

Refereed article

A Long-Term View of Thai Nationalisms: From Royal to Civic Nationalism?

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Abstract

This article offers a history of Thai nationalisms, drawing on primary sources as well as the secondary literature on the country's political history. Rejecting a linear evolution of Thai nationalist ideas, it traces the development of very different political imaginations of a Siamese/Thai political community from the early nineteenth century through the student protests of 2020/2021. It does not consider, therefore, these recent demands for reform of the country's monarchy to represent a radical rupture with established Thai political culture. Rather, the student protests constitute a new iteration of a long-standing trend of contesting official nationalisms in the country. This is evident in the students' own symbolic embracing of the history of the Siamese Revolution of 1932. For analytical purposes, the article employs a twofold approach. As such, it differentiates between inclusive and exclusive imaginations of the national community on the one hand and between its democratic versus autocratic political organization on the other.

Keywords: Thailand; nationalism; nation-building; monarchy; royal nation; student protests; Siamese Revolution

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Introduction

In February 2020, Thailand's supreme court dissolved the Future Forward Party that had come third in the previous year's national elections by capturing the votes of first-time and younger voters. Founded by activists known for their criticism of the kingdom's draconian *lèse-majesté* law and campaigning on a platform critical of the military, the party's success shocked the political and bureaucratic establishment. While not unexpected, the dissolution triggered immediate protests on university campuses that by summer 2020 had turned into a veritable student movement. Vocal criticism of the monarchy and the military set these protests apart from the protests that had regularly polarized Bangkok over the previous fifteen years, as did the relative lack of national flags. This was experienced as a surprising or even uncomfortable rupture with established Thai political culture by many. But such a view falsely assumes that Thai imaginations of their national community are largely static and homogenous. In fact, contesting views of the Thai nation have oscillated between vesting sovereignty in the people or in the monarch almost from the time that the Thai nation became imaginable. The embracing of the history of the Siamese revolution of 1932 by the students themselves gives testimony to this continuity. There is not a fundamentally unchanging identity rooted in a homogenous national culture, but domestic as well as international economic and political contexts have determined which interpretations of Thai nationhood were dominant at given times and how they were challenged by alternative nationalisms.

This article attempts to provide a long-term view of these developments, thereby proving a deep historical context for the recent student movement. It thus also contributes to the nationalism studies literature.

Making sense of multiple nationalisms

Nations are social constructs, sovereign "imagined political communities" as Benedict Anderson famously framed it. They are creations of the modern worldview of nationalism, which divides humanity into a number of these unique cultural communities, in which the tenet of popular sovereignty solely invests political sovereignty (Anderson 1991, 5–7; Özkırımlı 2017, 82, 167, 225). Over the course of the nineteenth century, nationalism became a global phenomenon, making the nation-state the sole legitimate form of organized political communities. But to be relevant locally, nationalism must materialize in specific forms. These combine locally available cultural resources with political ideas circulated globally (Bieber 2020, 4, 24–6, 211–2).

As nationalism defines legitimate claims to political power, the imagination of a political community is always contested, resulting in multiple and changing nationalisms in any given community claiming to be a nation (Hutchinson 2005, 3–4, 77, 121). Ideal types have long been employed in the nationalism studies literature to analyze nationalisms and make meaningful comparisons. The differentiation

between a liberal-civic, inclusive nationalism and an ethnic or ethnocultural, exclusive nationalism is one of the oldest categorizing attempts in the field of nationalism studies. While the initially descriptive use of the two categories is now rightly rejected, they remain useful as ideal-types of very different imaginations of the organization of a national community (Bieber 2020, 12–5; Coakley 2018: 267).

To make the categories more useful for the extra-European case of Siam, renamed as Thailand in 1939, however, disintegrating them is in order. This results in a two-dimensional matrix. A first axis relates to membership in the imagined community, which can be open to or inclusive of outsiders, or closed to them. They are reflected in the *jus soli* and the *jus sanguinis* principles of nationality law respectively. The second axis pertains to the internal organization of that community, which can be found on a continuum between an egalitarian, democratic and a hierarchical, authoritarian nationalism.

Chat Thai: From estate to people

In contrast to the general acceptance of the modernity of nationalism, there remains a debate about the modernity of nations. In the case of the Thai nation, however, the modernity of its “imagined community” is plainly evident

The people of the Kingdom of Siam have long referred to themselves as Thai and their country as *mueang Thai* (see e.g. de la Loubere 1691, 16–7). The exonym Siam is possibly a Portuguese rendering of the Chinese Xian (Baker & Pasuk 2014, 8). This “imagined community” differed from a modern, national one in important regards. First, the realm was ethnically very diverse. The people of the north and northeast of the kingdom, for example, were not included in the Thai population, but known as Lao. In the south, there were Malay speakers and several smaller ethnic minorities lived in the mountainous northern borderlands. And, of course, there was a sizable Chinese population (Renard 2006, 298–300, 305). Second, political legitimacy derived from the Buddhist idea of merit, not blood ties. The Thai-Buddhist cosmology, which explained all existence through different amounts of merit, was directly reflected in the social hierarchy. The king stood at the apex of the social hierarchy by virtue of his supreme merit (see Lithai 1982). In 1782, King Phra Phutthayotfa Chulalok (Rama I, 1737–1809, r. 1782–1809) founded the royal capital of Rattanakosin (Bangkok) and its ruling dynasty following the destruction of the previous capital of Ayutthaya and the short intermezzo of King Taksin (1734–1782, r. 1767–1782) ruling from Thonburi. Through his title, statements, and performances he claimed to be a bodhisattva, a future Buddha, and a chakravartin, a universal emperor, by virtue of his vast merit (Malitz 2020, 4–5).

The linkage between one’s social status in the kingdom and one’s merit was reflected in the numerical *sakdina* ranks, which differed depending on one’s estate and title (Akin 1969, 22–5, 53–69). “Ethnicity” played a minor, if any, role in this political order. Being foreign meant speaking a different language, the word being used to describe somebody as alien, as practicing a different religion (Davisakd 2003, 113–

5; Renard 2006: 301). Foreigners useful for the crown as administrators, traders, or military specialists were regularly ennobled and thus enjoyed a higher *sakdina* rank than the vast majority of the crown's Thai subjects (Nidhi 2018, 17–9).

With the idea of a “Thai nation” in the modern sense being non-existent, the word used to describe the concept today, *chat*, had a very different meaning. Stemming from the Sanskrit and Pali *jāti* for birth, it was used in the sense of an individual's “birth” or in extension “estate” as well as “caste.” Kings—in Thai *kasat*, from the Sanskrit *ksatriya*—by virtue of being born in the warrior estate or caste explicitly claimed to have been born in a different *chat* than their subjects (Vajiravudh 1963, 56, also 14).

The destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767, the displacement of a large part of the population to Burma, as well as the famine and disease in its wake, set into motion a shift in political consciousness among the kingdom's elite. Historical writing that had previously written exclusively about rulers now began to use “politicized ethnic identities” to describe the conflict (Reeder 2017, 88). With foreign ships visiting Siam more frequently, missionaries arriving in Bangkok, and geographic knowledge being disseminated, *chat* became the general term for such an identity. Exemplary of this shift is a famous text written under the penname Lady Nopphamat, now dated to the reign of King Nangklao (Rama III, 1788–1851, r. 1824–1851), which combined *chat* with “language” (*phasa*) and used it to describe different peoples (Nopphamat 1914, 3; see also Pallegoix 1854: 883). It had become possible to imagine a community to which both the king and his subjects belonged.

A modern Buddhist monarchy

Being Buddhist was a crucial dimension of being Thai even before the destruction of Ayutthaya (Renard 2006, 302–3). But Buddhist practices and doctrines had always been heterogeneous and accepted as such. This changed under the influence of the development of a modern Buddhism and the colonial threat in the nineteenth century. The German Buddhistologist Heinz Bechert famously coined the term “Buddhist modernism” to describe cultural revival movements that reinvented their Buddhist traditions in response to Western colonialism as rational and thus reconcilable with modern science while simultaneously making them central pillars of timeless and authentic national identities (Bechert 1966, 37–195). A similar observation can be made in Siam, where the beginning of the development of a rational Buddhism de-emphasizing animist and Brahmin influences can be traced to the late Ayutthaya period. It also underlined reforms of the monkhood under King Rama I (Baker & Pasuk 2017, 247–8, 272). Nevertheless, as a monk in the early nineteenth century before his ascension to the throne, King Mongkut (Rama IV, 1804–1868, r. 1851–1868) was greatly disillusioned with the lack of knowledge and lax discipline of the majority of the monks he encountered. His founding of the Thammayut ordination lineage in 1833 was meant to rectify these shortcomings (Baker & Pasuk 2014, 40–1). But at this time, missionaries had also begun to

proselytize in Siam. They demonstrated their scientific knowledge in an attempt to prove the superiority of Christianity. In response to this challenge, the Thammayut monks and their supporters embraced the Western sciences to explain the material world while affirming the superiority of Buddhism in moral and spiritual matters, linking it to a pure Thai identity (Thongchai 2010, 137–139; Reynolds 2006, 172–7). The creation of such a dichotomy between the material and the spiritual to allow for the adoption of Western sciences and technology while claiming a distinct, authentic identity was of course a staple strategy of nationalists around the colonial and semi-colonial world (Chatterjee 1993, 120–1; see for Japan e.g. Tipton 2008, 46–7). But in semi-colonial Siam, it also allowed for the preservation of the law of karma to explain social inequalities. As stated in a summary of their worldview published in 1867, “men are born unequally, differing from each other” (Reynolds 2006, 177).

In 1851 King Mongkut ascended the throne supported by nobles wishing to establish trade relations with Britain. The First Opium War and the subsequent unrest in China had disrupted the profitable tribute trade with China. His good relations with the missionaries, which he had met frequently, will have been seen as beneficial for the negotiation of a treaty. That he lacked an independent power base after 25 years in the monkhood must also have made him an attractive candidate. Starting with the Bowring Treaty with Britain in 1855, Siam signed a series of unequal treaties opening trade relations, but reducing Siam to a semi-colony through limits on tariffs and the extension of extraterritorial jurisdiction to the citizens and subjects of the colonial powers (Kullada 2004, 22, 26–31). To bolster his position vis-à-vis the high-ranking nobles, King Mongkut reconceptualized royal legitimacy. Adopting the idea of dynastic legitimacy, he tied his own authority to the achievements of his ancestors, who had reestablished the kingdom after the destruction of Ayutthaya and brought peace and prosperity to it through their reigns as virtuous Buddhist kings while rejecting claims of bodhisattva-ship (Malitz 2020, 8–9).

Nationalizing the realm

His son and successor King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1853–1910, r. 1868–1910) initially also found himself in a weak position. Far from being an absolute monarch, his authority was curtailed by high-ranking nobles. Only after their deaths could the king assert his authority by appointing trusted relatives and allies to high offices and laying the foundations of an absolute monarchy ruling through a centralized bureaucracy (Baker & Pasuk 2014, 49–61). Tied to this was King Chulalongkorn’s continuation of the reinvention of the Siamese monarchy. By selectively adopting European ideas and practices, he became a member of a transnational royal community. And by thus becoming “civilized,” the Siamese monarchy could maintain its claim to legitimacy (Thongchai 2000, 537; Peleggi 2002).

Extraterritorial jurisdiction necessarily tied this state-building intimately to a nation-building project. Inability to arrest individuals claiming to be protégés of colonial

powers limited the state's authority while local notables in the peripheries could not be antagonized for fear that they might desert to a colonial power (Tej 1977: 139). By the late nineteenth century, extraterritoriality had become an existential threat. In 1893 French-Siamese rivalry over the Lao principalities on the eastern bank of the Mekong resulted in armed conflict. A quick French victory forced King Chulalongkorn to grant consular protection to all people who had "originally" come from the eastern bank of the river. As the people of northern and northeastern Siam were not referred to as Thai but as Lao, like the French subjects on the eastern bank of the Mekong, a major percentage of the kingdom's population could now potentially be claimed by France (Tuck 1995, 105–12). The response of King Chulalongkorn's government was multipronged. Restrictions on foreign landownership and expansion of the provincial administration made claiming extraterritoriality less attractive. British capital was also treated more favorably. By 1907, France was willing to end the registration of Asians as protégés in return for considerable territorial concessions in Cambodia (Larsson 2013: 50–60; Petersson 2000: 281–6).

Most importantly, however, the Siamese government began to officially refer to the Lao within the kingdom's borders as Thai and to invoke this identity also in census documents and official histories (Ijima 2018: 180; Grabowsky 1996: 62–3; Streckfuss 1993: 139–40). A modern system of education served to imbue the heterogeneous population throughout the realm with a Thai identity (Renard 2006: 298). With many temples serving as schools, education depended heavily on the monkhood. To ensure their loyalty, a new centralized administration was initiated for them as well. It ensured the homogenizing of doctrinal practices in line with modern Thai Buddhism (Ishii 1986, 25–6, 71–7). Due to a lack of financial resources, however, these attempts remained limited. By the end of the absolute monarchy, only about half of all children went to elementary school (Pin 1975, 15). There remained also the ethnic minorities in the mountainous borderlands in the north, Malay-speaking Muslims in the south, and the urban overseas Chinese. But in theory at least, in the early twentieth century the Thai nation was largely made congruent with the population living within the borders of the Kingdom of Siam and tied to its monarchy through Buddhism.

This "royal nationalism," an imagination of a national community around the monarchy, at once made the monarchy modern and civilized, and created the Thai "royal nation" around it. This was not a uniquely Siamese project. Rather it was part of a transnational movement of established dynasties to create new roles for themselves as "national monarchies" and thereby preserve or even expend their political significance and social status against the emergence of new ideas about states and political communities (Banerjee 2017, 23; Backerra et al. 2017, 2–7)

Challenging the royal nation: Popular nationalism

From its very beginning, the official and royal nationalism was challenged. The first criticism of the new absolutism came from high-ranking princes studying or serving as diplomats in Europe. In 1885, they argued that a constitution was necessary to maintain Siam's independence. This political change would translate into good governance and mobilize the people on behalf of the state (Nares et al. 1975). Implicitly, this criticism already differentiated between crown and country, yet it neither called for a parliament nor evoked popular rights. In his response, the king rebuked the princes, arguing that only his righteous rule was acceptable to the people and therefore able to lead the country (Chulalongkorn 1975). Yet oaths were introduced for the bureaucracy and textbooks published for the new schools opened to train future bureaucrats, then not only taught loyalty to the throne, but also to the nation. Divergence in the interests of crown and country had become imaginable (Kullada 2004, 92; Murashima 1988, 83–7)

The emergence of a Siamese bourgeoisie has been traced to the late Ayutthaya period of overseas trade expansion (Baker & Pasuk 2017, 248). But with the opening of the new schools, the expansion of the bureaucracy, and the integration of the Kingdom of Siam into the global economy, this middle class grew greatly. Its members soon found themselves marginalized in the absolutist and semi-colonial society. As commoners, their career prospects in the bureaucracy and military were limited, while as Siamese they were disadvantaged vis-à-vis Europeans and colonial subjects, often overseas Chinese, who enjoyed consular jurisdiction when conducting business (Murashima 1998, 111–2).

The first critical commoner publicists, K.S.R. Kulap and Thianwan, publishing from the 1890s and 1900s respectively, were acutely aware of this. In their criticism of the kingdom's lack of political participation and semi-coloniality, they did not yet advance an alternative to the monarchy and the estate-based social order. But they did argue that a parliament and a free press would greatly contribute to overcoming the corruption and mismanagement holding kingdom and nation back (Bunphisit 2017; Reynolds 2006; Rosenberg 1980). This nascent popular nationalism critical of the monarchy received further impetus from the Chinese nationalist press publishing in both Chinese and Thai. Here, even republican arguments were permissible as long as the target was the Qing court and publishers demonstrated their loyalty to the Siamese monarchy (Wasana 2019, 50–8, 68–9).

Responding to discontent: Royal nationalism

As crown prince, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1881–1925; r. 1910–1925) had published a satire ridiculing his critics (Vajiravudh 1975). He only realized the depth of discontent in 1912 when a conspiracy in the army was discovered. Its members had planned to assassinate the king and introduce a constitution. A document recovered from them harshly criticized the king for betraying the nation by wasting

resources on his and his sycophants' amusement while the nation was in mortal danger (Rian & Netphun 2013, 246–252). The conspiracy greatly disturbed the king and the princes, but not enough to convince them to make political concessions. Rather, the conspirators' discontent was attributed to them being Chinese, as many indeed had Chinese ancestry (Siam Observer 7 March 1912). In response, King Vajiravudh disseminated through speeches and articles the official, royal nationalism that had been developed in his father's reign. Absolute kingship based on Buddhism, so the king said, was at once Siam's tradition and a necessity in the present for the kingdom to remain independent and pursue progress (e.g. Vajiravudh 1963, 44, 49–50, 56, 63–64, 74). Arguing along colonialist lines, the Oxford-educated king deemed his subjects to be too ill-disciplined and insufficiently educated to participate in their government (e.g. Asvabahu 1912, 35–8, 45, 49). The others of the nation as imagined by the king were then not the colonial powers, but the Chinese community. They had demonstrated their economic dominance in Bangkok during a three-day long strike in 1910. Now, they were also suspected of fostering criticism of the monarchy. King Vajiravudh's anti-Sinicism drew on the language of anti-Semitism to describe the Chinese as fundamental aliens and a “yellow peril” to the kingdom. Yet in contrast to anti-Semitism, it remained cultural and not racial. While Buddhism remained an important dimension of being Thai, the unquestioned core ethnicity of the kingdom, loyalty to the crown was all that was demanded in order to be accepted as a full Siamese subject (Wasana 2019, 67–73). The first Siamese nationality act of 1913 was thus based on the principle of *jus soli*. The royal nationalism of absolutist Siam was thus at once hierarchical and undemocratic as well as expressly inclusive. It imagined Siam as a purely political, yet obviously starkly unequal community tied together by shared loyalty to the crown.

Revolution and nation-building

Frustration with the lack of political reform and economic opportunities as well as widespread corruption only grew after the failed coup of 1912. This is evident from the contemporary press, with its harsh opinion pieces and biting cartoons. These at times also targeted the monarchs directly and questioned whether Siam was truly independent (Barmé 2002, 97–131; Copeland 1993).

In the wake of the great depression, Siam's absolute monarchy came to an end when the self-declared People's Party conducted a successful a coup d'état on 24 June 1932. King Prajadhipok (Rama VII, 1893–1941, r. 1926–1935) agreed to remain on the throne as a constitutional monarch. Meanwhile, Siam's first constitution now officially declared the people and not the monarch to be sovereign. All of the People's Party's core members had studied in Europe, mostly through government scholarships. This meant that the revolutionaries, who declared that they spoke for the nation, were among the most privileged members of Siamese society. Ironically, this very privilege made them acutely aware of a twofold discrimination. As

commoners, their careers were limited despite their prestigious education in Europe and individual merit. King Prajadhipok's acknowledgment in front of soldiers in 1931 that managing the financial crisis was beyond his abilities was only the final straw of disillusionment with the system (Baker & Pasuk 2014, 115–7). Furthermore, abroad they had also been confronted with racism and the low international status of Siam, which was often not even known. The University of Frankfurt, for example, initially refused to recognize Thai as part of the requirement to speak two foreign languages when Prayoon Pamornmontri (1898–1982) studied there. Only after being informed about Sanskrit loanwords was the language accepted (Prayoon 1982, 41, 51). Reflecting on such experiences, the People's Party's five principles declared “national independence in all forms” and “equal rights” as its paramount goals (Pridi 2000, 72).

Given the kingdom's multiethnic population, a fundamental question revolved around who belonged to the Siamese nation and therefore deserved such equal rights. Opinions varied considerably. In an essay on how “nationalism” would “greatly benefit the Thai nation and the country of Siam,” the diplomat and writer Wichit Wathakan defined a “Thai” patriot as somebody, who “revere[d] the constitution and the king,” but who was also a devout Buddhist (Wichit 1933, 3, 6). Clearly, subjects of the crown who were not ethnic Thais and not Buddhists could not fully belong. In contrast, the liberal newspaper founded by one of the few aristocratic supporters of the constitutional regime, Prince Wan Waithayakon (1891–1976), explicitly rejected *chat* as a possible title, as it would imply a common “bloodline.” By adding the Sanskrit *prajā*, “people,” its title would include all Siamese citizens in the national community (Prachachat 1933, 5). A further fundamental question was the role of the monarchy in the constitutional regime and the degree to which the nation was a hierarchical community. In 1938, both questions were decided upon when the leader of the military faction, Phibun Songkhram (1897–1964), became prime minister. After the revolution, the People's Party had tried to work with the king while diminishing his political and cultural role. They worried about the support the king might receive from abroad should there be open conflict, but were also aware of the reverence the institution still enjoyed among senior members of the bureaucracy and in the countryside (Thep 2016, 283–4). A second constitution proclaimed in December 1932 had made considerable concessions to the monarch. But after a failed royalist counter coup and a prolonged conflict over the royal prerogatives and assets, the king abdicated. His nephew, Ananda Mahidol (1925–1946, r. 1935–1946), succeeded as Rama VIII despite being a minor and residing in Switzerland (Baker & Pasuk 2014, 118–20). Phibun reduced the role of the monarchy, banishing it from public view and, influenced by European fascism, established himself as the “leader” of the Thai nation. Supported by Wichit Wathakan, his government attempted to fundamentally remake Thailand and to create a homogenous Thai and Buddhist national community. Only through cultural uniformity was national unity achievable, which the military man understood to be the necessary foundation of national survival and progress at a time when a world

war seemed imminent. As a military man and politician whose power base was the military, Phibun made the army a core institution of the nation (Thep 2016, 286–7). For him and his supporters, it was the duty of the state to prescribe proper behavior and consumption through regulations to reconcile Thai authenticity with universal progress. For the daughter of a high-ranking prince returning from exile in Penang in 1942, the kingdom had become a foreign country (Phunphitmai 2016, 410). The renaming of the kingdom as Thailand in 1939 and the subsequent naming of minorities as Thai exemplified this nation-building project.¹ The sovereign body-politic and the nation's territory were made congruent, homogenous, and, as the abolishment of royal titles stressed, its members seemingly equal. Ethnic and religious minorities were pressured to assimilate to make this nationalist fiction a lived reality (Kobkua 1995, 103–108, 112–133, 141, 149).

Phibun's and Wichit's nationalism was thus in a sense the opposite of the absolutist royal nationalism. It was—in theory—radically egalitarian but ethnoculturally exclusive. Yet, intolerant as this nationalism was, it was based on a cultural and not a racial understanding of nationhood, and was therefore fundamentally different from European fascism. Closing Chinese schools and newspapers, limiting new immigration, and increasing taxes for foreign residents were aimed at making the overseas Chinese accept Thai citizenship and assimilate culturally, not to exclude them from the national community or even expel them physically (Murashima 1998, 228–9; Kobkua 1995, 106–108, 149). This nationalism was also not hostile towards neighboring peoples, who were regarded as ethnic brothers (Thongchai 2009, 789).

From World War to Cold War

The anticipated global conflict arrived in Thailand on 8 December 1941, when Japanese forces invaded the kingdom to enter British Malaya and Burma. Impressed by early Japanese victories, Phibun aligned Thailand with the empire. Shared belief in an ultimate defeat of Japan and opposition to the military dominance of the government allowed the civilian members of the People's Party under their leader Pridi Banomyong, elected members of parliament, and royalists to find common ground, leading to the foundation of the Allied-supported Free Thai network. They were able to force Phibun from power in 1944, allowing for a smooth transition from the alliance with Imperial Japan to Thailand becoming a US-supported democratic state recognized as having been occupied by Japan (Sorasak 2010, 21–6).

The civic nationalism of the progressive wing of the Free Thais was institutionalized with an amendment to the 1932 constitution that introduced universal suffrage and an indirectly elected upper house. For a brief moment the nation became a community of equal citizens. It was also more inclusive, as Phibun's ordinances regarding everyday life were rescinded. Royalists and other conservatives, in contrast, thought of the nation as an organic and hierarchical community, in which

1 Likewise, semi-colonial Persia was renamed "Iran" in 1935.

political authority naturally accrued to the royal family and those close to them. The popular support for the left-leaning policies of Pridi Banomyong convinced them that their political and economic interests were better served by joining forces with the military, whose members had become disgruntled by the loss of political power and the mismanagement of the postwar demobilization. A military coup in 1947 was justified by the unresolved death of King Ananda, as well as widespread corruption, and was legitimized by King Bhumipol (1927–2016, reigned 1946–2016) through his recognition of the coup group as the nation’s leaders (Sorasak 2010, 172–87; Suchin 2012, 130–1). For the former revolutionary leader Phibun, this was a complete reversal and his acceptance of this recognition implied that the crown and not the people were sovereign.

Royalist constitutions in 1947 and 1949 introduced an upper house with members appointed by the king and a powerful privy council. After the recognition of the coup government by the Allied powers, however, Phibun returned to the premiership in 1948, leading in 1951 to the reintroduction of the 1932 constitution with an unicameral parliament to which officers were largely appointed. Having lost direct command over military units during his enforced retirement, however, Phibun’s authority was much weaker than during the war. He therefore had to play high-ranking officers off against each other to remain in power. For this, he also depended on support and recognition from the United States, with their cornucopia of military and financial assistance. Anti-communism brought the wartime enemies together, while also explaining the need for the military’s continuing political role (Fineman 1997, 38–62; Kobkua 1995, 137–144). It also allowed for the continuation of discriminatory policies aimed at Chinese immigrants (Stanton 1956, 221–222). The goal remained their assimilation, which continued, including in the upper class. As a US diplomat observed in the early 1950s, generals “tended to marry the rich daughters” of Chinese merchants (ADST 2012, 34).

Buddhism remained a central pillar of Thai identity and Phibun’s legitimacy. But in stark contrast to his wartime government, joining the “free world” again necessitated embracing religious tolerance. While Catholics in particular had been targets of chauvinistic sentiment during his first government, which fought a border war with French Indochina, both Christianity and Islam were now supported by the state as anti-communist institutions and to demonstrate the liberalism of the government (Strate 2011, 86; Kobkua 1995, 140). In contrast, under the influence of American anti-communism, foreigners from neighboring countries began to be seen not as brothers but as potential threats to national security (Attachak 2006, 48–50).

The starkest difference between the two Phibun governments concerns the role of the monarchy. Having been instrumental in the suppression of a royalist rebellion in 1933, Phibun’s first government had been hostile to the monarchy and its public role was reduced to a bare minimum. After returning to power in the 1950s, however, Phibun cautiously allowed King Bhumipol (1927–2016, r. 1946–2016) a public role (Thep 2022, 239–40). The United States had embraced the institution as crucial in

the defense against communist subversion (Natthaphon 2013, 328). But the prime minister also hoped to support himself against domestic opponents. Phibun therefore attempted to shore up public support by presenting himself as the main patron of Buddhism. Most prominently he did so by organizing a grand celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the death of the Buddha, thereby infringing on traditional royal prerogatives (Thak 2007, 66–8, 205; Keyes 1992, 332). This and mutual distrust prevented a symbiotic relationship. At the same time, Phibun's cautious attempt to shift to the left and use a more neutral foreign policy to gain popular support damaged his relationship with the US (Fineman 1997, 242).

The return of royal nationalism

Having fallen out with Phibun, army chief Sarit Thanarat (1908–1963) launched a successful coup d'état in 1957. Initially, Sarit attempted to govern constitutionally, but he and the United States were concerned by the increasing influence of the left. A second coup in 1958 established Thailand's most repressive and sternly anti-communist dictatorship, thereby gaining continued US support (Fineman 1997, 239–57). He then secured control over the armed forces and invited King Bhumipol to play a central role in public life, deriving his own legitimacy from this arrangement (Thep 2016, 300; Thak 2007). Through visits to the countryside, state visits abroad, and religious and social functions, the monarchy once again became the symbolic center uniting the nation. King Bhumipol was a powerful symbol of the organic and hierarchic national community imagined by conservatives, as he was able to represent its different aspects in personal union. As a patron of Buddhism he stood for authenticity, while as a modern, jazz-playing and athletic family man he simultaneously stood for modernity. Through the initiation of development projects, the king demonstrated his concern for his subjects, reconciling traditional royal duties with a demonstration of modern, scientific knowledge. While the unequal treaties had been renegotiated just before World War II, it was the king's official visits in the capitals of the West that shored up national pride by demonstrating the recognition of his kingdom as an equal member of the Free World (Thak 2007, 204–18).

Under Sarit, assimilation remained the goal of the policy towards the overseas Chinese, which was supported by the United States (Eaksittipong 2021, 103–104). They always remained, however, at risk of being singled out as criminals, or worse, communists. As an academic remarked based upon personal experience, being not ethnically Thai in an education system that remained invested in an ethnocentric vision of the Thai and a hostile view of China led to a constant sense of insecurity regarding one's belonging (Kasian 2009, 271). In the famous novel *Letters from Thailand*, becoming Thai meant accepting Thai citizenship, going to Thai schools, and being loyal to the king (Botan 2002, 379). The last point was most easily demonstrated by the economically successful immigrants. They donated generously to royal charities, had their children receive their university degrees from members

of the royal family, and received royal blessings for their children's weddings (Baker & Pasuk 1995, 282–283; Gray 1986, 528–530.).

Ethnic minorities in the mountainous borders in the north had been traditionally known as *kha*, a term also denoting servants. Illiterate and non-Buddhist, living in the forest, they had always been relegated to a lower status than the Thais (Renard 2006, 304). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were described as the uncivilized others in the periphery of the civilized Thai nobility (Thongchai 2000, 535). But until the 1950s, Bangkok showed little interest in them. Their collective classification “hill tribes” was only introduced in 1959. At that time, their living in border regions and the perceived uncertainty of their loyalties came to be seen as a potential threat. Through royal patronage in the form of development aid, they were supposed to be assimilated into the Thai nation. The newly founded paramilitary Border Patrol Police, which enjoyed close relations with the royal family, was tasked with policing the border as well as supporting the study and development of these ethnic minorities. This shows that the underlying assumption that they were a danger to the nation remained and is also reflected in their negative depiction in the press until the present, as is denial of citizenship despite the nationality act promising it to people born in Thailand (Toyota 2005, 115–129).

The nationalism of Sarit, influenced heavily by his adviser Wichit Wathakan, was thus a hybrid. It took from the royal nationalism of absolutist Siam the image of the nation as a hierarchical community with the monarchy at its apex. But it now situated the military just below it, claiming a special and close relationship between the two institutions. Additionally, the exclusiveness and latent hostility towards outsiders was inherited from Phibun's nationalisms. Arguably, the influence of Sarit's nationalism proved to be enduring because only from the 1950s onward did the national community become imaginable far from the capital. Generous support from the United States allowed for the building of infrastructure connecting the capital to the provinces, building schools and clinics, but also handing out pictures of the king and showing films about the perils of communism. To paraphrase the title of a historical work on these processes, Thailand was only “born” during the Sarit years (Phinyonphan 2015).

Radicalism left and right

The postwar period saw the expansion of tertiary education as well as rapid economic growth, which by the late 1960s could not keep up with the number of graduates and their expectations. Students became vocal critics of the military regime and widespread corruption, as well as the lack of political opportunities. The king, who had developed a relationship with the students, echoed these concerns, while critical intellectuals narrated the history of Thai democracy as one driven forward by the nation's kings (Prajak 2013, 468–486). Mass protests against the dictatorship in the early 1970s were thus democratic in their demand for a constitution, but also driven by an illiberal economic and cultural nationalism. A

boycott of Japanese goods in 1972 was motivated not only by economic concerns but also because foreign consumer goods had become a part of everyday life despite not being necessary in the students' opinion. Their imagined community clearly remained a hierarchical one. Criticism of the king was limited to the far left and was not tolerated by the majority of the students and their supporters, as a rally against a newspaper that had published a critical letter showed (Prizzia & Sinsawasdi 1974, 28–33, 39, 52, 54, 78, 161–162; Khorapin 2018, 365).

The demonstration of royal support for the students after violent clashes in October 1973 finally forced then dictator Thanom Kittikachorn (1911–2004) to step down. But in the following three years, the cautious support for the students among Bangkok's middle class and the royal family eroded quickly. Political liberalization led to an influx of new ideas and the radicalization of parts of the student movement. Alliance building between student activists, labor unions, and farmers threatened the economic interests of the conservatives, while the military failed to defeat a communist insurgency supported from abroad. As all of this occurred while Laos and Cambodia fell to the communists and their monarchies vanished, these developments greatly frightened the palace and conservatives, who responded with the foundation of paramilitary organizations such as the Village Scouts, while the royal family became leaders in the fight against communism as a threat to the nation and its identity. The nationalism of the right became "hyper-royalist, it made loyalty to the crown the only dimension of the Thai national identity of significance" (Thongchai 2016, 14; see also Khorapin 2008, 385). The insurgents' Thai identity as well as that of students, labor, or peasant activists was denied due to their alleged hostility towards the king, but also toward Buddhism. They were labeled either Vietnamese communists or their agents, if not vampires. Their grievances, on the other hand, were dismissed with the claim that the nation was a harmonious family in which all inequalities due to regional, religious, or economic differences were of little importance (Prajak 2006, 19; Bowie 1997, 14–30, 190–3, 223, 230). The culmination of the radicalization of the right was the massacre at Thammasat University of students accused of being Vietnamese communists in October 1976 (Thongchai 2020, 108, 208).

After the massacre, a coup made the former supreme court justice and fanatical anti-communist Thanin Kraivichien (b. 1927) prime minister. He promulgated his own hyper-royalist imagination of the Thai nation, which was of course hierarchical and undemocratic (Thanin 1976). In theory, however, it was and is inclusive, as loyalty to the monarchy alone determines one's belonging. The resulting inclusivity is, however, always contingent, as one's loyalty has to be continuously proven.

The establishment of royal democracy

Thanin's dictatorship was so repressive that he lost even the military's support within a year. A Thai-Chinese rapprochement ending Chinese support for Thai communists led to a period of political liberalization. An amnesty followed in 1980,

which, paired with promises of political participation, broke the insurgency. Under Prem Tinsulanonda (1920–2019, in office 1980–1988) Thailand became a “stable semi-democratic regime,” in which elected politicians shared power with the bureaucracy (Samudavanija 1987). The government began to encourage foreign direct investment, leading to an economic boom, meaning businessmen rivalled bureaucrats in income and status. The end of the insurgency and political stabilization turned neighboring countries from enemies to promising markets (Suehiro 2014, 69–70). Against this backdrop, the narrative of a pure and homogenous Thai culture defined by the culture of Bangkok and central Thailand began to be challenged. Historians and popular writers embraced local traditions and pointed to the various influences which have shaped Thai cultural traditions and linked them to those of neighboring countries without rejecting the idea of a cultural core defining a Thai identity. Often former student activists and insurgents, the intellectuals were deeply skeptical of capitalist development and cultural change (Hong 2000). Closely related was the rewriting of the history of Chinese-Thai relations and the role of the Sino-Thai in this period. New scholarship with active support from Chinese academic diplomacy explored Chinese-Thai relations as a long history of friendly exchange and stressed the contributions of the overseas Chinese to the Thai nation (Sittitthep 2021, 108–117).

Against the backdrop of political stabilization, King Bhumipol’s public image also changed. He was first of all the “developer in chief,” working tirelessly for the sake of the national community (Suehiro 2014, 219). In 1992, mass protests erupted in Bangkok against a government installed by a military coup. Only a royal admonishment of both sides’ leaders ended a bloody crackdown and forced the military to withdraw from politics. A popular and largely inclusive nationalism seemed to have been established. The king was now perceived by many—as he had been in 1973—as Thai democracy’s main patron (Baker & Pasuk 2014, 249–51). Yet the king was thereby seen as having the legitimate authority to intervene in exceptional circumstances. Following Carl Schmitt, this made him the *de facto* sovereign within royal democracy despite all constitutions since 1932 having declared the people as sovereign (Schmitt 1985, 5).

The Thaksin Shinawatra government and a political polarization

Drafted with unprecedented popular input, Thailand’s most democratic constitution was enacted in 1997. The very same year, Thailand was hit by the Asian Financial Crisis. Businesses went bankrupt, while unemployment and poverty rose starkly. The painful reforms and privatizations prescribed by the IMF as the conditions for a rescue package gave birth to an economic nationalism. The former policeman turned entrepreneur and politician, Thaksin Shinawatra (b. 1949), capitalized on the 1997 constitution’s aim to create strong governments with a clear majority in parliament for his “Thais love Thais” party by embracing post-crisis economic nationalism and combining it with Thai cultural nationalism (Baker & Pasuk 2014, 257–68). Once

elected, however, he leveraged control over the senate to neutralize independent organizations created to keep the government in check (Kuhonta 2008).

In line with the developments since the 1980s, Thaksin assumed a Thai identity based on a “unified cultural core,” which allowed cultural difference to be seen as not threatening to the existing social order, national identity, or territorial integrity. Consciously preferring English “nationalism” to the Thai translation, he presented his nationalism as benign and inclusive. It nevertheless remained the state’s duty to police the borders between the acceptable and the subversive. This is maybe best exemplified by the attempt by both Thaksin and his sister Yingluck to control and standardize Thai food served abroad (Baker & Pasuk 2004, 76–80, 140–151, 167–170, 280; Ichijo & Ranta 2016, 111–112). Against the backdrop of a global movement for the recognition of indigenous rights, as well as royal exhortation to that effect, his government oversaw the extension of citizenship to parts of the hill tribe community, whose formal inclusion in the Thai nation was also of benefit for the promotion of tourism (Toyota 2005, 124). In contrast, the distinct cultural identity of the Malay-Muslim minority in the southernmost provinces bordering on Malaysia had long been seen as a threat and their loyalty was questioned despite their citizenship. When a harsh response to protests against Thailand’s support for the invasion of Iraq and political centralization triggered a full-blown insurgency, a state of emergency was declared, suspending civil rights for the local population, thereby making them what has been described as “informal citizens” (McCargo 2011). Kidnappings, torture, and forced disappearances followed (Thanet 2007, 1–7). Exclusion from the national community through the *de facto* revocation of civil rights was not limited to cultural others. The Thaksin government identified drugs as a threat to social order and thus drug dealers as mortal enemies of the nation. In a “war on drugs,” the extrajudicial killing of dealers was encouraged and the murders were never prosecuted (Baker & Pasuk 2004, 157–66).

Thaksin was re-elected in 2005 in a landslide. But by this time, his authoritarian leadership style, denigration of political opponents and the press, as well as his abuse of authority for personal gain, had brought together a heterogeneous assembly of oppositional forces centered on the bureaucracy, whom he had antagonized by criticizing it as inefficient and backward while relocating policy decisions to his party. They were joined by members of the Bangkok middle class, NGOs, the relatively richer southern region, and the large conglomerates. They all saw Thaksin’s embrace of neoliberal globalization in combination with the welfare policies enacted by his government as a threat to their economic and social status. Thaksin’s opponents’ diverse grievances were brought under the umbrella of conspiratorial narration that the premier was planning to overthrow the monarchy. The protestors wore yellow shirts, the king’s birthday color, to indicate their loyalty to the throne (Suehiro 2014, 142–176; Hewison 2007, 239–43).

Their boycotting of elections called for early 2006 created a stalemate that was ended by a military coup in September of that year. This in turn triggered the formation of

the Red Shirts network. Underlying the conflict between the two networks, which remains unresolved in the present, are two fundamentally different imaginations of the national community. The yellow shirts see the nation as a strictly hierarchical community with the king at its apex. Military coups as a measure of last resort are therefore legitimate if approved by the king. They embrace a guided democracy in which voting by the poorer and allegedly less competent demographics is to be checked by “good people,” who are necessarily more educated in their worldview, from independent organizations, the bureaucracy, and appointed upper houses, while not rejecting parliamentary democracy *per se*. Ultimately, of course, making royal intervention the arbiter of the last resort makes the monarch the *de facto* sovereign. As middle- and upper-class protestors’ confident embrace of their Chinese heritage demonstrate, yellow shirt nationalism is much more inclusive than the authoritarian nationalisms of the past. It remains, however, heavily prejudiced against the ethnic Lao of northeastern Thailand and the northern Thai, who have largely voted for Thaksin-affiliated parties, as well as the “Hill Tribe” minorities. Profoundly shaped in their economic views by the experience of the 1997 currency crisis, they embrace the Sufficiency Economy approach developed by King Bhumipol. It stresses social harmony, the preservation of Thai cultural traditions—as interpreted by them—and economic stability both on the individual and national levels over growth. This translates into a rejection of a more comprehensive welfare state as populist and financially irresponsible (Dulyaphab 2021, 3–7; Wasana 2017, 50; Hewison 2007, 245; Baker & Pasuk 2014, 268–79; Suehiro 2014, 133–9, 219).

Like the yellow shirts, the red shirts, who assembled after the 2006 coup d’état, are a heterogeneous network. Numerically, their main contingents are lower middle-class individuals stemming mainly from the country’s north and northeast. They had benefited from Thaksin’s policies and therefore opposed their overthrow. While embracing the elected government, they have largely not rejected the authoritarian tendencies of the former prime minister. This distinguishes them from the more progressive “red” academics, who share with them a belief in free elections as the only legitimate way to select a government (Dulyaphab 2021, 7–12; Baker & Pasuk 2014, 273–7).

The following years saw competing mass demonstrations and the removal of Thaksin-aligned prime ministers and parties through the courts. Protests in Bangkok from March to May 2010 by Red shirts demanding a new election escalated to violent confrontations until the army violently cleared the protest site in central Bangkok, leaving 80 people—mostly protestors—dead (Baker & Pasuk 2014, 271–7). In the elections in late 2010, Thaksin’s sister Yingluck Shinawatra (b. 1967) emerged victorious, having campaigned as her brother’s proxy. By 2013, however, an expensive policy to shore up rice prices as well as a proposed wide-ranging amnesty that would have allowed her brother to return from exile, triggered a new protest movement. Like its immediate predecessor, the People’s Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State, better known under its self-chosen English name the People’s Democratic Reform Committee, was an alliance

of various conservative groups. All of them had become disillusioned with electoral democracy due to their inability to defeat Thaksin at the ballot box. They thus embraced the idea of a People's Council of unelected, and thus ultimately royally appointed, "good people." Their embrace of their Chinese heritage while collecting cash donations for impoverished farmers demonstrated their inclusive yet hierarchical imagination of the nation. Simultaneously, their demonizing of their political opponents as stupid, corrupt, or disloyal showed that, just as in the 1970s, belonging to the national community was contingent (Prajak 2016, 473–5; Bangkok Post 30 January 2014 & 11 February 2014; The Nation 21 January 2014). Both red and yellow shirts count monks of different factions and with different grievances among their ranks (Dubus 2018).

The dissolution of parliament was answered once again with a boycott of the election, creating a stalemate that presented army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha (b. 1954) with a pretense to launch a coup. The junta that ruled until elections in 2019 was the most repressive since the days of Thanin. Its reform program aimed to realize through a new constitution a political system as envisaged by the PDRC by having electoral democracy kept in check by institutions controlled by the bureaucratic-military elites. And in ultimate accordance with these ideas, Prayuth declared that sovereignty rested with the king and not the people (Arjun 2020, 93; Khorapin 2018, 363–4; Prajak 2016, 483).

When repression was finally relaxed and a new election was called in 2019 under the new constitution, it became evident that political polarization had not been overcome. The newly founded Future Forward Party, running on a progressive platform, came third with 17% of the vote. Founded by known critics of the *lèse-majesté* law and criticizing the military, the party's success revealed a generational cleavage. Its voters, too young to have meaningful memories of the Cold War or King Bhumipol, had grown up as digital natives in a cosmopolitan Thailand shaped by international tourism and foreign investment. Future Forward's last rally presented a truly multicultural imagined community, with candidates ranging across ethnic and sexual minorities, disabled and labor activists, thus reflecting the true diversity of the country and going beyond the tokenism of having representatives of these communities join parties or protests (McCargo & Anyarat 2020, 35, 58, 88–89, 99–104, 161; Piyabutr 2019, 83). This imagination of the Thai nation is reflected in a definition by the party's co-founder Piyabutr Saengkanokkul (b. 1979), a former law professor and known critic of Thailand's *lèse-majesté* law. *Chat*—the nation—according to him refers simply to the citizens, while Thai-ness can only be that which at once is held dear by Thais and does not contradict universal values (Piyabutr 2019, 81–2).

The New People's Party

The party's dissolution (it was later re-founded as Move Forward) over alleged violations of party financing regulations immediately triggered student protests

across the country. These were interrupted by restrictions introduced to curb the first wave of Covid-19 infections. Protests resumed on 24 June 2020, the anniversary of the Siamese Revolution of 1932. Initially, secondary and tertiary students made headlines with their creative use of international pop cultural references to criticize the government. But protests soon began to greatly concern the government and conservatives with their vocal criticism of the monarchy and demands for its reform to make it truly constitutional, void of any political influence and thereby going further than the banned Future Forward Party. Closely connected to this criticism was their embrace of the Siamese Revolution of 1932 as a central memory site in a people-centered Thai history. On 19 September 2020, protest leaders officially took on the mantle of the revolutionaries of 1932 by symbolically founding a “new People’s Party,” declaring the people sovereign (Kanokrat 2021: 206–9; Bangkok Post 20 September 2020).

But as shown above, there had been periods of open and harsh criticism of the monarchy before. According to Khorapin (2018), the latest such wave began not immediately after the 2006 coup, but in 2008, when the queen attended the funeral of a yellow shirt protester, thereby revealing a political partiality. The lack of a royal response to the killings in 2010 intensified this emergent anti-royalism, giving rise to indirect criticism and satire in private and online. Red shirt leaders cautioned, however, against direct criticism of the monarchy (370–389). Politically socialized by the turmoil since 2005, the student protestors of 2020 were privy to these developments and as digital natives were also familiar with international reporting about Thailand and its monarchy. Their criticism of the institution was further galvanized after the ascension of King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X, b. 1952) in 2016 and the subsequent strengthening of royal powers, by the wealth of the royal family, and the forced disappearances of critics (Kanokrat 2021, 214–5; Khorapin 2020).

The Siamese Revolution had already been rediscovered by historians during the early 1980s against the backdrop of a cautious political liberalization, and the twin events of the 50th anniversary of the revolution and Pridi Banomyong’s death in exile in Paris the following year.² But it was only after the coup in 2006 that this rediscovery acquired political significance. Red shirt activists now discovered the revolution as a historical event directly related to their own struggle and used a plaque in central Bangkok marking the site of the revolution for demonstrations. After the coup of 2014, the military government attempted to erase this history. The historical plaque was removed in 2017 (Subrahmanyam 2020, 74, 89–92). The student protestors’ subsequent embrace of the revolution demonstrates that this attempt has clearly backfired. Online and on merchandise, the plaque is even more present now than it was before its removal.

The protests themselves were organized by a network of protest groups often also taking aim at specific grievances in Thailand’s unequal society. Protests by ethnic

2 Personal conversation with Professor Charnvit Kasetsiri on 4 May 2021.

and sexual minorities were incorporated into the protest movement and their causes promoted, as were various local demonstrations. Protest leaders with northeastern roots identified as people from the region through their language (Saowanee 2021, 224–226). In stark contrast to all the previous protest movements, students largely saw no need to demonstrate their loyalty through ubiquitous national flags. But as with prior protests, they were supported by monastic demonstrators critical of the undemocratic organization of the monkhood (TLHR 2021).

Individual red shirt activists have joined protests (McCargo 2021, 178, 182, 184) but demands to reform the monarchy have proven too extreme for the main opposition party Phuea Thai, aligned with Thaksin. Thus a larger oppositional alliance remained out of reach and with the state cracking down on student leaders and Covid-19 cases increasing, protest participation began to wither from late 2020 (Chalida 2020).

What has become clear in the course of the younger protests and the social media usage surrounding them is that protestors imagine the Thai national community as truly inclusive and egalitarian, and sovereign. Theirs is indeed a civic nationalism.

Conclusion

A history of Thai nationalisms concluding with the emergence of a civic nationalism invokes the specter of classical modernization theory, as a reviewer of this article has pointed out. But far from the straight trajectory of universal progress assumed by the theory, Thai nationalisms have long oscillated between two very different imaginations of the Thai nation. One firmly vests national sovereignty in the monarchy and one imagines the people to be sovereign. In both cases the people are at times defined in more or less inclusive or exclusive terms. Thailand has also not become a secular society, as the active participation of monks in all major twenty-first century movements shows.

A royal nationalism was first propagated to counter the colonial threat in the late nineteenth century. It was hierarchical but inclusive. But the introduction of the new idea of the political community of the Thai nation allowed the delegitimization of the absolute monarchy by claiming popular sovereignty, leading to the Siamese Revolution of 1932. Revolutionary nationalisms differed between the factions of the People's Party. The most influential ideology was that of wartime leader Phibun Songkhram, who together with his supporters imagined the nation as egalitarian but culturally homogenous and therefore exclusive. Royal nationalism returned during the Cold War, when the monarchy was seen in both Thailand and the United States as a bulwark against communism. The nation became a hierarchal community again but also inherited some of the exclusiveness of wartime nationalism. The hyper-royalism of the 1970s in particular made inclusion contingent on sufficient loyalty to the monarchy.

Political stabilization and the economic boom enabled the compromise of royal democracy. It declared the people sovereign and imagined the nation in more

egalitarian and inclusive ways. But at the same time, it allowed the king to act as a de facto sovereign in states of exception. Socio-economic change since the 1980s, the 1997 economic crisis, and the conflict over former prime minister Thaksin all contributed to the end of this compromise and the ongoing political polarization. At the end of the day, however, it is based on fundamentally different imaginations of the imagined community and the question of where its sovereignty is to be found.

The students, whose protests started after the dissolution of the Future Forward Party in 2020, have not only been shaped by the socio-economic change within Thailand in the twenty-first century, but also by this political conflict. Their protests are thus not a radical rupture with the past. But they still differ from previous incarnations of popular nationalism due to their truly egalitarian and inclusive vision of the Thai national community and rejection of all discrimination against minorities. While this nationalism certainly appears to benefit from generational change, its ultimate success in becoming dominant remains to be seen.

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