

The Thai Royalists' Uses of Narratives in Their Defenses of a Politico–Moral Order

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine the ways in which Thai royalists employed narratives in their defense of a politico–moral order against threats over the past two decades. It employed qualitative research methods primarily including in-depth interviews and document analysis, examining how Thai royalists constructed and told the narratives, what themes and plots of these narratives are, and the extent to which these narratives are convincing and able to defend the politico–moral order where righteousness is the main source of power. The article found that, considering themes and plots, Thai royalists constructed three narratives, including a righteous king under threats of a corrupt and disloyal politician, a sacred war between good and bad people, and informed adults instructing indoctrinated children. Drawing on religious concepts especially the Buddhist ones in their narrativization, the royalists achieved to defend the politico–moral order as their narratives were cited by the coups that ousted politicians considered a threat. Despite convincing at the initial stage, their narratives however became less convincing and thus less able to defend the politico–moral order, given changing socio–political circumstances and the discrepancy between them and the reality. The article argues that Thai royalists need to construct a new narrative or inevitably adopt a new politico–moral order so as to survive these challenges.

Keywords: Thai Royalists, Narratives, Thai-style Democracy, Thai Politics, Politico–moral Order

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Introduction

In a group interview on Thai politics over the past two decades, three Thai royalists who called themselves “people’s sector”² recalled their political engagement during the period. One of them said that he has engaged social problems in his hometown Phuket since he was young. However, it is not until Thaksin Shinawatra became a prime minister in 2001 that he engaged social problems at the national level. This is because he found Thaksin crooked and greedy. Particularly, he said, “Thaksin joined hands with ex-communists in founding a political party. Ex-communists didn’t uphold the monarchy, and they wrote the party’s policy”. (“People’s sector 1”, Interview, November 23, 2022) He therefore joined People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in 2005 in ousting Thaksin, which eventually led to the 19 September 2006 coup.

Likewise, the other “people’s sector” said he not only joined the PAD but also supported the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) in 2013 in ousting Yingluck, Thaksin’s sister, given her administration’s attempt to bring Thaksin back home by passing the Amnesty Bill. He was therefore pleased with the 22 May 2014 coup as it put an end to Thaksin’s clique and brought peace and order back to Thai society, otherwise, he said, “there would be bloodshed in the country”. (“People’s sector 2”, Interview, November 23, 2022)

However, when asked if they were satisfied with the junta and its successive government over the past eight years, their answers were negative. One of them said that at the beginning the junta seemed to be a problem solver but later it became a problem because it had stayed in power for too long. The other added that the successive junta-led government was disappointing

² “People’s sector” or “ภาคประชาชน” is a self-identification of a group of Thai people who vigorously engaged Thai politics in mid 1990s through early 2000s. Initially, they were a liberal, progressive force, as they constituted a crucial part of the mass in the May 1992 Incident which led to the end of the military junta and the rise of social movements. However, later they became a reactionary, conservative force as they attempted to restore a traditional political institution at the expense of parliamentary politics. They eventually formed the People’s Alliance for Democracy which paved a way for a military coup on 19 September 2006.

because it did not follow through on reforms it promised, and was tarred by scandals not unlike civilian governments it accused, not to mention its inability to alleviate economic hardship.

Besides, these royalists deemed the youth movements, which were vigorous in 2020, a new threat. On the one hand, they believed that Thaksin was behind the youths using education system as a tool for infiltration. The root cause then remained. On the other hand, although they admitted that youths are progressive in certain aspects, they cannot accept the way youths treated the monarchy and especially the youths' demands for reform of the monarchy.

The unintended consequences they partly caused and the unprecedented circumstances notwithstanding, these royalists remained firm on what they believed and did. Regarding the 2014 coup, one of them said that the coup was not wrong in itself, and “we apologize [for its consequences], but we don’t regret because we did the right thing at the time. The junta is another issue”. (“People’s sector 3”, Interview, November 23, 2022) Importantly, they still revered King Vajiralongkorn, the current monarch, despite rumors or scandals about him. They maintained that some rumors about King Vajiralongkorn might be true, but such rumors remain acceptable. For example, “his majesty may have many wives, but it is not that bad, is it?” one of them asked in return. (“People’s sector 1”, Interview, November 23, 2022)

The group interview illustrates the way in which Thai royalists narrated their political engagement over the past two decades, which in essence is a defense of a politico-moral order where righteousness is a main source of power and the king who is regarded as the most righteous person is the sovereign.³

³ The Thai politico-moral order is primarily grounded on a Buddhist hierarchical order where positions and the mobility within depend on morality. Hanks is one of the first scholars to discuss this order. He maintained that as good Buddhists, Thai perceive that all living beings stands in a hierarchy of varying ability to make actions effective and of varying degrees of freedom from suffering, and that hierarchy depends on a composite quality called “merit” (บุญ) or virtue (คุณมติ). (Hanks, 1962, p. 1247). The discussion was then elaborated by subsequent scholars of Thai studies. Jackson, for example, submitted that in Early Siamese kingdoms such as Sukhothai,

It is a narrative of this politico-moral order which is superior to formal political system but is under threats of immoral and disloyal politicians. It also illustrates how they continued to employ such a narrative in their defense of the order even though it paved a way for unintended consequences, and particularly even when there is discrepancy between the narrative and the reality of the order.

Narrative is a concept variously used across disciplines. In anthropology, narratives are characterized as coherent plots that have an inherent integrity determined by a beginning, middle and end (Dodge et al., 2005 as cited in Ramchandani, 2016, p. 43), and, through their characters and events organized through space and time, make sense in their totality. (Toolan, 2013 as cited in Ramchandani, 2016, p. 43) Anthropological approaches to narratives shift a focus from the genesis to the interpretation of intention and meaning of what being said in context, and attend to narratives' ability to transform the real into an object of desire through a moral order that the real lacks, and the narrativization – how events are narrated and the act of narrating–(Ramchandani, 2016, pp. 43–44).

Drawing on anthropological approaches to narratives, this article examines the Thai royalists' uses of narratives and their narrativization in their defenses of a politico-moral order. It examines what themes and plots of these narratives are, what repertoires were drawn, what identities were constructed and how, how the narratives were told, and the extent to which they are convincing and

the king's authority and legitimacy derived from the Buddhist notion of dhammaraja, or "righteous king" whose political function was regarded as being governed by dasabhidha rajadhamm, or the Ten Kingly Virtues. Although the kings of Ayutthaya, the Siamese kingdom that followed Sukhothai, reverted to Brahmanical ideas of the monarch as a devaraja (the king of the deities) legitimizing their rule by linking themselves with Vishnu, the Hindu god, the notion of dhammaraja returned in the early Bangkok period in the wake of Western colonialism. (Jackson, 2010, pp. 35–37) And although King Bhumibol was also resacralized as devaraja via royal ceremonies (Ivarsson & Isager, 2010, pp. 9–10; Jackson, 2010, pp. 37–48), his legitimacy remains grounded on dhammaraja. In current political conflicts, the discussion of this Buddhist politico-moral order was framed against democracy, as demonstrated in the following section of the article.

able to defend the politico-moral order. It argues that although these narratives which drew on religious concepts were appealing, they are less convincing and less able to defend the politico-moral order due to changing socio-political circumstances and the discrepancy between them and the reality regarding the monarchy. This article then, on the one hand, contributes to the discussion of Thai politico-moral order in that, while the discussion attends to the ways in which the order was created, the article demonstrates how the order was collapsed and then restored. The article, on the other hand, contributes to anthropological approaches to narratives in that it not only demonstrates the narrative's ability to transform the real into an object of desire through a moral order that the real lacks, but also demonstrates conditions and limits of the narratives' ability.

A righteous king under threat of a corrupt and disloyal politician

The 1990s is crucial to modern Thai politics. On the one hand, it is a period in which popular democracy especially “civil society” was vibrant in parallel with the growth of the urban middle class. This began with the military’s return to the barrack after the May 1992 incident in which the urban middle class played a crucial role, followed by the growth of social movements especially the political reform movement which culminated in the 1997 “People’s Constitution”. (Thabchumpon, 2000, pp. 463–511) On the other hand, it is time during which King Bhumibol’s hegemony reached its peak. Although King Bhumibol began to be promoted during Field Marshal Sarit’s era (Hewison, 1997, p. 63)⁴ and got a firm ground in the 14 October 1973 incident (Winichakul, 2019, p. 286), it is not until he intervened in the May 1992 incident and was ostensibly celebrated in rituals (Jackson, 2010, pp. 37–48) and through royal initiatives (Chitbandit, 2007) in this decade that he obtained a highly revered status like a sacred figure or “semi-god”. These two trends converged to create a politico-moral order where the king together with “civil society” are celebrated at the expense of politicians and political system.

⁴ In addition to promoting the king’s visits to the provinces and abroad, Sarit revived royal ceremonies, including plowing ceremony, monk name giving, commencement, and Emerald Buddha’s dressing changing, etc. (Tambiah, 1976, p. 501)

Although culminating in this decade, however, this politico-moral order has a long history and is differently called by scholars of Thai studies. The common one is “Thai-style democracy”. Connors (2007) submitted that in early 1960s the notion “Thai-style democracy” emerged as a fundamental element of the military and bureaucratic ideology similar to cosmological world view in *Traibhumikatha*. Stability and happiness of social order are the consequence of the king’s merit and Barami. The monarchy is therefore the indispensable para-political institution in Thai-style democracy. Likewise, Hewison and Kitirianglarp (2010, pp. 179–202) maintained that “Thai-style democracy” is a political idea developed to justify conservatism and authoritarianism in the reign of King Bhumibol who viewed politics as a dirty business. King Bhumibol supported Field Marshal Sarit’s authoritarianism because it is an opportunity for the palace to revive, and because it is his personal admiration of traditional institutions. He viewed Western democracy as alienated to Thai tradition, and advised Thai people to create a “Thai-style democracy” for themselves.

This politico-moral order is also called “royal democracy”. Winichakul (2019, p. 284), who coined the term, viewed it as a form of guided democracy – an ostensibly democratic polity, but one in which the electorate and elected authority do not have substantive power because true power remains in the hands of the monarchic institution. It is a political system where formal parliamentary system comes under the authority of the unelected monarchy as stated in the formal name of Thailand’s political system, that is, “the democratic regime with the monarch as the head of the state”. Besides, Sinpeng (2021, p. 132) called it “Dharmic democracy,” or *Thammatippatai*, which is an ideal version of democracy, whereby the leader who is elected democratically by the people exercises truthfulness, ethics, and righteousness as a principle of rule.

Long history and culminating in the 1990s notwithstanding, this politico-moral order began to face a challenge in the 2000s. This is because the 1997 constitution, while distrusting politicians, ironically provided a means through which politicians became more popular and powerful than ever before. Thaksin Shinawatra is a case in point. A police lieutenant colonel and businessman

turned politician, Thaksin founded Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party in 1998 and competed in the first election held under the 1997 constitution in 2001. In addition to its policy package aimed to win support of the grassroots, one of the reasons why the party won majority seats and was able to form a coalition government is that the 1997 constitution was designed to create a strong government, i.e. two kinds of ballot. The Thaksin administration not only delivered its policy, which responded to economic changes and the emerging “lower middle class” especially in rural areas (Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra, & Pawakapan, 2013, pp. 15–18), as promised but also stayed full term for the first time in Thai political history. This brought Thaksin popularity and consequently the TRT landslide victory in the 2005 election, enabling the TRT to form Thailand’s first single party government.

While gaining popularity among the grassroots, especially the emerging lower middle class in rural areas in the North and the Northeast (Satitniramai, Mukdawijitra, & Pawakapan, 2013, pp. 34–48), however, Thaksin brought grave concerns to the urban middle class I interviewed. A member of P-NET (an election watchdog NGO) said that the TRT’s vote canvas strategy in the 2001 election was to employ populism to gain supports of voters especially the poor. However, he commented, “it did not touch root causes of problems”. (Nikorn Weesapen, Interview, April 1, 2022) Likewise, a former senator and national human rights commissioner admitted that the populist policy especially the universal health coverage is good. However, he remarked, “we must look for a policy that better creates infrastructure such as decentralization”. (Nirun Pithakwatchara, Interview, March 31, 2022) This is not to mention many other comments especially those that viewed that the grassroots had fallen prey to the policy and became extravagant and materially fanatical.⁵

⁵ In their interviews with Bangkok upper middle class, Pitidol and Techasunthornwat (2019, p. 49) found that most informants identified Thaksin’s “populist policies” as a major threat to Thailand. They regarded these policies not simply as economic policies that lacked sustainability but as Thaksin’s means of destroying morality, especially among villagers.

Besides, these urban middle class viewed Thaksin a crooked and corrupt politician. An academic said Thaksin undermined the country's good governance. He cited Thaksin's amendment of the laws and the satellite concession contract as examples among many others, and observed that "Thaksin made an excuse on this and that to free himself from guilt. Many people believe him, but I didn't". (An academic 3, Interview, October 20, 2022) Likewise, an NGO worker said Thaksin "was excellent and smart, but he was crooked". (An NGO worker, Interview, September 7, 2022)

Importantly, they viewed that Thaksin encroached the monarchy.⁶ An academic turned politician said Thaksin's behaviors regarding the monarchy were improper. He cited one ceremony as an example, saying that "that Thaksin put the chair in the Emerald Buddha Temple was the encroachment, acting as if he were the absolute". (Rong Boonsuakwan, Interview, April 7, 2022)

These urban middle class' concerns and discontents against Thaksin found an outlet in the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) which was led by a "media mogul" Sondhi Limthongkul. Beginning with cordial relationship, Sondhi later turned against Thaksin. On 9 September 2005, he read his article "An Astray Lamb" in his television program "Weekly Thailand" on state-owned television Channel 9 accusing Thaksin of disrespecting King Bhumibol.⁷ Since it is

⁶ Thaksin's disloyalty to King Bhumibol is a decisive factor that turned Thai urban middle class against Thaksin. In their interviews with Bangkok upper middle class, Pitidol and Techasunthornwat (2019, p. 50) found that the informants interpreted Thaksin's "populist policies" as an indicator that he tried to deviate from King Bhumibol's philosophy of sufficiency economy. They saw him as bent on accumulating power, building himself up as the "god" to the poor, and trying to match the appeal of King Bhumibol.

⁷ That is, "dad [King Bhumibol] told us that we should pursue sufficiency economy. But a lost lamb asked what we will have to eat. Should we better go live in huts, morons? [...] The older brother lamb remained lost...and lost...and lost. Wake up, all children. Open your eyes. Your lives belong to dad, which does not need any rule to support. Prostrate at feet of father of the land [King Bhumibol]". (Sithisaman, 2006, p. 59)

very much likely that “an astray lamb” was meant to be Thaksin, Sondhi was then sued by Thaksin for contempt, and his program was later pulled out from the channel’s programs. (Matichon editorial department, 2008, pp. 83–84)

The prosecution did not stop Sondhi from criticizing Thaksin. Rather, it pushed him to go further. He continued to hold his program in auditoriums under the theme “Return the Royal Prerogative”. His program drew thousands of attendees and had nation-wide viewers on his television channel ASTV. He then joined hands with a veteran politician and especially those in “civil society” including academics, NGO workers and unionists in founding the PAD on 9 February 2006. The PAD held rallies on the streets, primarily in Chinese descendants’ neighborhoods in Bangkok, but also in major cities in the South. It accused Thaksin of undermining the nation (corruption, tax evasion), religion (appointing an acting Supreme Patriarch), and the monarchy (making a merit in the Emerald Buddha Temple). Besides Thaksin’s resignation, it demanded a royally-appointed prime minister citing article 7 of the 1997 constitution.

Thaksin responded by dissolving the parliament on 24 February 2006 and holding an election on 2 April 2006. However, the Democrat Party boycotted the election, and the Constitutional Court on 8 May 2006 nullified the election, which led to a political deadlock. Then the military stepped in by staging a coup on 19 September 2006, which was warmly welcomed by Thais in general. The PAD took this opportunity to cease its rallies as part of its demands was met.

The royalists I interviewed were convinced on Sondhi’s accusation of Thaksin on corruption and encroachment, and it is the reason why they joined the PAD. An activist said he joined the PAD because Sondhi fought the corruption whereas he himself upholds rightness. He added that he has faith and confidence in Sondhi because “he [Sondhi] continually fought corruption although he didn’t hold any political position”. (An activist 1, Interview, October 15, 2022) Likewise, the other activist said he supported the PAD because Sondhi exposed Thaksin’s corruption, many of which, he said, “I never realized before”. (An activist 1, Interview, October 15, 2022)

However, besides “facts” Sondhi disclosed, what drew these people to the PAD is narratives Sondhi employed. These narratives were primarily about Thaksin’s posing a threat to a politico-moral order and how to defend it. The narratives begin with the way Thaksin governed the country and his manners towards King Bhumibol. Given that he committed wrongdoings in both aspects, he was then identified as a crooked and corrupt politician who is disloyal and wanted to replace King Bhumibol. The plot then goes on with the restoration. Rather than politics as usual, i.e. no-confidence vote and election, the restoration is to return power to King Bhumibol citing the constitution. However, citing the constitution alone does not suffice to justify the solution. The narrativization then brings in religious concepts especially the Buddhist ones, and associate them with King Bhumibol. The narratives end with King Bhumibol exercising his royal prerogative in appointing a new prime minister replacing Thaksin. The politico-moral order is therefore eventually restored.

Sondhi and other PAD leaders employed these narratives in several occasions (Sinpeng, 2021, p. 132), the dominant one is a petition for a royally-appointed prime minister submitted to King Bhumibol. Below is part of the petition first read on 4 February 2006.

“We seek his majesty’s permission to inform his majesty about the country’s grave suffering resulting from the governance of police lieutenant colonel Thaksin Shinawatra, the prime minister. [...] Crises cannot be solved by political system’s mechanisms because this prime minister has undermined state power checking mechanisms. This led to discussions about the king’s royal prerogative in Thai society [...] This government is corrupt the most, damaging the country like never before. The latest one is the sale of shares of the company [...] which his majesty granted ‘royal permission’ [...] This caused unbearable sorrow and frustration among the Thais over the past two weeks [...]”

This prime minister [...] neglects the king’s royal prerogative, rendering us afraid of peril that will happen to the country, people, and the monarchy [...] We the people who own sovereignty granted from the monarch then have

absolute right to call it back and return it to the monarch [...] We submit a petition to his majesty, for his majesty to alleviate sufferings of the subjects the way his majesty deems appropriate”.

This petition was followed by a rally on 26 March 2006 where Sondhi said “We came to show that Thaksin must resign and to show public opinion to seek for his majesty’s *barami*. It is to use article 7 of the constitution of the kingdom of Thailand to beg for a royally-appointed prime minister”.

Besides a coherent plot that makes sense in totality, this narrative draws on Buddhist concepts in creating “a moral order that the real lacks” to attract audiences. First is *Barami* – great moral power innate to an extraordinary person who has achieved supremely virtuous accomplishments in a previous life. Jory (2002, pp. 36–78) maintains that Vessantara Jataka is one of the most important texts in pre-modern Thai state that expresses and circulates a political theory based on concepts of *Barami* and *Bodhisattva* king. Siamese kings of late 18 and early 19 centuries were presented in royal documents as possessing attributes like *Bodhisattva*, that is, had the same name as *Bodhisattva*, accumulated ten *Barami*, and will enlighten to be a Buddha in the future. Early Rattanakosin period is a golden age of Thai political culture based on a concept of *Barami*; kings were elevated to a status of *Bodhisattva* who accumulated *Barami* and was linked to Buddha. Although a religious reform in the reign of King Rama 4 rendered concept of *Barami* outdated, the concept still appears in royal anthem and in the mind of people through Jataka tales.

Second is royal prerogative. Prior to this, Pramuan Rujanaseri, former director-general of Department of Provincial Administration, published a book “Royal Prerogative” (Rujanaseri, 2005) to create a “correct” understanding of the king’s royal prerogative. He submitted that in Sukhothai period the king was a “Great Father” reigning his children. In Ayutthaya period, the king was a deified king and a righteous king according to Hindu and Buddhist concepts respectively. In Rattanakosin period the king’s status changed from a deified king to *Anekchonnikorn samosorn sommut* who was committed to a Buddhist doctrine

of Ten Virtues of the King, *Rajasangkahawatthu*, and *Jakkrawaddiwat*. The king then continually possesses sovereign power.

Pramuan (Rujanaseri, 2005) maintains that Thai people believe that every king has *Prapuppekatapunyata* – constantly committing good deeds more excellently than others in previous lives – and, when becoming a king, is determined to commit good deeds by healing suffering and nourishing happiness for the people and fostering Buddhism. This was obviously articulated in King Bhumibol's coronation speech- “I shall reign by righteousness for the benefits and happiness of the Siamese people”. Pramuan also added that King Bhumibol always sermonized in various occasions emphasizing the importance of morale and righteousness. As such, when morale of Thai people degenerated, he concludes, “all Thais only hope in the king's power” using the king's royal prerogative.⁸

Sondhi was quick to put this Buddhist concept in his narrativization. On 26 August 2005, on his television program “Weekly Thailand,” he said that the king has read Pramuan's book with comments – “I have already read it. I like it very much. Written well. Written correctly”. – and asked his men to inform Pramuan about this. Sondhi said that if reading between the lines, one will find that Thai society does not pay enough attention to royal prerogative. He said that there are several royal prerogatives stated in the constitution: royal prerogative in time of crisis, royal prerogative in considering petitions, and royal prerogative

⁸ These Buddhist concepts have continually been invoked when the monarchy faced challenges. In encountering modernity and western colonialism, the monarchy adapted itself by invoking the notion *Anekchonnikornsamosornsommot* in which the king is from people's consensus. (Chaiching, 2013) After 1947, royalists revived the monarchy's role in political society by proposing that the king is Dhammaraja who possesses Ten Virtues of the King, resulting in a peaceful Buddhist society as translated through royal initiatives and duties aimed to take care of Thai people. (Winichakul, 2013) There was a new justification of King Bhumibol by invoking the notion of Dhammaraja and later *Anekchonnikornsamosornsommot* insisting that Thai political system is already democracy. (Connors, 2007) Pramaun's book is thus the latest move of this trend.

in veto. It is also a custom commonly held among relevant circles that royal prerogative exists although the younger generation may not understand and the older generation may forget it. The petition for a royally-appointed prime minister citing article 7 of the constitution is the culmination of Sondhi's narrativization of Buddhist concepts in restoring the politico-moral order.

Sondhi's and other PAD leaders' narrativizations of Buddhist concepts⁹ with regard to King Bhumibol strongly moved Thai royalists I interviewed. An academic turned politician said that Pramuan's book is convincing as it drew on Buddhist concepts stated in Buddhist texts in explaining how and why the king possesses power to reign. He added that "I believe that the king has accumulated *Barami* in his past lives and in the present. And I therefore accept his prerogative and agreed with Sondhi when he proposed the return of power to the king". (Rong Boonsuakwan, Interview, April 7, 2022)

Likewise, a former senator and national human rights commissioner admitted that he was once dominated by Buddhist concepts so much that he invoked article 7 of the 1997 constitution in a demand for a royally-appointed prime minister. As he put it, "I was the one who invoked article 7 because I thought it was to use custom and tradition according to Buddhism". (Nirun Pithakwatchara, Interview, March 31, 2022)

This explained why the PAD was able to draw supports from the majority Thais who were convinced that Thai politics was in decline by a politician who was immoral and disloyal to the king. The only way to fix it is to return power or

⁹ Besides Buddhist concepts, a Hindu notion of Devaraja, or deified king, was also invoked. Jackson (2010) maintained that Field Marshal Sarit's coup laid the ground for the return of Devaraja discourse; Brahman symbols of royal absolutism were stronger again along with Buddhism as a basis of the king's political justification through media in which King Bhumibol was presented as a deified king, whereas Chaloemtiarana (1979) submitted that the Sarit administration revived Hindu traditions such as plowing ceremony. Ivarsson and Isager (2010) argued that King Bhumibol enthroned as Dhammaraja, or righteous king, but later was made Devaraja through Hindu rituals whereas Winichakul (2013) maintained that over the past 50 years royalists esteemed the king so much that he became a deified king.

royal prerogative to the king who according to Buddhist concepts is the most righteous person, and, in their opinion, is more reliable than and can surpass normal political mechanisms. Submitting a petition to the king for a royally-appointed prime minister then became the most appropriate solution for many Thais.

PAD's narratives might not be able to defend the politico-moral order by themselves, as Thaksin remained in power and the petition was turned down by King Bhumibol. But given that the 19 September 2006 coup makers cited Thaksin's corruption and his encroachment of King Bhumibol, which are the core component of PAD's narratives, for justification, PAD's narratives are arguably effective in defending the politico-moral order.

A Sacred war between good people and bad people

The PAD reached its peak in 2008 with the occupations of the Government House and airports demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat, who it regarded as Thaksin's proxy. The Constitutional Court stepped in on 2 December 2008, ruling that the People Power Party, the TRT's successor, is to be dissolved given its executive member's election fraud. The PAD took this opportunity to cease its rallies as one of its demands—ousting Thaksin proxy administration—was met. However, Sondhi was assassinated on 17 April 2009. Although narrowly surviving, he later faced many charges and imprisonment. The PAD has never organized any major rally since then.

Former PAD supporters took to the street again in 2013. Opposing the Yingluck (Thaksin's younger sister) administration's passing of the Amnesty Bill which allegedly aimed to bring Thaksin back home, Suthep Thaugsuban, former secretary-general of the Democrat Party, called on people to rally at Bangkok's Samsen train station on 31 October 2013. His call was successful as thousands of people, mostly Bangkok residents and those traveling from the South, joined. (Unno, 2019, pp. 58–68) As the rally gained momentum, he moved the rally site to the Democracy Monument on 4 November 2013 demanding the revocation of the Amnesty Bill. Yingluck accommodated the demand as she revoked the Amnesty Bill on 7 November 2013 and pledged protesters to cease, but to no

avail. On 29 November 2013 Suthep founded People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), of which he established himself as a secretary-general, and demanded Yingluck's resignation. Yingluck in response dissolved the parliament on 9 December 2013 and proposed an election on 2 February 2014. The PDRC did not follow suit, because besides Yingluck's resignation, it demanded the founding of the "People's Council" to conduct "reform before election". Importantly, Suthep established himself as "sovereign of the state" who is authorized to issue a charter, form a new, unelected government citing article 3 and article 7 of the constitution for the king's endorsement, and found the "People's Council" composed of "good and righteous people".

Then the PDRC on 13 January 2014 launched the "Shut Down Bangkok" operation, primarily including rallies in seven strategic areas and "visits" to important government agencies. Importantly, it obstructed the 2 February 2014 election by closing many polling stations. The Constitutional Court on 21 March 2014 followed suit by ruling that since the election did not take place across the kingdom, the election was not in line with article 108 clause 2 of the constitution, and thus was nullified. This, again, led to a political deadlock and a coup on 22 May 2014. The PDRC ceased its rallies partly because overthrowing Thaksin's-proxy Phue Thai Party-led government is one of its demands. Suthep later gave an interview that the PDRC is pleased to cooperate with the junta in conducting the reform.

The PDRC gained supports from various groups of people across society, including the royalists I interviewed, because it raised an issue that they found unacceptable – passing the Amnesty Bill three times in a row at 3 am. An academic, for example, said that he joined the PDRC because "I am not OK with the government passing the Amnesty Bill". (An academic 1, Interview, November 23, 2022) Likewise, the other academic said that he went to Bangkok per Suthep's calling because "I want to oppose the Amnesty Bill". (An academic 2, Interview, November 23, 2022) These two local academics also joined PDRC's activities in their hometowns afterwards.

An academic turned politician shares the same cause in joining the PDRC in Bangkok and holding rallies in his hometown. He viewed that Thaksin deserved punishment, and granting Thaksin amnesty might lead to violence. As he put it,

“Passing a law needs transparency and cleanliness. So, I disagreed with the government. This carried enough weight for me to join the PDRC. I believed that what Thaksin did was wrong, and punishment was appropriate. If he was granted amnesty, violence would happen. I came to observe rallies in Bangkok a couple of times. And I took part in holding parallel rallies at Walailak University before moving to the front of the provincial hall”. (Rong Boonsuikwan, Interview, April 7, 2022)

“Reform before election” is the PDRC’s other demand that appeals Thai royalists. A local politician said he joined the PDRC because he opposed the Amnesty Bill and agreed with the PDRC’s demand for reform before election. Therefore, he not only shut down roads in Bangkok and his hometown Phuket, but also shut down the polling stations and a police station on 2 February 2014. These shutdowns caused him 3-year imprisonment on parole, a 30,000 baht fine, and the revocation of political rights for 5 years. However, he said, “I don’t regret because I did the right things”. (A local politician, Interview, September 5, 2022)

Like the PAD, the PDRC employed narratives in their mobilization. However, rather than a righteous king under threats of a corrupt and disloyal politician as those of the PAD, PDRC’s main narrative is a sacred war between good people and bad people.¹⁰ Suthep always tells PDRC’s supporters that they are good people doing good deeds in ousting a bad woman like Yingluck.

¹⁰ One of the reasons why the PDRC did not follow the PAD’s narrativization although its purpose is the same is that it avoids to create negative impacts on the monarchy as the way the PAD’s narrativization did. That is, although appealing to the vast majority Thais, the PAD’s narrativization dragged the monarchy into political conflicts and put the monarchy against certain groups of its people. The PDRC then chose, or was forced, to dissociate the monarchy from its narrative so that the monarchy will not be more tainted and the politico-moral order restored.

For example, on 21 November 2013, he gave a speech on a stage at Ratchadamnoen Avenue: “We are good people [...] doing right things for the country [...] fighting devils [...] Our fight will be the greatest fight. And the world will inscribe that good people, good citizens have come out to fight for the country”.

Likewise, “Buddha Isara,” an abbot of a famous Buddhist temple and a second-tier PDRC’s leader, told his audiences in a rally at the government complex on 13 January 2014 that their rally is not an ordinary political rally but a sacred war where good people came to eradicate bad people. His speeches were imbued with sermons citing Buddha’s life history to justify their rallies that they are morally right.

The PDRC’s main narrative begins with the Yingluck administration’s passing of the Amnesty Bill which aims to bring Thaksin back home. Then it goes on that unless people come out to oppose, such a plan will succeed, given that the parliament is under the control of the Yingluck administration, part of the “Thaksin regime”. As such, besides the revocation of the Amnesty Bill, Yingluck needs to resign and the government terminated. The narrative ends with the founding of the “People’s Council” composed of “good people” to conduct “reform before election” to ensure that elected politicians are “good people” and the politico-moral order will be restored.

Suthep employed this narrative on several occasions. The significant one is his speech at the Constitution Monument on 15 December 2013. After attacking Yingluck administration on passing the Amnesty Bill to help Thaksin return home, he went on to say that

“Thaksin regime is a governance that does not respect the law [...] exercises power at its will, such as abduction of 2,000 people. The worst is corruption. Thaksin regime also means undermining a merit system in bureaucracy, using patron-client system. People cannot bear anymore and stand up to say that we must eradicate Thaksin regime from Thailand. [...] We the great mass will definitely not go back to the election until finishing reforming Thailand [...] The prime minister and the cabinet must resign, and then form an ad-hoc government to solve problems by founding a people’s council”.

Given that the narrative is about a sacred war between good people and bad people, the significant part of the narrativization is therefore the identification of these two kinds of people. For good people, it is imperative for Suthep as he has a tainted past. He begged PDRC supporters in his speech at Ratchadamnoen Avenue on 13 December 2013 that

“In the past my images might not be beautiful. It was my karma. But I told you that the day I came to fight, I was like the one getting ordained, observing precepts. And I will strictly observe the precepts”.

Suthep was then reidentified from a politician with a tainted past to “Uncle Kamnan [sub-district head]” who was reborn amid the struggle of the masses and was freed from darkness to brightness. He became a meritorious person who crossed obstacles to undertake the mission.

For bad people, it includes such identities as immoral, credulous, misled, and ignorant, “red buffaloes,” “nation sellers” and “hellish beasts,” that must be eradicated from the country. This is particularly the case for Yingluck who is the main target of this side of identification. Suthep once put it on the PDRC stage at Patumwan Intersection on 7 January 2014:

“If I don’t call you [Yingluck] a hellish beast, I have no idea how to find a word to talk to you...You are a hellish beast reborn...You are extremely wicked”.

Importantly, the identification involves King Bhumibol as the archetype of good people in eradicating bad people who are disloyal to him.¹¹ As a young PDRC supporter put it on the stage on 24 December 2013.

“Hello, my name is Paeng. Today I came to oust the government and red buffaloes [Red Shirts]. We must oust them because we are good people [...] I give brothers and sisters moral support because you are good people. I am a good

¹¹ The idea of good people versus bad people also derives from King Bhumibol’s oft-cited speech given at the National Jamboree on 11 December 1969. That is, “There are both good people and bad people in the country. No one can make everyone good. To keep the country in peace and order is not about making everyone good, it’s about supporting good people so they can govern the country and prevent bad people from grabbing power and creating troubles and disorders”.

people. I don't love bad people like Yingluck [...] We scold Yingluck because we are Thai people protecting Thailand along with the king. [...] I am not exhausted; fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters are not either, because we do it for the king every year, every day [...] I wish the king goes to heaven; being a fairy, being an angle, because the king has done a lot of goodness. Now Yingluck goes to hell".

While some royalists may have reservations about the reidentification of Suthep as "good people",¹² they all believed that Thai politics was in decline by immoral politicians. Although they did not invoke the king's supreme righteousness and called for his intervention as the PAD did, they highlighted their superior righteousness in their narratives. It is them good people who are entitled to defend a politico-moral order from bad people.¹³

PDRC supporters therefore welcomed the 22 May 2014 coup because it ousted politicians whom they considered bad people. Besides, they hoped that the junta will bring peace to the country and conduct political reform they demanded. However, later they were disappointed with the junta and the junta-led government because the two did not conduct reform as promised and, worse, were tainted

¹² For example, an academic turned politician who joined the PDRC in shutting down Ratchadamnoen Road said that he knew Suthep well and as such felt indifferent when Suthep claimed that he is a good people. (Rong Boonsuakwan, Interview, April 7, 2022) Likewise, a former senator said that he knew Suthep well and distrusted him. Although he opposed the Amnesty Bill, he could not work with Suthep, because he thought Suthep's move is a political trick. (Nirun Pithakwatchara, Interview, March 31, 2022)

¹³ PDRC supporters always narrativized, or identified, themselves as good people and their participation in the PDRC as doing good deeds. As a local politician put it, "I am a 'good water' government official. I fight for rightness and benefit of the people. I collected related documents and sent them to Office of the National Anti-corruption Commission for 'a government official model, good man of the land project'. It was a selection of government officials' deeds from all ministries and organizations across the country. Twenty-eight government officials were selected and I was one of them. I received an award from General Phaibul Kumchaya, the justice minister". (A local politician, Interview, September 5, 2022)

by scandals, which contradicted a politico-moral order they tried to restore.

Although many PDRC supporters became disenchanted with the junta and the junta-led government, however, they did not express their stances openly; preferably “raising pets and planting flowers” instead. It is not until the youths staged rallies and demanded reform of the monarchy that they employed the other narrative to defend their politico-moral order.

Informed, cognizant adults instructing innocent, indoctrinated children

The 22 May 2014 coup brought an important political actor – students – back to the political arena after “disappearing” for decades. This is primarily because previous political groups were disbanded and students were the only group capable of staging protests against the coup. Initially, the number of students involved was small. And although later the number increased due to the junta’s suppression and certain behaviors of members of the royal family, their engagement remained online. Students began to protest offline after the Constitutional Court on 21 February 2020 dissolved the Future Forward Party and deprived its executives of their political rights for 10 years, because the party appealed to them as the party of the younger generation, and the majority of them voted for the party in the 24 March 2019 election. (Unno, 2021, pp. 1–2)

The Student Union of Thailand (SUT) was the first student group to stage a protest at Thammasat University, followed by students of other universities across the country, totaling at least 70 protests before halting in late–March 2020, primarily because of the spread of COVID–19. The SUT together with a student group called “Free Youth” resumed a rally on 18 July 2020 at the Democracy Monument following the arrest of two youths for their protest against the prime minister. They demanded an end to threats against critics of the government, the dissolution of parliament, and a new constitution. (Unno, 2021, pp. 3–4) Later on 10 August 2020, the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD) held a rally at Thammasat University’s Rangsit Center demanding reform of the monarchy. Given their pungency, the demands were viewed as “piecing through the ceiling” that had prevented discussion of the monarchy in Thailand. (Unno,

2022, p. 5–6)

Meanwhile, “Free Youth” had evolved into “Free People” and incorporated the UFTD’s demand as “one dream” along with three demands (the same as those of Free Youth) and two standpoints (no coup and no national government) in its rally on 16 August 2020 at the Democracy Monument. The UFTD, however, did not join “Free People” because they thought that their demands were downgraded into a dream. (Unno, 2022, pp. 5–6) It then held a rally at Saman Luang on 19 September 2020 to emphasize their demands for reform of the monarchy along with two other demands (Prayuth’s resignation and a new constitution). (A UFTD leader, Interview, April 9, 2022) Later, the “People’s Party 2020” which was composed of members of “Free People” and the UFTD explicitly pushed forward these three demands in its rally on 14 October 2020. (A People’s Party 2020 leader, Interview, April 5, 2022)

Although “People’s Party 2020” was dissolved according to a “leaderless strategy”, its three demands were pursued by subsequent groups, most of which gave emphasis on reform of the monarchy. A group called “People”, for example, held a march to submit letters to King Vajiralongkorn on 8 November 2020 whereas the other group, REDEM, held a march on 20 March 2021 demanding that the monarchy be under the constitution. (Unno, 2022, p. 6)

Later these group founded the “People’s Party Abolish Article 112” because, said one of its founders, “article 112 has been widely used against the dissidents and the abolition of it is the first step to reform the monarchy”. (Somyot Prueksakasemsuk, Interview, March 9, 2022) The group launched a campaign of signature collection for the abolition of article 112 in a rally at Ratchaprasong Intersection on 31 October 2021. It also opened a website which provides an online form to sign name for a petition.

Moreover, in early 2022 other students founded two new allied groups focusing on the monarchy. Making a debut on 1 February 2022 with a campaign “No Paying Respect to God,” the Draconis Revolution places emphasis on royal motorcades. Meanwhile, founded in late January 2022, *Thalu Wang* (piercing through the palace) focuses on conducting surveys on monarchy-related issues,

including royal motorcades on 8 February 2022, royal lands and assets on 13 March 2022, and paying tax for the monarchy on 31 March 2022.

The youths' demands for reform of the monarchy brought grave concerns to royalists. A teacher, for example, strongly disagreed with a demand for the abolition of Article 112, because, he said, "you have done this far even though there is a law. What would it be if the law was repealed?" (A teacher, Interview, February 18, 2022) A retired government official who is now a Red Cross member said she once asked youths "if there was no monarchy, what you kids thought could replace it properly? They can't answer. They said they don't know either. So, it means that the reform has no goal". (A Red Cross member, Interview, February 18, 2022)

Besides, an academic turned politician said students' demands are idealistic and missed the point. He admitted that "privileged people" are a problem, but he thought that students should focus on issues close to them first, not the monarchy that could wait or not to be touched at all. He also insisted that "whenever they propose reform of the monarchy, I will definitely object them". (Rong Boonsuikwan, Interview, April 7, 2022)

Previous royalist groups, either the PAD or the PDRC, have not resumed to counter the youth movements.¹⁴ And they did not construct any narrative for mobilization either. Royalists then were left to construct narratives of their own in dealing with the youth movements especially the youths' demands for reform of the monarchy. In doing so, most of the royalists I interviewed employed

narratives that demonstrate how informed and cognizant they are in comparison

¹⁴ The reasons why previous royalist organizations did not resume to counter the youth movements are twofold. First, because it is not necessary as those in power are the military junta who vowed to be loyal to the monarchy, not disloyal politicians as in the 2000s and 2010s that led to the emergence of the PAD and the PDRC. Second, because it is hard to do so given the organizations' disintegration and the emergency decree that bans political gatherings. The royalists in general then were left to defend the politico-moral order on an individual basis, and this shapes the way in which they narrativized their defense as demonstrated hereafter.

to the youths who are uninformed and innocent, which make the youths vulnerable to deception especially when it comes to the monarchy. Below is an example of their narratives.

“Kids today do not know about the monarchy. The king’s travel methods changed. He did it easy. These are in royal news, but kids do not watch. So, they don’t know what the monarchy did. Kids know only in social media. Their worlds are too narrow. So, it is easy for them to be deceived”. (A Red Cross member, Interview, February 18, 2022)

The royalist, through this narrative, claimed that she is better informed than the youths on the monarchy because she watched royal news which contains “truth” about the monarchy whereas youths only follow social media which are inundated with falsehoods regarding the monarchy. Other royalists cited Thai history classes they took in schools in claiming how well informed on the monarchy they are when compared to youths. Below is an example of their narratives.

“Youths today did not learn history much as we did. If you want to know much, don’t forget to study Thai history subject where we learn about local communities, Thailand’s geography, the monarchy”. (“People’s sector 2,” Interview, October 23, 2022)

Besides describing how better informed they are when compared to youths, the royalists pointed to those who brainwashed or deceived youths in their narrativization. First are university professors. As one of them put it, “University professors are ringleaders. Say, Piyabutr [a university professor turned politician]. How did he teach students? I checked his background. People like this have problems, inferior complex. He tried to cover his inferior complex using students”. (A Red Cross member, Interview, February 18, 2022) Second are politicians. As one of them said, “I was angry at Thanathorn [leader of the disbanded Future Forward Party] regarding the monarchy. The monarchy is a good principal institution; above politics. But Thanathorn was so keen that he can deceive kids”. (A local politician, Interview, September 5, 2022)

Although identifying youths as a threat to the king or the politico-moral

order, these royalists in their narrativization did not take the eradication of the youths as a solution, or the end of the narrative. Rather, they point to providing youths with correct information and understanding about the monarchy for the politico-moral order to be restored. Besides, these royalists tended to view the way the government employed legal measures against the youths as the way the elderly punish children as a lesson when children commit wrongdoings. As one of them put it, “Kids were incited and now they paid the price. They were put in jail. They will learn what is right, what is wrong after this”. (A teacher, Interview, February 18, 2022)

While not amounting to any move, i.e. the coup, as in the case of the PAD and the PDRC, these royalists’ uses of narratives in dealing with the youths helped them defend their conception of politico-moral order. This is primarily because since the youths were regarded in the narratives as those who cannot think for themselves but were brainwashed or deceived, there is no need to take their demands seriously. And since the youths’ demands especially the reform of the monarchy are not to be taken seriously, there is no need to reconsider the conception of politico-moral order where a righteous king is the sovereign.

Conclusion: Thai royalists’ narratives in crisis

Thai royalists over the past two decades have employed narratives to defend their politico-moral order against successive challenges. Threatened by a politician they deemed crooked and disloyal to the king, Thai royalists in their narratives invoked the notion of righteous king exercising royal prerogative in eradicating such a politician. These narratives gained supports from Thai people across society especially the urban middle class and the southerners. They also paved a way for a military coup as the coup makers cited part of the narratives for the justification.

Likewise, triggered by the passing of an amnesty bill allegedly aimed to bring such a politician back home, Thai royalists employed narratives of a sacred war where they narrativized themselves as good people eradicating bad people via ousting the proxy prime minister and government. These narratives appealed a wide range of Thais who narrated that they too are good people committing

good deeds in joining the rallies. The narratives, again, also led to a military coup as a coup leader cited part of the narratives as a reason.

However, later these narratives which privilege unelected rulers' righteousness over the political system became less convincing. On the one hand, the junta not only failed to follow through on promised political reform, but was also tarred by scandals, rendering them unrighteous not unlike politicians they accused. On the other hand, personal life of the current monarch has provided much to criticize not unlike those of ordinary people, making it difficult to justify his royal prerogative via religious concepts. Thai royalists then were faced with a question of how to employ narratives in their defense of a politico-moral order where righteousness is a main source of power.

The rise of the youth movements rendered the question more pressing as their demand is reform of the monarchy. In dealing with this new challenge, Thai royalists narrativized themselves as informed adults instructing uninformed and indoctrinated children. While not amounting to any action especially the coup as the two previous narratives did, this narrative was able to keep the conception of politico-moral order intact as it downplayed the youths' capacity.

However, it remained unclear to what extent this narrative will be accepted among Thais in general. But it is clear that the Thais' stance towards the monarchy has fundamentally changed. From the minority, people not standing up when the royal anthem is played in movie theaters have now become the majority. Importantly, the youths conducted surveys on the opinions of passerby on monarchy-related issues and found that almost all respondents voted in line with their demands. This is not to mention the Move Forward Party's win over the 2023 election and one of its election campaigns is the amendment of Article 112. Given that the reality does not lend coherence (Ramchandani, 2016, p. 47) or is unable to be incorporated (Massey, 1995 as cited in Ramchandani, 2016, p. 49) into existing narratives, Thai royalists either need to construct an entirely new narrative or, in reverse, inevitably adopt a new politico-moral order so as to survive these challenges.

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