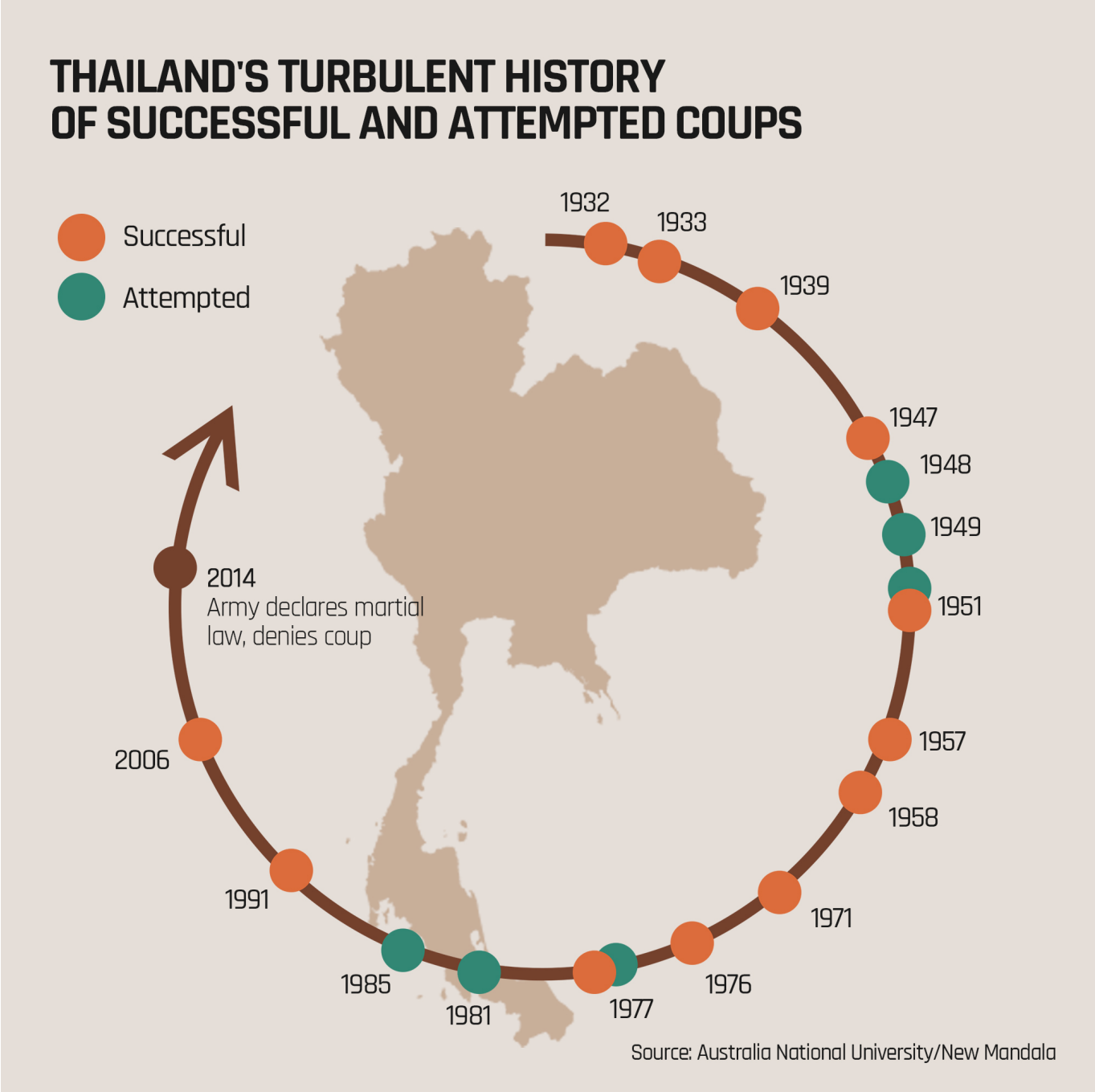
The Thai People's Struggle for Democracy Amidst Deep State and Coup D'etats

As Thailand's elected government navigates its complexities, it's clear that the kingdom's long standing democracy problem is at a crossroad. *The familiar cycle of coup d'etat, election, and another coup d'etat* has evolved beyond the traditional bi-partisan red/yellow [1]. However, the foundational issue persists: the functional class divide between the rural and the urban, with the kingdom always under the thumb of the elite classes and their military enforcers. The limitations of parliamentary democracy have been exposed time and time again, with Thailand holding the ignominious record for having the most coup d'etats in modern history. The Thai people now face a daunting challenge: break out of the coup d'etat cycle and challenge the elite while navigating a post-coup era [2].



The Thai state, established on the foundations of big capitalists, the military and the monarchy after WWII was a conscious anti-peasant, anti-worker, and anti-communist project led by the United States and colonial powers at the onset of the Cold War. This led to the formation of a tight cabal of the deep state powers, the big capitalists, the military, and the monarchy – against the progressive and revolutionary forces within the Kingdom.

This project was initiated by William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the founding father of the CIA. In 1953, as the ambassador to Thailand, he played a crucial role in establishing and supporting a vast network of counterrevolutionary forces; militaries, militias, mafias, and drug runners loyal to the Thai state [3].

During the cold war, this reactionary cabal was legitimised by its opposition to the threat of global

communism in the region, namely the communist states of Laos and Vietnam, as well as insurgencies both foreign and domestic: The Communist Party of Burma, Malaya, and Thailand [4].

However, decades after the cold war has ended, the deep state's tentacles still remain entrenched, controlling the barriers in which political power can be wielded, on both the national and local level. Thailand has had around 13 coup d'etats since WWII, with the most recent one occurring in 2014. All these coups have been carried out by reactionary forces to ensure that political power remains within the tight confines they permit. Herein lies the problem for progressive forces in Thailand in the 21st century: how to challenge such a deeply rooted power structure that still operates as if *The Reds* are still at the gates.

Thailand at The End of History – Thaksin and Phue Thai

The Communist Party of Thailand surrendered in 1983, marking an early "End of History" for Thailand, where liberal capitalist *democracy* no longer faced an existential threat. Over the decades, the presence of the Communist insurgency had forced the state into providing relief for peasants and workers through social security, state infrastructure, and land ownership, acting as a form of non-parliamentary leverage for the poor. However, after the communists surrendered, the deep state remained unchallenged, and capital was abounded as foreign companies began heavily investing in and extracting Thailand's natural resources and labour capacity. This economic boom inevitably served only the elite classes, while the poor were forced into sweatshops, had their land confiscated, and witnessed as the state infrastructure crumbled.

It was under these conditions that the Tom Yung Gung financial crash took place, as Thailand's economic bubble burst further decimating the lives of the working class and plunging millions of families into debt [5]. This crash paved the way for the first and only real response to the deep state since the surrender of the Communists: The Phue Thai party, led by billionaire populist Thaksin Shinawatra.

The Thaksin coalition, later known as the Red Shirts, was an unlikely alliance of peasants, the urban working class, high ranking police officers, elite capitalists, former communist insurgents, western-educated academics, and even former anti-communist counter insurgents [6]. Thaksin appealed to the overlooked poor for their votes, who had been silently suffering for decades.

When Thaksin was elected in 2001, he and his coalition performed an economic miracle. They cleared the Kingdom's bail out debts with the IMF and rapidly reinvigorated the country's economy transforming it from complete collapse to one of the fastest-growing and most stable economies in the region. He combined leftist inspired social democratic welfare programs with neo-liberal privatisation and international trade. There was also a huge wealth transfer out of Bangkok to the far under-developed smaller cities and rural areas, which had been completely neglected by the capital for decades.

At times, Thaksin's tenure could be seen as highly punitive, marked by his *war on drugs* and his channelling of post-9/11 Islamophobia, notably at the Tak Bai Massacre, where around 85 Muslims were killed by the military under his watch. Furthermore, Thaksin sent an envoy of Thai troops to support the US invasion of Iraq. However, Phue Thai governments have also taken seemingly contradictory stances, supporting the decriminalisation of marijuana and small quantities methamphetamines, recognising Palestinian statehood, and maintaining good diplomatic relations with states like Iran and Russia.

Whether the Phue Thai project was Left or Right populist is hotly contested to this day. While the rich got

richer, the poor were undoubtedly empowered. It cannot be argued that the material lives and political engagement of peasants and the urban working class did not significantly improve under his tenure. During his first term, he became an unexpected billionaire hero of the poor, and his party became an institution with devout local cells across the country, particularly in the poorer Isaan and Northern regions.

In 2005, Thaksin became the first Prime Minister in Thai history to win re-election and complete his term without being ousted by a coup d'etat. Ironically, he became a victim of his own success, as the aforementioned deep state, rooted in reactionary cold-war dogma, could not tolerate any form of empowerment of the poor, even if it was achieved through capitalist means.

Despite all bar charts going upwards– higher employment, higher household income, higher GDP, greater access to healthcare, the deep state considered their power under threat during Thaksin's rule. Within the first year of his second term, Thaksin was ousted by a military coup d'etat and forced into exile.

The next 15 years were marked by intense *anti-Thaksinisation* campaigns by reactionary powers, the mass protests by the Red Shirts, counter-protests by the reactionary Yellow Shirts, and occasional resurgences of the Phue Thai party, led by Thaksin's proxies. Phue Thai comfortably won three general elections during this period but all three elected governments were removed from power by the deep state.

During the *anti-Thaksinisation* period, the old coalition began to split apart, with former loyalists starting their own parties so as to take a similar pragmatic approach to politics, while vocally expressing support for the monarchy. The most successful of these parties was Bhumjaithai.

While the opposition to Thaksin, that broadly coalesced in the Yellow Shirt movement, lacked the voter numbers to challenge Phue Thai, they were massively overrepresented in their political power. Electorally, they were dependent on urban centres and the southern region, who viewed Phue Thai supporters as ignorant uneducated peasants whose votes should, **quite literally**, be worth less than the more educated urban elites [7].

The Yellow Shirts perceived popular democracy as a failure and eventually would call for the abolition of the parliament and reinstatement of an absolute monarchy. Their protests were wildly bold and egregious, with their leaders facing little to no recrimination from the elite judiciary. For instance, in 2008, during a Phue Thai tenure, they stormed Government House and several other ministries, and Suvarnabhumi Airport, with little legal repercussions. Meanwhile, crackdowns on Red Shirt/Phue Thai supporters grew increasingly violent. In 2010, over 100 Red Shirts were killed by the military at a protest encampment in central Bangkok [8].

Despite facing tremendous political violence, lawfare, disappearances, and assassinations of Red Shirt members, Thaksin's sister, Yinluck Shinawatra, was elected Prime Minister of a Phue Thai government in 2011. This, however, seems to have been the final straw for the reactionary forces of the deep state. The coup d'etat that ousted her government three years later marked Thailand's transition into a new era of politics, the one we are stuck in today.

Liberal Democrats

The post-Thaksin years saw a huge economic downturn for Thailand, as the country lurched from one

political crisis to another. Household debt skyrocketed, and land tenancy rates surged. After the 2014 coup, a new crisis was on the horizon, the declining health of King Bhumibol, the figurehead of the nation, the mandate for the Yellow Shirts movement, and the ultimate commander of the military.

Following the 2014 coup, martial law was declared, and the military took complete control over the judiciary. Political organising was essentially made illegal, from parliamentary level to the regional and local politics. A new constitution sailed through the courts, including a key provision of a 250 member junta-appointed senate to ensure the deep state's stamp of approval on any future elected government [9].

The economic downtown was even more pronounced by the military government's lack of response to the many crises brewing across the country. Nationwide, infrastructure was crumbling, people were suffocating under debt, and homes and small businesses were being repossessed and left abandoned. Even in central Bangkok, empty shop fronts lined the wide, cracked boulevards, bought by developers but never developed.

Thaksin was no revolutionary, but he was a revolutionary force within the Thai economy, aiming to redistribute the wealth, not from rich to poor per se, but from urban to rural. Although his policies still solidly served the bourgeois class, he was deemed too much of a threat to the deep state, proving their inability to adapt to the pace of global capital.

The deep state's ultimate goal after the 2014 coup was to finally *de-Thaksinise* Thailand ahead of the succession of the new monarch, Prince Vajiralongkorn, who lacked the diplomatic, social, and religious virtues that King Bhumipol had upheld. The deep state was wary of the moment of succession being exploited.

After King Bhumiphol's death in 2016 and the eventual coronation of King Vajiralongkorn in 2019, however, a window began to emerge. In 2020, following the first COVID lockdown, student protests began against the new monarch, who was wildly unpopular with the younger generations. For the youth, King Vajiralongkorn embodied everything that was wrong with Thailand, with their bitterness focused primarily on the country's aged military leadership and widespread corruption in both government and business.

Due to the mass *de-Thaksinisation* campaign, many Red Shirt leaders were killed, jailed, aged, tired or retired from politics. The once-loyal rank-and-file members, who had once occupied the streets of Bangkok in protest, spent the past decade facing defeat after defeat, along with deadly repression. As such, Phue Thai was unable to seize this rare moment of instability in the deep state, and a new party, Future Forward, was formed.

Led by a young billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, Future Forward sought to capture the voices of the younger generation, articulating similar opposition to the country's aged leadership and widespread corruption. Unlike Phue Thai and Thaksin, however, Future Forward targeted a more urban demographic, one which had become alienated by the extremes of the Yellow Shirt movement and its rabid royalist beliefs. Future Forward positioned itself, not as pragmatic reformers but as Western style liberal democrats. This was reflective of the coalition they built, predominantly made up of second-tier elite capitalists, academics, and NGO leaders.

For two decades, Thaksin and Phue Thai had been the de facto pro-democratic force in Thai politics, creating an exceptionally wide tent coalition. With the rise of Future Forward, the coalition split in half,

simultaneously drawing in elite urban voters who were already rabidly anti-Phue Thai.

In other countries, parties like Phue Thai and Future Forward would make for typical parliamentary adversaries. Phue Thai recognised the rural-urban divide as Thailand's primary antagonism and sought decentralisation and material change through pragmatism above all else. Future Forward, however, took a classically idealist analysis of Thailand, identifying corrupt old politics as the key antagonism, which could be remedied by creating a more democratically Western-style state apparatus. This approach often bled into a more overtly republican stance than Phue Thai was willing to articulate, fearing state recrimination.

It was the republican sentiment that led Future Forward into their first bit of hot water, when the party was forced to dissolve and reform in 2020 by the courts, rebranding as the Move Forward Party, under Pita 'Tim' Limjaroenrat, another billionaire capitalist. Under Pita, the Move Forward Party intensified its anti-Thaksin rhetoric, shifted further to centre-right, and successfully brought in several prominent former Yellow Shirts and younger members of elite far-right Thai political families.

Meanwhile, the ultra-royalists of the former Yellow Shirt movement and former Thaksin loyalists like Bhumjaithai Party began formulating their own vision of Thailand's future, one that would protect the interests of big capitalists, the military, and the monarchy's deep state.

This set the stage for the 2023 general election, the first fully open elections since the 2014 coup. Move Forward secured the highest number of seats in parliament with 151, closely followed by Phue Thai coming with 141, and the loose grouping of pro-monarchy/military parties with 172. An additional 20 uncommitted parties also gained seats, leading to intense realpolitik negotiations for the future of the country.

During this process, the Move Forward party's candidate for Prime Minister, Pita 'Tim' Limjaroenrat, was taken to court over a clerical error in his paperwork submission to the election commission. Through the "magic" of the Thai judiciary, this was indeed proven to have been a paperwork error on Pita's behalf, with one document missing a signature. The court deemed the error sufficient grounds for disqualification, thus preventing Move Forward from taking the Prime Minister's office [10].

The move proved inconsequential, as the party was once again dissolved by the Constitutional Court a year later. The court ruled that the Move Forward party's proposal to amend Article 112, the contentious *lese-majeste* law against insulting the monarchy, violated the constitution [11]. Thus, Move Forward was reborn, this time as The People's Party.

For the liberal democrats of the Move Forward party, the outcome of the election, which they had technically won, exposed the weakness of a movement based on idealistic notions of liberal democracy. Simply put, Thailand is not Europe, and a European-style liberal party cannot survive in the global south, a state built by American Imperialism.

Whenever the Phue Thai government was attacked by the deep state actors, the masses erupted into huge protests and descended on the streets of Bangkok under the leadership of the Red Shirts. This was Phue Thai's true leverage. However, following the Move Forward's dissolution the capital city was eerily quiet, as none of its voter base was willing to put their bodies on the line for the party or its supposed movement.

Real Politik and Non-Parliamentary Organising

Move Forward clearly lacked the ruthless political pragmatism that Phue Thai welded with ease. We can only imagine the backdoor meetings, late night phone calls, and the prolonged game of poker played by the different forces that took place in Thailand after the 2023 elections. However, on the morning of the 22 August 2023, a plane landed in Bangkok, off walked Thaksin Shinawatra, back from 15 years of exile abroad. Later that day, Phue Thai took the Prime Minister's office as part of a highly fragile coalition comprising former adversaries in the military and former loyalists turned royalists. Today, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Thaksin's daughter serves as the Prime Minister of the country and as a leader of the Phue Thai Party that lost its economic and political swagger.

Despite this, today's Phue Thai has achieved some successes, such as a direct 10,000 THB cash handout to the poorest 20th percentile of the population, as well as providing land deeds to landless peasants, and recognition of citizenship to stateless people. They have also managed to turn around the shrinking GDP and, on the international front, moved away from the US by joining the BRICS in 2024, and forged tighter relations with Iran while securing the release of Thai hostages in Gaza.

Nonetheless, due to the shaky nature of the coalition, the guardrails of Thai politics and political change remain all the more firmly in place. If just one of the coalition partners withdraws, the government would collapse. This puts Thailand in the strange position of having a Phue Thai government without the immediate threat of a traditional coup.

What the deep state has been able to achieve since the coup of 2014 is to essentially de-militarise the mechanism of the military coup, shifting that capacity into the parliamentary and judicial realm.

If we look at how substantial change for the poor in Thailand has been achieved historically, this shift by the deep state, from the gun to the courtroom, is ingenious. Undoubtedly, the two forces that were able to fight for the rights of the poor in Thailand have been The Communist Party Insurgency and The Red Shirts via Phue Thai. While these movements were ideologically very different in their approach, both were dependent on people's power, mass mobilisations, non-compliance, and even violence against the state. It was through the power of people that hospitals were built, teachers were trained, roads to remote villages were paved, clean water pipes laid, and land deeds were transferred from lord to labourer. While coup d'etats have been commonplace in Thai history, it does not mean they have been taken lying down. Hundreds of thousands, of common people have given their lives to challenge the deep state.

At the peak of the Red Shirt movement, Professor and activist Ajarn Kengkij described the collective struggle within the protest movement as having grown out of its initial confines of a Thaksin support network and developing its own class character and consciousness, building class solidarity in doing so. To quote his **2010 article** in Prachatai:

Inequality, oppression, exploitation and injustice is the lived experience that the majority of the country has faced. The issue of whether Thaksin is a Lord or a Serf is not important. What's interesting is that the more the Red Shirt masses define or associate themselves as "Serfs" the clearer it becomes that the struggle of the Red Shirt masses has moved beyond the individual. As now promoting a proletarian identity is not a weakness, but a point of strength, which leads to the development of class consciousness.

Again, in short, it has been in the moment of the coup d'etat that the true face of the deep state has revealed itself. As such, it is within the organising of the counter-coup that the Thai people have been able to forge

their close bonds of solidarity and class consciousness. Today, the current state of affairs allows the deep state to potentially orchestrate *a coup without a coup* as the non-military organs of the Thai state -judiciary and the bureaucracy – have been captured.



This then begs the question of where progressive forces in Thailand focus their struggle in this new era. Certainly, there has been a noticeable rise in peasant and labour activity in the past few years, much of this activity has looked into Thailand's radical history for inspiration. Late last year a **memorial event was held** in the Northern city of Chiang Mai. Hosted by the Northern Peasants Federation. It was in honour of the peasant activists of the 1970s who were assassinated by state-backed paramilitaries, largely in the Northern region. While the Northern Peasants Federation played host, they were joined by other recently re-energised peasant and labour groups from across the country, such as the Four Slums Region Network, P-Move, The Southern Peasants Federation and The East Thailand Labourer's Group among others. At the end of the ceremony, the gathering released a statement that captured the essence of the progressive movements of Thailand:

"We are the product of a long history of struggles. The memories of fighting for justice and a better life still shine brightly, guiding us toward a more beautiful future … It is also an opportunity to learn about the political consciousness of farmers, their organizational struggles, and to continue the movements that may have been suppressed in history. It is a time to understand the contemporary political landscape and seek new ways to fight under current conditions."

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