, the document said. It would administer the government’s

¹² “ประกาศคณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ ฉบับที่ ๑๔/๒๕๕๗ เรื่อง ห้ามสร้างความขัดแย้งหรือต่อต้านการปฏิบัติงาน ของคณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ,” 22 May 2014.

¹³ “ประกาศคณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ ฉบับที่ ๑๕/๒๕๕๗ เรื่อง ขอให้ระงับการถ่ายทอดออกอากาศของสถานีโทรทัศน์ดาวเทียม เดบีล โทรทัศน์ระบบดิจิตอล และสถานีวิทยุชุมชน,” 22 May 2014.

¹⁴ “ประกาศคณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ ฉบับที่ ๑๘/๒๕๕๗ เรื่อง การเผยแพร่ข้อมูลข่าวสารต่อสาธารณะ,” 22 May 2014.

¹⁵ “ประกาศ แต่งตั้งหัวหน้าคณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ,” 24 May 2014, available at <http://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/ncpo.html> (accessed 25 November 2014).

¹⁶ That is, “ความสงบเรียบร้อยแก่ประเทศไทยและความสมานฉันท์ของประชาชน.”

¹⁷ “เจตนารมณ์/นโยบาย หน.คสช.” [Aims and Policies of the Head of the NCPO], undated; available at <http://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/ncpo.html> (accessed 25 November 2015).

¹⁸ That is, “แสงจตุรรมของผู้ที่มีความเห็นแตกต่าง.”

¹⁹ That is, “สร้างมาตรฐานของการดำรงชีวิตของประชาชนในสังคมไทย.”

²⁰ That is, “ภายใต้การปกครองในระบบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข อย่างยั่งยืนตลอดไป.”

budget responsibly while seeking to revive the economy and generate income for the people. The interests of the people would be at the core of the junta's efforts to stimulate the economy, and it would seek to open to all of the people the opportunity to invest with the government in infrastructure projects. The NCPO would reduce the role of monopolies and capitalists in the marketing of agricultural products and increase the participation of the people in that marketing, in drawing both on the approach of cooperatives and on the king's ideas about strengthening the people's sector. It would work to see that reform of politics and of the state served the interest of the people and to improve the electoral system so that it reflected the true wishes of the people. It would stress that the people play a part in safeguarding national security and, the somewhat confusing language of this statement of Gen Prayut's policies suggested, in strengthening ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The document closed by asking for time and the chance for the junta to start work toward its aims and on its policies, for patience and for "moral support from all sectors and from all of the Thai people in joining together for reform to transform Thailand into a lasting absolute democracy with the king as head of state."²¹

Additional NCPO announcements and orders paved the way for the implementation of the policies outlined in this document. Some of those orders invoked the people in rather surprising contexts and ways. For example, the junta's seventy-fifth order, issued on 26 June, appointed the members of a Committee for Policy on and Direction and Oversight of State Enterprises. The creation of this so called "Superboard," with the head of the NCPO as its chairman and prominent figures drawn from the private sector among its members, signalled a determination on the part of the junta to renew the role of Thailand's state-enterprise sector. And the reference to "the greatest benefits for the state and the people" in the order creating the new committee recalled the ideology of "a Thai economy for the Thai people" that had motivated the initial establishment of state firms in the late 1930s and early 1940s.²² Whether Gen Prayut's Superboard and the NCPO's evident ambition to re-boot Thai state capitalism for the twenty-first century will bear fruit remains to be seen. Far more likely to prove anachronistic in this age of "sovereign wealth funds than that ambition are the goals of the junta's one hundred and fifteenth order, issued during the second week of August, on the creation of a "Committee to Protect Buddhism and Resolve Problems Relating to Buddhism."²³ But this order also numbered among the early proclamations in which the NCPO invoked the people—the goal, in this case of bringing peace to the way of life of the people by means of Buddhist morality—in explaining its dictates.

²¹ That is, "ขอเวลาและโอกาสให้เราได้เริ่มต้น ขอให้อดทน ขอกำลังใจจากทุกภาคส่วน และจากประชาชนคนไทยทุกคน ในการที่จะร่วมกันปฏิรูปเพื่อเปลี่ยนผ่านประเทศไทยสู่ระบอบประชาธิปไตย ที่สมบูรณ์ อันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุขอย่างยั่งยืน."

²² Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, International Crisis Group, "A Coup Ordained? Thailand's Prospects for Stability," Asia Report No. 263, 3 December 2014 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/263-a-coup-ordained-thailand-s-prospects-for-stability.aspx>, accessed 3 December 2014). (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 130.

²³ "คำสั่งคณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ ที่ ๑๑๕/๒๕๕๗ เรื่อง แต่งตั้งคณะกรรมการป้องกันและแก้ไขปัญหาดังพระพุทธรักษา," 8 August 2014.

2. “The People” in the Political Thought of Civilian and Military Elites

The repeated invocation of the people in the NCPO junta’s announcements and orders during the first two and a half months after it took power on 22 May 2014 represented more than a rhetorical tic, a cliché rationalization for the return of Thailand to military rule. Rather, it drew on thinking about the relationship among monarchy, state and citizenry that developed in Thailand during the Cold War. This thinking had at least two important strands, characteristic, respectively, of civilian and military elites and treated in turn in the following pages.

The political theorist Michael Connors has noted the invocation in late 2005, as the protests against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra that would culminate in his ouster in the coup of 19 September 2006, of the concept of *ratchaprachasamasai*,²⁴ or “king-people mutuality,”²⁵ and of the threat that Thaksin allegedly posed to this relationship.²⁶ Connors traces the origins of this term to the late 1950s.²⁷ He links it to one of the early trips to remote parts of Thailand that would during the quarter-century that followed come to define Bhumibol’s vaunted contribution not only to national integration but also to counter-insurgency. He notes that the royalist intellectual and politician Kukrit Pramoj gave *ratchaprachasamasai* a broad, explicitly political, meaning in the early 1970s,²⁸ at a time when armed communist insurgency represented a far greater threat to peace and order in outlying regions of Thailand than had been the case when the term first appeared.

Kukrit advocated a relationship between the king and the people whose centrality to the Thai political order had relevance far beyond the state’s struggle with the Communist Party of Thailand, however.²⁹ That centrality would, in fact, undergird “a long-term project to establish a liberal state based on the ideological power of the monarchy.”³⁰ This was not, however, a project to be pursued by liberal means. It was an undertaking of civilian elites, in which invocation of the people and their relationship with the monarchy served to undermine the legitimacy of actors or institutions that might come between palace and people, like political parties or elections. The project might tolerate the presence of such actors and institutions, but only in their proper place. It was, in sum, an exercise in the partial depoliticization of the country, an exercise whose proponents have proved remarkably persistent and resourceful.

Without an awareness of this project, of its nature, and of the place of the people in it, understanding of Thailand’s widely admired so called “people’s constitution”³¹ of 1997 is, for example, impossible. For the adoption of that charter represented to a large degree the

²⁴ That is, ราชประชาสมาสัย.

²⁵ Connors, “Article of Faith,” p. 160.

²⁶ Michael Kelly Connors, “Article of Faith: The Failure of Royal Liberalism in Thailand,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* XXXVIII, 1 (February 2008): 143-165, pp. 149, 155.

²⁷ Connors, “Article of Faith,” p. 149.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 144.

³¹ That is, รัฐธรรมนูญฉบับประชาชน.

apparent triumph of the project.³² And all too few who sing that constitution's praises appear aware of the actual place of the people in the order that it sought to shape, with its strong and putatively independent oversight bodies and allegedly non-partisan upper house of parliament. As a blueprint for continuing domination of the Thai political order on the part of a royalist, civilian technocratic elite in a climate of partial depoliticization, the 1997 constitution failed, of course. The electoral prowess of Thaksin Shinawatra saw to that. Yet this failure nowise led to an abandonment of the project in favour of a political vision that would accord better with social realities in a Thailand whose rural majority is less poor and far more politically aware than in the mid-1950s or early 1970s.³³ The people may have changed, but their place in the minds of this civilian elite and in its project remains fixed. And pursuit of the project has only taken on more extreme form. Witness only the name of the movement to drive Thaksin's sister and proxy, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, from office between November 2013 and May 2014, the "People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State."³⁴ And consider its leadership's call for "reform" and its insistence, as it campaigned to oust an elected government, that it represented "the great mass of the people."³⁵

In the event, of course, civilian elites and their supporters on the streets of Bangkok did not topple the government that Yingluck had led. Instead, actors who subscribed to the second major strand of thinking on the place of the people in the polity to emerge from Thailand's experience of the Cold War did.

The amended and amplified version of King Vajiravudh's slogan, with its reference to the people, that appeared on viewers' screens during Gen Prayut's program "Returning Happiness to People in the Nation" between mid-June and late September 2014 did not originate with the NCPO. Rather, the phrase, "For Nation, [Religious] Doctrine, King and the People," has served for some decades as the motto of the Thai Army.³⁶ And the inclusion in that motto of a reference to the people grows directly out of the Army's history and its understanding of that history.

The Thai Army's ostensible success in defeating the armed insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the 1970s and early 1980s had stood for decades at the centre of

³² Connors, "Article of Faith," p. 147, and Duncan McCargo, "Alternative Meanings of Political Reform in Contemporary Thailand," *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* XIII (1998):5-30, esp. pp. 13-21.

³³ See Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Thailand in Trouble: Revolt of the Downtrodden or Conflict among Elites?" pp. 214-229 in Michael J. Montesano, Pavin Chachavalpongpun and Aekapol Chongvilaivan, eds., *Bangkok, May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), pp. 215 ff., and also Pattana Kitiarsa, "From Red to Red: An Auto-Ethnography of Economic and Political Transitions in a Northeastern Thai Village," pp. 230-247 in the same volume.

³⁴ That is, "คณะกรรมการประชาชนเพื่อการเปลี่ยนแปลงประเทศไทยให้เป็นประชาธิปไตยที่สมบูรณ์ อันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข." The best available analysis of this campaign is International Crisis Group, "A Coup Ordained? Thailand's Prospects for Stability," Asia Report No. 263, 3 December 2014 (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/thailand/263-a-coup-ordained-thailand-s-prospects-for-stability.aspx>, accessed 3 December 2014), pp. 9-15.

³⁵ That is, "มวลมหาประชาชน." See, for example, "Suthep Vows to End Regime," *The Sunday Nation*, 30 March 2014 (<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/Suthep-vows-to-end-regime-30230445.html>, accessed 30 November 2014).

³⁶ See, for example, the upper left-hand corner of the Army's home page, <http://www.rta.mi.th/RTAweb/rtaweb.html> (accessed 30 November 2014).

its self-image. And its understanding of that success in turn gives it a particular conception of the place of the people in the country's political order and of the role of the Army itself guaranteeing that order.

In the first instance, that conception emerged from the local variant of a phenomenon typical of "the counter-insurgency era."³⁷ That is, the CPT embarked on a "people's war" from the mid-1960s,³⁸ and the Thai military would mimic its enemy and learn to fight a people's war of its own in return.³⁹ This process of learning took time. It began as early as the 1965-1967 period, when officers attached to the newly created Communist Suppression Command—renamed the Communist Suppression Operations Command in 1969 and the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) in 1974⁴⁰—began to advocate a more effective approach to counter-insurgency.⁴¹ But the process only gained momentum in the mid-1970s, when Thailand's Second Army, responsible for the Northeast, pioneered a more "political" approach, one centred on empowering ISOC to direct counter-insurgency efforts, on partnership with the people in areas affected by insurgency and on the creation of local militias.⁴² The officer who spear-headed this effort was Gen Prem Tinsulanon, who became the deputy commander of the Second Army in 1973, its commander in 1976, commander of the Thai Army in 1978, and prime minister in 1980.⁴³

The attention of officers involved in Gen Prem's counter-insurgency work in northeastern Thailand to the political and social context of their fight with the CPT bred a rising interest in the applicability of the same approach at the national level.⁴⁴ And, the month following Gen Prem's assumption of the Thai premiership in March 1980, his office issued Order 66/2523⁴⁵ with the goal of making that interest government policy. While ostensibly a blue-print for the final stage of the Thai state's contest with the CPT, this order was in fact a document with far broader importance. It represents perhaps the classic statement of the military strand of thinking about the place of the people in the Thai political order. As Michael Connors points out, its contents would have lasting importance to the Thai military's conception of politics and of its own place in politics.⁴⁶

Order 66/2523 owed much to the Thai Army's effort to mimic and thus beat the communists by fighting a people's war of its own. This debt was evident above all in the order's repeated emphasis on, first, the happiness, interests and needs of the people and, second, the primacy of "political" work on the part of the government in defeating the CPT once and for

³⁷ I borrow the term from Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950s to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1977).

³⁸ Tom Marks, *Making Revolution: The Insurgency of the Communist Party of Thailand in Structural Perspective* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994), pp. 64, 88, 93.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 201 ff.

⁴⁰ Kanok Wongtrangan, "Change and Persistence in Thai Counter-Insurgency Policy," ISIS Occasional Paper No. 1, Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1983, pp. 5, 8, 10.

⁴¹ Marks, *Making Revolution*, pp. 99, 102, 103.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197, 201, and Kanok, "Change and Persistence," pp.13-14.

⁴³ Marks, p. 197.

⁴⁴ Kanok, pp. 15-17.

⁴⁵ "คำสั่งสำนักนายกรัฐมนตรี ที่ ๖๖/๒๕๒๓ เรื่อง นโยบายการต่อสู้เพื่อเอาชนะคอมมิวนิสต์," 23 April 1980.

⁴⁶ Michael Kelly Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (New York and London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), p. 109.

all. On an organizational level, the order assigned ISOC the vanguard role of command over and coordination among agencies and personnel from across the entire Thai state in making this final push. On a theoretical or ideological level, it alluded in its preamble to the effort of the CPT to exploit conflict⁴⁷ in Thai society. While it never mentioned elections, with their potential to serve as arenas for conflict and to place parties or factions between the state and the people, it called for “reform of the system of government so that it is more efficient in serving the people and corresponds to the democratic system.”⁴⁸ And, in connection with this latter goal, the order noted explicitly the role of the Thai military not only in defending the country but also in administering the regime of democracy with the king as head of state. It also stressed the need for the state to ensure the people’s devotion to nation, king and religion and to that variety of democracy.

The axis linking the military, the people and the emphasis on a political line envisioned in Order 66/2523 represented the Thai Army’s response to the danger that conflict of the sort described in the order could pose to the country. In that axis, with the agenda of effective depoliticization that it suggested, lay the order’s most important implications for the future.

To be sure, developments on the international scene contributed much to the collapse of the armed insurgency of the CPT by the early 1980. But emphasis on the role in that defeat of the innovations introduced by the Second Army and of the vision outlined in Order 66/2523 has eclipsed interest in those developments in the formation of the Thai Army’s self-image, conception of its political role, and focus on the people. The apparent marginalization of Privy Council chairman Prem Tinsulanon since 22 May 2014 notwithstanding, he and his network of clients in the officer corps have dominated the Thai Army as an institution for most of the past three and a half decades. That many of the phrases and ideas in the announcements and orders of the NCPO discussed above echo phrases in Order 66/2523 thus comes as no surprise. For these more recent documents are products of the same world-view outlined in that order.

In the wake of the ouster of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, Michael Connors asked whether the events of that year had not illustrated the impotence of “the myth of a social contract between the people and the king”—of, that is, the idea of king-people-mutuality—in the country that Thailand had become.⁴⁹ Those events exposed, he wrote, the “completely dependent and misguided nature”⁵⁰ of civilian elites’ efforts to operationalize that understanding of the place of the people in the Thai polity and to dominate that polity. Connors wrote with specific reference to Bhumibol’s direct intervention with the Thai judiciary in April of 2006 to ask it to resolve the country’s political crisis. But his analysis applies with equal accuracy to the armed putsch against Prime Minister Thaksin in September of that same year. The dependence in question was on the monarchy in the first case and on the military in the second. And it puts into stark relief a crucial difference between the two understandings of the place of the people in the Thai political order

⁴⁷ That is, “ความขัดแย้ง.”

⁴⁸ That is, “ปฏิรูประบบราชการให้มีประสิทธิภาพในการรับใช้ประชาชน และให้สอดคล้องกับการปกครองระบอบประชาธิปไตย.”

⁴⁹ Connors, “Article of Faith,” pp. 160-161. Note that Connors wrote with specific reference to Bhumibol’s direct intervention in April 2006 to ask the Thai judiciary to resolve the country’s political stalemate, rather than to the September 2006 coup. His analysis clearly also applies, however, to that latter event.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

discussed here. One was centred explicitly on the monarchy. The other, for all of Bhumibol's keen interest in and active support for the Thai Army's counter-insurgency work,⁵¹ was not.

3. Toward a Praetorian Trajectory of Inclusion

The NCPO junta made no effort to hide its recourse to a counter-insurgency playbook in its effort to restore unity to Thailand. Just a week after seizing power it charged none other than ISOC with establishing "reconciliation centres" as a means of taking its message to the inhabitants of provincial Thailand⁵²—not least in the Northeast. This assignment came just as Thais and foreign observers of Thailand began to understand the level of repression to which the country's new dictatorship would resort.⁵³

Two months to the day after its coup, the NCPO promulgated a temporary constitution,⁵⁴ to obtain pending the drafting of yet another "permanent" Thai constitution intended to perfect the achievement of democracy with the king as head of state. In its emphasis on the people, this former document echoed the analysis of Thai society that led the Second Army to revamp its approach to counter-insurgency three decades earlier. Its preamble alluded, that is, to "the situation of political conflict"⁵⁵ and to "division among the people"⁵⁶ in explaining the need for the NCPO to seize power. It emphasized, following logic parallel to that found in Order 66/2523, the importance of the "faith of the people" in democracy with the king as head of state.⁵⁷ And, in another echo of Thailand's counter-insurgency era, it affirmed the junta's determination to "return the happiness lost for some time to the people and to reform some regulations that have been the cause of conflict."⁵⁸

On the basis of this diagnosis of Thailand's troubles, the NCPO's temporary constitution of 2014 provided, in the words of Puangthong Pawakapan, for the establishment of "an anti-electoral democracy."⁵⁹ It was, like Order 66/2523, a program for addressing conflict through depoliticization. And, like the broad program of the NCPO in general, it must be understood not merely as the response of the "traditional Thai elite" to the victory of parties loyal to Thaksin Shinawatra in every general election since the turn of the century. Rather, it represented a reassertion of a political vision to which the Thai Army has subscribed since a quarter-century before Thaksin first organized his Thai Rak Thai Party in

⁵¹ Marks, p. 200.

⁵² Amy Sawitta Lefevre, "Thai Junta to Set Up Reconciliation Centers Across Country," Reuters, 30 May 2014 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/30/us-thailand-politics-reconciliation-idUSKBN0EA0RO20140530>, accessed 2 December 2014).

⁵³ An overview of the NCPO in power appears in International Crisis Group, "A Coup Ordained?" pp. 16-24.

⁵⁴ "รัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย (ฉบับชั่วคราว) พุทธศักราช ๒๕๕๗," 22 July 2014, available at <http://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2557/A/055/1.PDF> (accessed 2 December 2014).

⁵⁵ That is, "สถานการณ์ความขัดแย้งทางการเมือง."

⁵⁶ That is, "ประชาชนแตกแยก."

⁵⁷ That is, "ความศรัทธาของประชาชน."

⁵⁸ That is, "นำความสุขที่สูญหายไปนานกลับคืนสู่ประชาชน และปฏิรูปกฎเกณฑ์บางเรื่องที่เคยเป็นชนวนความขัดแย้ง."

⁵⁹ Puangthong Pawakapan, "The Thai Junta's Interim Constitution: Towards an Anti-Electoral Democracy," *ISEAS Perspective*, 12 August 2014 (http://www.iseas.edu.sg/documents/publication/ISEAS_Perspective_2014_45.pdf, accessed 2 December 2014), p. 4; also see discussion on pp. 6-7.

the late 1990s. In its stress on the people, on the danger of conflict, and on the Thai Army's "political" role, this vision allowed for an at best ornamental role for all actors or institutions that would mediate between the state and the undifferentiated *prachachon*. It was, in essence, the ideological foundation for a praetorian order, a regime of something approximating "Army-people-mutuality" in which civilian elites might serve as subalterns at best. Puangthong notes the likelihood that the underlying principles of the NCPO's temporary constitution will also define the junta's permanent charter⁶⁰—which is to be ready, perhaps, at some point in the first half of 2015.

The manner in which the NCPO junta sought to see these principles manifest themselves in the future that it planned for Thailand became clearer in early October, when the Thai media revealed the contents of the junta's "blueprint" for political reform.⁶¹ Prepared for the members of the junta's Political Reform Council by the Working Group to Prepare Reforms to Return Happiness to People in the Nation⁶² in the office of the permanent secretary of the Ministry of Defence, this document offered a series of options in a range of areas. Possibilities on the agenda for reform included onerous restrictions on the electoral platforms of political parties, strict requirements on candidates for parliament, appointed senators sitting alongside elected senators, and the selection of prime ministers from outside parliament. The blueprint also raised the possibility of creating a third chamber of parliament, in addition to the National Assembly and the Senate, to be called "the People's Assembly."⁶³ Composed of representatives of such functional constituencies as occupational groups, provincial people and serving government officials, this chamber would balance the power of members of parliament elected by simple majorities.⁶⁴ It would, that is, help neutralize such actors and institutions as politicians and parties as may seek to mediate between the state and the people.

As early as mid-December 2013, Nidhi Eoseewong, one of Thailand's most prominent intellectual figures, invoked Hannah Arendt to argue that the campaign of the People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State, one allegedly supported by "the great mass of the people" with its "excessive" attachment to the Thai monarchy, risked putting Thailand on the road to "totalitarian dictatorship."⁶⁵ While the NCPO is certainly authoritarian rather than totalitarian, his concern was prescient. What we are

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 8.

⁶¹TNA News, "พิมพ์เขียวปฏิรูปด้านการเมือง เสนอที่มานายกฯ 2 ทาง คือเลือกตั้งและแต่งตั้ง" [Blueprint for political reform proposes two means of selecting the prime minister, election and appointment], Mass Communications Organization of Thailand, 9 October 2014 (<http://www.mcot.net/site/content?id=54366e1abe04703a2d8b4569#.VH2tI6N0zX5>, accessed 2 December 2014).

⁶²That is, "คณะกรรมการเตรียมการปฏิรูปเพื่อคืนความสุขให้คนในชาติ."

⁶³That is, "สภาประชาชน."

⁶⁴Suthichai Yoon, "สภาประชาชนต้องถ่วงดุลอำนาจนักเลือกตั้ง" [People's Assembly Must Balance the Power of Elected Politicians], OK Nation Blog, 24 October 2014 (<http://www.oknation.net/blog/black/2014/10/24/entry-1>, accessed 2 December 2014).

⁶⁵Nidhi Eoseewong, "The Great Mass of the People," *Prachatai English*, 31 December 2013 (<http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/3802>, accessed 30 November 2014). This is a translation of "มวลมหาประชาชน โดย นิดิ เอียวศรีวงศ์" [The great mass of the people by Nidhi Eoseewong], *Matichon Online*, 17 December 2013 (http://www.matichon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1387190430, accessed 4 February 2014).

seeing in Thailand in 2014 is the country's arrival at a praetorian moment. The king has long since been too infirm to play the significant political role that was long his. A growing consensus suggests that his heir aspires to play no such role himself in the future. Among the enemies of Thai democracy, civilian elites who joined their cause to that of royalism have failed. That latter cause has lost its salience as an alternative to straightforward military dictatorship. The anti-Yingluck movement and its followers, with their commitment to the mass politics of king-people-mutuality, proved little more than useful idiots for Gen Prayut Chanocha and the Thai Army. Nidhi saw that movement as a symptom of the atomization of Thai society.⁶⁶ To correct for that atomization, the NCPO dictatorship has plotted a trajectory for Thailand premised on folding all Thais into "the people" and depoliticizing that people in the name of ending "conflict." This is the manifestation of praetorianism that is Thailand's lot at the end of Bhumibol's reign.

⁶⁶ Ibid.