

Autochthonous Politics and Capitalist Development in Thailand

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Abstract

Autochthonous politics is defined as indigenous-developed politics. Adherence to autochthonous politics allows for the gradual evolution of indigenous political regimes in the face of foreign alternatives. Autochthonous politics is said to exist when indigenous political systems are not displaced by foreign political systems over time. Successful autochthonous power systems often revolve around a central political figure like a monarch or a dictator who maintains a stranglehold over the entire regime through a network of loyal sycophants and supplicants. The monarch or dictator retains central control over political power through legal and extra-legal means. The clearest example from European history was Louis XV. The Sun King or le roi soleil, meant when he said "l'état cest moi" or "I am the state". The singular representation of a political demi-god derives legitimacy from mysterious universal sources. In the case of Thailand, the powerful Siamese monarchs sat on their thrones above heaven, earth and all men. All beings paid homage to the great and absolute power of the autochthonous monarch. The summative power of the monarch was made all the more powerful because of the grand narratives that surround the mystery and spirituality of the King of Kings¹.

Keywords: Politics; Political economy; Trade policy; Capitalist development

Introduction

There is an enigma in modern Thai politics today that cannot be easily explained with existing concepts in political science. This is because each political model merely explains part of that political problematic. Local and *farang* scholars and experts tend to explain Thai politics in a piecemeal manner, preferring to focus on one small aspect. There are also those scholars who attempt to explain the entire political system. For example, in *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* [1]. Fred Riggs described Thai politics as an evolving, transitional society, perhaps even a "prismatic one" within the confines of a bureaucratic polity. While Riggs explained the politics of Thailand as a whole, he failed to show how the economy continued to function despite the pressures of multiple military coups since 1932. Therefore the former type of experts and scholars tend to have great depth but little breadth while the latter like Riggs tend to possess great breadth but little depth. It is a trade-off. In another example, Thongchai Winichakul [2] examined Thailand in the 1980s drawing from his experience as a student activist at the politically radical Thammasat University in Bangkok. He argued eloquently in his book, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* [2] for a kingdom that was held together as a living and breathing political animal that one might associate with a quasi-modern *Leviathan* (Hobbes) that was steeped in myth but armed with technology. In *A History of Thailand* [3] Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit provides a powerful and comprehensive intellectual juxtapositioning of the political, economic, social and cultural history of the kingdom. Baker and Phongpaichit emphasize the neofeudal master-slave dialectical arrangements with the central role of the king in managing political transformation. Clearly influenced by a Hegelian aesthetic, Baker and Phongpaichit remain two of the most deeply respected scholars of Thai politics at Chulalongkorn University. The Thai scholar who comes closest to a comprehensive analysis of the Thai political economy is Thitinan Pongsudhirak, whose PhD thesis from the London School of Economics and Political Science won the UK best dissertation award. The title of his thesis is "Crisis From Within: The Politics of Macroeconomic Management in Thailand, 1947-97" [4]. Unfortunately he did not convert that work into a book and

the work. His thesis focussed on the importance of the international political economic strategies of the Kingdom. Eiji Murashima's 1988 work on the modern ideology of Thailand is already outdated as many empirically-based works tend to become after a few years, let alone two decades [5]. Nevertheless, it is a compelling account of the evolution of the ideological praxis of the state machinery. Murashima criticizes the state ever so subtly that a speaker of English as a second language would not know the difference. Riggs, Winichakul, McCargo, Baker, Phongpaichit, and Smith are only a few names of Thai scholars whose seminal works have made their mark on Thailand's culture and society. But not all scholars write as well as they do and indeed, most of us, myself included, are condemned to remain within the confines of poor writing and inadequate analyses. While attempting to explain everything, many popular scholars explain nothing. Other scholars prefer to focus on specific regimes such as the Sarit, Thanarat, Prem Tinsulanonda or Thaksin Shinawatra governments. In *The Thaksinization of Thailand* [6] Duncan McCargo and Ukrit Patthamānan offer a brilliant account of the spectre that remains to haunt various military juntas that have continuously kept the democratically elected capitalist former prime minister at bay. When he was in power, Thaksin endeavoured to share the spoils of the nation with the people, especially his beloved supporters of the Thai Rak Thai party. Thaksin tried to run the Kingdom like a giant corporation, in a manner that was very similar to the Republic of Singapore, a country that he was embroiled in a bitter scandal over alleged sale of sensitive military-grade satellite technology. It was not the intention of McCargo and Patthamānan to explain the entire regime but to provide a general description of Thaksin's policies. However, their other works have focussed on other political and cultural aspects of the kingdom. Most political scientists and historians have therefore focussed on specific periods of Siamese and Thai history

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while others have preferred to explain different dimensions within its long history. There are therefore many ways in which to treat Siamese and Thai politics as a whole. Scholars prefer to focus on what their training has enabled them to analyze. Some prefer to examine political institutions, civil society relations, ethnic politics, women's issues, public administration and policy.

Puzzle

Despite these brilliant explanations of Siamese and Thai politics and economics, there remains an absence of a holistic, non-linear analysis of the kingdom that explains why "Siam was and Thailand is as it is today". As a result of that research lacuna, the enigma of Thai politics remains unexplained [7]. There is an enigma because the history of ancient Siam and modern Thailand is the history of conflict, political violence, and authoritarianism. But the kingdom has evolved into one of the fastest growing states in the world and has not imploded or resulted in civil war for over 700 years. No state can exist with the internal forces that political tensions between military factions and political opposition inflict on a frequent basis. Despite the public protests and, to use Huntington's term, praetorian political interventions since at least 1932, the economy remains as robust and efficient as it was when the ancient Siamese sacked the Angkor Wat and laid the basis for modern Thailand.

Defining Autochthonous Politics

Autochthonous politics is defined as indigenous-developed politics that differ from foreign political models in the local emergence of political regimes rather than adaptation to foreign concepts. This paper uses the concept of autochthony to understand the vicissitudes of indigenous local government systems in modern Thailand. Thus, an autochthonous politics exists when indigenous political systems remain non-displaced and in power over generations. Such autochthonous power systems usually revolve round a central autochthonous figure like a monarch that not only retains the centralised focus of political power but is also the symbolic repository of the self same power. This was what Louis XV, *le roi soleil* meant when he said "*l'état, c'est moi*" or "I am the state" [8]. The singular representation of a central demi-godlike pillar has an additional benefit. Such autochthonous regimes derive legitimacy from mysterious universal sources. The Siamese king therefore sits above not only man but over heaven and earth. All beings pay homage to the great and absolute power of the autochthonous symbol of the monarch. Because power was vested in a single authority, it made the summative power of the ancient factors of production powerful and focussed.

Characteristics of the Autochthony

The autochthony has the following main characteristics: a political legitimacy that is steeped in mysticism, animism and spiritualism; a complex bureaucratic machinery; a sophisticated military force; a monarchy that reigns above the law despite the absence of executive power; the suppression of dissent (such as public protests and opposition); deep religious fervour with a devout following; a sophisticated propaganda apparatus that supports the regime; weak civil society associations; a superficial adherence to democratic norms within a façade democracy; and, draconian laws that criminalizes anti-statist activities [9]. The following sections discuss the characteristics of the Autochthony in relation to the Thai kingdom and how each characteristic reveals a new and unique perspective on the nature of the Thai autochthony.

Political legitimacy

The autochthony legitimizes its existence through a mystical and mysterious spiritualistic bond between the monarch and the universe. Animal symbolism and imagery supplement and complement the regime through anthropomorphism. The propaganda arm or apparatus relates a singular ancient narrative of the proto nation and nation. This is unique to Thailand because most other states, apart from Japan, do not have a King who is also kind of a God. The Royal Protocol requires people to prostrate before him. In previous times, a royal princess was said to have drowned in the Menam Chao Phraya because she could not swim and no one is allowed to touch a royal. The continuing grand narrative that begins with the story of the pre-Chakri kings and their weaknesses followed by the superlative achievements of the Chakri Dynasty form the substantive basis of that chronicle. It is a story, perhaps a legend that all modern Thai people know by heart. All states have some kind of origin story. However, the Siamese-Thai case is unique because its entire history has been about the twists and turns of battles and negotiations with foreign powers and the Siamese always ended in victory. That is why it adds to the autochthony. There remains a grand narrative at work that combines all forms of symbols, relics, artefacts, as well as the *Ramkhamhaeng stele*, an ancient inscription on a stone block discovered by a Siamese Rama king that claims the authenticity of the Thai language. The political legitimacy is deeply tied to the Buddhist fervour that we shall discuss later. In a critical series of moves to expand and consolidate their empire, the Chakri Kings would resort to what David Brown and others refer to as internal colonialism [10].

Complex bureaucracy

The complexity of the Thai bureaucracy dates back to ancient Siam. The complexity has made it a most indecipherable maze of bureaus that provide many opportunities for corrupt behaviour. Some scholars believe that the ancient Siamese were not corrupt until the Portuguese visited Ayutthaya. However, this is very unlikely to be true because it is in the human condition to be vulnerable to corruption. In any case, the modern assessments of the level of corruption in Thailand reveal otherwise. That is to say, Thailand is at least as corrupt as half of all states in late modernity. The Thai bureaucracy is known for its systemic corruption and has ensued Thailand its place as the 85th most corrupt country out of 175 states according to Transparency International's 2014 *Global Corruption Perception Index* [11]. The level of petty corruption takes place on a quotidian basis and tourists have reported Royal Thai Police (RTP) officers asking for bribes in broad daylight. The low wages of the tourist police and the RTP officers have resulted in the abuse of bureaucratic power for personal gain. Police Colonel Santhi Piwuthongkum of the Inspector General (Investigations Division) says that there are two kinds of corrupt police officers. In a *YouTube.com* video, he mentions on camera that the first type of corrupt cop is one who has failed the police tests but purchases the uniforms to impress girls and take bribes. The second kind of corrupt cop is one who has purchased or stolen police uniforms for nefarious purposes. He also mentions that some checkpoint chiefs wish to gain outstanding performances by demanding that each of their officers attain a prescribed quota of bookings for illegal drivers. These chiefs do not care how or where the police officers issue these summonses. So a police officer may be part of a network that implements temporary checkpoints to issue summonses [12]. These may range from 300 baht to 1000 baht. The low salary and the 40% share of each bribe motivate the police officers to attain their quota regardless of whether the person receiving the summons is guilty or not. However, further investigations by the local social media reveal that most people prefer to simply pay these corrupt

cops off with a 100 baht bribe. Most of the people who are victims are taxi drivers and motorcyclists. Some are fined for the ludicrous reason of wearing improper footwear such as slippers. The *YouTube.com* video entitled, “Thai Police Bribery” revealed how such activities take place and named several popular locations. Thai workers driving to and from work prefer to pay a small bribe to avoid the inconvenience of having to go to the police station. There are other videos on the Internet made by long time foreign residents in Phuket, Pattaya and Bangkok who use *GoPro* cameras to shoot footage of bribery in broad day light [13]. The networks of corruption have become so prevalent in daily life that the Thai people have accepted it as a necessary evil. Corruption has been a norm in Thailand for decades. This is why the Thai bureaucracy has a bad reputation and there has been no prime minister or military government that has been able to solve the problem. The King himself has been unable to reduce systemic corruption. In a commonly told story to people new to Bangkok, a tourist once asked a shopkeeper why there were really busy shops and a roaring trade on one side of the street but not the other. The shopkeeper replied to the curious tourist that the shops on the quiet side of the street did not pay their protection money [14]. Corruption as a norm in Thailand is the lubricant of the Thai neoliberal economy. There is a great reluctance and resistance to implementing anti-corruption measures by millions of Thai civil servants, bureaucrats and businessmen.

Military power

The primary function of the military is to provide security and protection for the King, the People and the territory of Thailand. While designed as a full tri-service force, the modern Royal Thai Army (RTA) has the capacity to conduct full scale hot war operations. *Jane's Defence Weekly* has the details. However, the RTA has been mainly preoccupied with Counterinsurgency (COIN) operations against the Communists in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the 1990s, the RTA and its COIN arm, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) that is headquartered in Bangkok have faced daily combat battles against the separatist movements in the restive Southern Provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani. This tells us that the military's experience is in controlling domestic unrest [15]. The 1st Army for example is well known for its occasional forays into Bangkok streets to quell unrests and public protests. This is a trait that remains a political hangover since the military dictatorships of the 1940s to 1970s. The problem with the Thai military is that they are lowly paid and their generals are corrupt. Not all the commanders take bribes but many do in order to supplement the low wages that they receive. It is not uncommon for a new military commander to accept new tenders for military projects that provide better kickbacks. This is why the RTA has different military systems and platforms with spares and accessories that are mismatched. The annual military rotation of commanders is an opportunity to increase their individual influence over the army. Unlike any other Southeast Asian country, the RTA remains the most influential institution in Thai politics. Thai military commanders have conducted over 19 coups since 1932 when the absolute monarchy was reduced to a Constitutional monarchy. The Cambridge-trained historians based at Chulalongkorn University, Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit wrote in their book how Rama IX's own rise developed alongside the Sarit regime and alongside the King's brilliant rebuilding of three ancient institutions that would govern the Kingdom: the palace, the military, and Thai Buddhism. In 1960, at the height of the Vietnam War, Thailand's gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was US\$101.08 with massive support from the American war machine and its use of Thai military and naval bases to attack Vietnam as well as the use of Bangkok and Pattaya for the rest and recreation of the United States (US) military

and civilian personnel [16]. Pattaya today is a haven for Russian warlords and gangsters who use it as a base into maritime Southeast Asia. Russian criminals would eventually use Pattaya as a springboard to other Southeast Asian countries after the Cold War. Towards the end of the Vietnam War, the Thai GDP per capita rose to US\$166.95 in 1967 and despite the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil crisis, the Thai GDP per capital rose again to US\$269.49 in 1973, and then to US\$390.89 in 1976 at the peak of the military junta in Bangkok which was almost 400 per cent higher than it was in the immediate post-war years. Thailand's army chief is a few months away from retirement. A senior ranking officer of general-rank and above in the RTA has a specific role to play. That role is not about the preparation for war (as in the Singapore Armed Forces or SAF) but the avoidance of coups. In Singapore, an army general would never think of staging a coup. This is because the SAF is designed in such a way that it reports to a civilian government head, the Minister for Defence. However, in Thailand, the RTA also has a Minister of Defence, but it is more of a ceremonial position given to well-deserved generals who have performed well. It is also easier to stage a coup rather than forestall one. Whether the coup is successful is immaterial because the King likes peace. But the generals are themselves often under pressure from various quarters to stage coups. In 1977, for example, General Kriangsak Chomanan took power through a coup and called for elections two years later in 1979. Kriangsak staged a coup against army-strongman and Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn [12]. History repeated itself in 2006 when General Sonthi Boonyaratglin staged a coup against the democratically elected but corrupt Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra; and elections were held two years later in 2008 after another Constitution was promulgated. Some scholars believe that the grand puppeteer is the president of the Privy Council, former General Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda—a trusted aid of the King who has been accused of taking advantage of his special position in the Royal Court despite not being a royal himself. One radical Thai political scientist who is in hiding overseas, outside of Thailand but in Southeast Asia said that Prem has been so close to the king that he has “become royal” via osmosis and by proximity to His Majesty. The real power of the RTA is in the office of the Supreme Commander of the Army. Hence, the choice job for any general is the Supreme Commander post and no Supreme Commander wants to have a bloody coup on his reputation with the rare exception that there is a chance for a shot at the top prize of becoming Prime Minister. But General Prayudh Chanocha showed how he had become more powerful than a prime minister. He became a king-maker after he personally staged a bloodless coup in 2014 against the government that replaced the ousted Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Her weakness was that she allowed her subordinates to be manipulated by her brother. Although Thaksin was unfairly and undemocratically removed in the 2006 military coup in a rather cowardly fashion (the generals waited until he was away in the US to stage the coup), his weakness is that he cannot let go of his desire for power despite his immense wealth [10].

Monarchy

Much of what we understand of the Thai monarchy is the result of the work of the current King, Rama IX or Bhumibol Adulyadej. While he does not possess any executive power, he has immense symbolic power over the people. Many scholars believe that he is genuinely loved by Thai people. The bond between the People and their Sovereign is almost spiritual. The Thai People do not have a “herd mentality” as the public protests at Rajphrasong and other parts of Bangkok showed from 1997 to 2015. While he has spent much of his own personal wealth to help the poor and the needy as well as to deploy and implement

his Sufficiency Economy concept, the King has not always had the complete support of detractors who tend to go into self-exile for fear of being arrested by the police. His Majesty the King spent much of his long reign developing the Kingdom and can claim to be one of a handful of sovereigns who has travelled to all parts of his Kingdom. But while he was going about his daily business, a cult of personality has emerged around him. The cult of personality is visible throughout Thailand [3]. Supersized pictures of the King, Queen and the other royals take up large poster board space in all Thai cities and towns. Before watching a movie anywhere in Thailand, the audience must stand in solemn silence to pay homage to the King. He also has remained in power while all prime ministers have lost their political office. He has also outwitted all the supreme commanders of the RTA since 1932. For over 63 years, Rama IX has remained in power and is widely loved by the Thai people. He is also reported by Forbes and other financial magazines as the richest man on earth and has more wealth than the Sultan of Brunei. But the King's amazing power and position is also buttressed by Thai law. These can be seen in Articles 45 and 112 of the Royal Constitution. Article 112 on *lèse majesté* is the anti-treason law of Thailand [3]. Foreigners and locals who contravene the law protecting the monarch and his family may be sentenced to up to 15 years in prison. Indeed, many have been convicted and sentenced to several years in one of the most horrendous jails in the world. Some have been pardoned by the King as part of his birthday celebrations but most languish in the deadly Bangkok prison system. Article 45 of the 1997 Constitution states that "No person shall exercise his rights and liberties in a manner that adversely affects the Nation, Religion, King, and Constitution". This Article that has been quoted by all and sundry in political science work on Thailand has remained in its various forms in the latest Constitutions that have been approved by Parliament. Nevertheless, it remains one of the most flouted Articles because of the many coups, protests, bombings, attacks, explosions, and new Constitutions that have emerged.

Suppression of dissent

The autochthony suppresses dissent in three main ways: 1. anticipating and arresting potential dissenters; 2. use of legal means to convict and incarcerate regime opponents; and, 3. use of military and police for wide scale coercive operations. This suppression of dissent occurs on a daily basis in a myriad of ways that are hidden to the public eye. Anytime one inspects the social media, one will discover an entire cacophony of opposition voices that criticise the regime on the Internet. Many websites and parts of YouTube are often closed down as press censorship widens. This is a norm in Thailand. Opposition-led demonstrations and public protests are held regardless of the threat of being repressed by military governments. The level of suppression is so intense that many soldiers and policemen themselves do not execute the orders for suppression. Rather, they prefer to In order to keep the peace, the RTP and their much larger uniformed brother, the RTA are ready and willing to suppress dissent. Local civil rights activists often decry the level of fear that Thai people live under. The suppression of dissent occurs when websites, non-government organizations, civic society associations and independent radio stations as well as television stations are closed down by the police. The innocuous owners are often charged for infringing vague laws.

Religious fervour

Buddhism in Thailand is more than superficial chanting, incense burning and merit-making. Buddhism involves an intense and deep as well as spiritual connection with the non-deity of the Buddha through thousands of temples and shrines that litter the Kingdom. There is

more of a strong religiosity than pure fanaticism in the Kingdom. The Thai army is replete with reminders of its adherence to Buddhism. Thai soldiers are devout believers in Buddhism inasmuch as many American soldiers are deep believers in Episcopalian Christianity. All Thai boys have to serve time as a Buddhist monk. While this is not a law per se, it is a form of religious devotion to the Lord Buddha and the kind of ritualistic Buddhism that is practiced according to the Theravada School as well as parts of Hindu mystical cults. The national religion is particularly powerful mobilizational tool. The King who is revered as demi-God leads the entire nation in obligatory prayer and ablutions. He cut quite the figure as a young monk himself and worked quietly to embrace all Thai people as the leader of the Buddhist faith and of all Buddhists in Thailand. The official religion while accepted by most Thai people is not forced onto non-believers. Non-Buddhists have built their temples, prayer halls, churches, mosques, and synagogues all over the Kingdom. There are over 450 temples of various sizes and materials in Bangkok alone. Tourists and locals are often in awe of their manufacture. Many cultural support systems have emerged to complement the cultural reproduction of the Buddhist faith in late modernity. The symbols of Buddhist fervour are everywhere. Huge, poorly lit museums house intricate artefacts of the Buddhist faith from past centuries. Individual civilians wear Buddhist *sak yan* tattoos of sacred Buddhist script from the Tripitaka; these Buddhist sutras have become a mantra for a holy and protected life. The largely animistic Thai people feed into the overwhelming support for Thai Buddhism. Over 95% of Thai people are Buddhists. The tattoos have become so commoditized that tourists have been banned by Thai police for having any Buddhist tattoos. Individual citizens wear amulets for protection. Thai soldiers going into battle never forget to wear their *jatukarm* talisman. Some wear over 128 amulets of various sizes. There are terse and overt reminders of the importance of the Buddhist faith that run throughout the Kingdom and through a highly concerted level of ceremony over the rituals and traditions as well as the celebration of holy days and national festivals.

Neoliberal capitalist economy

Modern productive capacities that we know as capitalist development in Thailand today are steeped in ancient history. Today's dominant views of how capitalism began are reinforced in the histories of Sukhothai, Lanna and the Ayutthaya kingdoms. The roots of modern Thai capitalism therefore run deep in Siamese history during the time of Indochinese barter-trade across various fragmented regional kingdoms since the 7th century. Thereafter, greater emphasis on infrastructure and pre-modern communications' systems resulted in Siam's participation in global mercantilist enterprises. This was concretized by trade with the European powers since at least the early 16th century. Ancient Siam was bountiful because of the natural, fertile alluvial soil from annual flooding of the Mekong. The sedimentation from the upper highlands of Laos and China would flow deep into Indochina thereby irrigating the entire delta until the waters reached the Gulf of Siam. The tropical environment also provided a wide range of resources to build and furnish dwellings and habitat suitable for reconstruction after the annual flooding destroyed them. Therefore, our understanding of Siamese mercantilism and Thai capitalist development is neither linear nor truncated into different phases. The Thai economy has emerged from a concentration of capitalist resources into Bangkok, the capital city, feeding into the concept of Bangkok-centrism. This has also caused a widening gap between the richest rich and the poorest poor. There are stark differences of wealth in the capital, also known as Krung Thep Maha Nakorn, the City of Angels and the longest city name in the world. The beggars with decimated and rotting

flesh languish on the filthy Bangkok streets while Thai billionaires drive by in their foreign important chauffeur-driven limousines. The Thai neo liberalist capitalist economy is built on the local and foreign MNCs, SMEs and global franchising. The economy shifted from a predominantly agricultural based economy to an industrial one. More than 48% of Thai workers are involved in light industry, autopart and aircraft manufacturing, marine and civil engineering, financial services, textiles, export services, and F and B services. Thai workers have limited union rights but tend to articulate their political rights in public protests. Thai unions tend to be pro-industry rather than pro-worker. There are very strong and deep economic ties with other ASEAN countries as well as with larger trading partners like China and the United States. In the 1980s, the value of manufacturing exports from Thailand was about 10 million baht per annum compared to over 50 million baht per annum for agricultural products such as rice. By the 1990s, the value of agricultural exports increased to over 130 million baht per annum. Labour receipts from foreign based Thai citizens as well as from labour-intensive industries rose to over 300 million Thai baht in the mid 1990s. Manufacturing increased significantly to well over 71% of all revenues in the 2005 to 2010 period when Thaksin Shinawatra was prime minister. The economic recovery in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami was rapid as it was immediate. The successes brought about in resolving natural and artificial disasters led to the gradual reinforcement of spatial views that inform political and ideological neoliberal capitalism in the Thai Kingdom. Evidently, the capitalist stakeholders prioritize neoliberal capitalism above all other values that they hold dear. This is part of the reason why the Thai economy was able to overcome several disasters despite the level of poverty ranging around 6-12 million people.

The globally dominant economic ideology we usually know as neoliberalism opposes the interests of local people and favors those of speculators and bureaucrats, subjugating the residents' lives to impersonal imperatives masquerading as "improvement" and "development". The Thai baht and the GDP per capita have remained strong despite Thailand's disruptive experience with over 19 military-led coups and a protest culture of bloody riots since 1932. This means that there is almost a clear delineation between the business sphere and the political sphere. Except for the Soros case and the Asian Financial Crisis, there has been no perceptible falls in the GDP per capita since World War II. However, it is too blunt a measure to capture the reality of Thailand's economic performance. This is also because of increases in population and the fact that the gross division of the GDP per capita does not take into account the large gap between the richest rich and poorest poor Thai citizens. Also, this does not mean that the baht has been moving upwards all the time but remains as volatile as other currencies. The 2015 Bangkok bombing of the Erawan Shrine at Rachaphrasong intersection resulted in the loss of 30 million baht worth of tourist dollars according to the local media. The police investigation led to the capture of two foreign nationals, one believed to be a Uighur supporter. The reward money of USD84,000 was given to the police team that caught the perpetrators.

Propaganda apparatus

The Thai bureaucracy, the military, the police and the Palace possess strongly coordinated propaganda works and activities that exist in support of the regime and the King. The cult of personality of Rama IX for example, is a clear indication not only of the existence of this apparatus but also of the level of serious commitment to its functions and roles.

Weak civil society

Although Thailand has many civil society associations, they are incoherent and weak. Many of these structures are able to provide at best a limited resistance to the regimes that come and go. These structures also do not sufficiently articulate their interests in a manner that has show to have impactful results. The weak civil society structures have not made life for the Thai people any easier than it was two decades previously. The only apparent difference being that there are beggars in the streets who communicate with handphones. In 2006, the Committee for National Security (CNS) that ousted the democratically elected but corrupt Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra while giving a talk at the United Nations – ensured that the Internet would be used to control the polity and invalidate civil society groups.

Facade democracy

This is politics of an empty shell. So we cannot completely apply this concept to the Thai case and across all parts of its long history of over 70 decades. There are no democratic norms in a façade democracy and when exposed as such, the system reinvents its narrative backwards and into a mysterious and unfathomable past. Façade democracy is defined as an adherence to democratic norms or paying lip service to them but not actually or substantively ensuring that there are democratic norms in play. Many scholars question the legitimacy of the democratic and civil society movements in Thailand. These scholars include William Case's work on the quality of Thai democracy. The characteristics of façade democracy include rigged elections; bankrupting Opposition candidates; intimidating the people with overt or covert threats; manipulation of the stock market; intimidation and or imprisonment of Opposition candidates, and the use of extreme rendition for potential threats to the state. However, one cannot completely claim that all elections in Thailand are fraudulent since the candidates work very hard at trying to convince the electorate to vote for them and their parties.

Nevertheless, in a façade democracy, the state often uses sophisticated virtual and real techniques against the political opposition. Opponents of the state are monitored by a secret police and random acts of sabotage occur including assassinations and "accidental" killings. Thailand is not the only façade democracy and there are more façade democracies in this world than genuine ones. In a façade democracy, opponents of the state as well as their families are often tailed, interrogated, roughed up, beaten, threatened, or convicted of minor crimes. As long as a state has a secret police that is used against the political opposition then there can be no genuine democracy. In a façade democracy, political candidates are carefully chosen by the leaders of political parties. They choose candidates who are proven supporters of the party from the individual candidate's previous political activities. A large percentage of MPs in a façade democracy are beholden to party leaders because of payoffs and kickbacks as well as business deals, contracts and directorships to government-linked companies. The surface attention paid by the power elite to the democratic structure of government in Thailand is about creating the appearance of a democracy especially when simplistic data are collected from various official agencies or when non-investigative global journalism reigns through sensationalism. For example, the 1991 and 1997 Constitutions were democratic and contained laws that adhere to international democratic visions. However, in 2006, the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra – democratically elected twice – was ironically removed from power by his "trusted" classmate General Sonthi Boonyaratglin the Commander of the Royal Thai Armed forces. The act of sabotaging his own prime minister was rewarded when

the good general was appointed “Head” of the Council for National Security (CNS). CNS is the democratic label for the military junta. And this was not the first military coup but the 19th coup in an occasional succession that began with the first one in 1932. Thaksin, himself an honorary Police Lieutenant Colonel, was stripped by that rank and sent an SMS informing him of the Court’s decision. His lawyers and aides in Dubai also informed him but he remains at large even having divorced his wife of 32 years, some believe to safeguard their family wealth as, and “the overarching theory is that the couple wants to protect their 76 billion baht (\$\$3.3 billion) worth of assets to remain at risk.

Draconian law

An understanding of capitalist development allows us to analyze the ways in which the traditional factors of production, that of land, labour and capital co-exist within the modern, neoliberal capitalist machinery of Thailand. For example, I noted that on “October 4, 1973. 4 p.m. a young police master-sergeant wiped his sweat-laden forehead in the tropical Krung Thep heat. He watched warily as angry Thammasat University students waived flags in protest along the Chao Phraya at Tha Phra Jan. The University of Moral and Political Sciences (Ethics and Politics) was established by Pridi Banomyong sometimes known as the father of Thai democracy in 1934. The university’s name was later shortened to Thammasat University. True to former prime minister Pridi’s democratic values, Thammasat evolved to become a radical, left-of-centre, social-democratic university. The police waited to open fire. Nothing happened. Yet, ten days later, when students protested against Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn a bloody riot ensued and by day’s end, the body count numbered seventy. Siamese-Thai history is the story of managing political and social complexity. And it dates back to the infamous mother of all Thai coups”. As we have seen, the factors of production were conceptually non-existent in ancient Siam. However, the modern productive capacities that we know as capitalist development in Thailand today are steeped in ancient history. Today’s dominant views of how capitalism began are reinforced in the histories of Sukhothai, Lanna and the Ayutthaya kingdoms. The roots of modern Thai capitalism therefore run deep in Siamese history during the time of Indochinese barter-trade across various fragmented regional kingdoms since the 7th century [4]. Thereafter, greater emphasis on infrastructure and pre-modern communications’ systems resulted in Siam’s participation in global mercantilist enterprises. This was concretized by trade with the European powers since at least the early 16th century. Ancient Siam was bountiful because of the natural, fertile alluvial soil from annual flooding of the Mekong. The sedimentation from the upper highlands of Laos and China would flow deep into Indochina thereby irrigating the entire delta until the waters reached the Gulf of Siam. The tropical environment also provided a wide range of resources to build and furnish dwellings and habitat suitable for reconstruction after the annual flooding destroyed them.

In 1932, under the disguise of draconian laws and much political abuse, King Rama VII (Prajadhipok) was overthrown by Mom Pridi Phanomyang, Major Phibunsongkhram, and Colonel Phahon Phonphaywasena (who was appointed Prime Minister). When he first returned from Switzerland, Bhumibol Adulyadej (a name that means, “Strength of the Land, Incomparable Power”) could hardly speak Standard Thai. He was convinced that he would always play second fiddle to his older brother Ananda. The humble man focussed on his studies while dating the daughter of the Siamese Ambassador to France. In a moment of great tragedy, Bhumibol rear-ended another vehicle in Paris and lost his right eye. Born in 1927 in Cambridge Massachusetts, Bhumibol became King Rama IX after the shadowy death of Rama VIII (King Ananda). When he ascended the throne in 1946, he was only

22 years old and his queen was 17 years old. That was when he began his first lessons in managing complexity. Therefore, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX, inherited a kingdom submerged in absolutism, corruption, draconian laws, and neofeudalism. The palace had been severely weakened by the 1932 coup and the rapid rise of military dictators worsened the political and economic corruption of Siam. After the Second World War, Siam was renamed “Thailand” (Land of the Free) [3]. But freedom is costly and often paid for in human blood. In 1955, three men were executed for the murder of King Ananda. The interview that Rama IX gave to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) showed that he was convinced that the three men were scapegoats. The interview on *YouTube.com* reveals a gentle man who is simply dressed, seated Thai-style on the floor of a cramped office. Rama IX did not expect to outlive, outwit, or out-survive the military-politico leadership of the Pramoj brothers, Phibun, Thanarat, Kittikachorn, Darmansakti, Choonhavan (father and son), Kongsompong, Silpa-Archa, Yongchaiyudh, or Chuan Leekpai. His love for the Thai people made him travel to all the provinces, often checking and re-checking with officials how to improve their lives, the infrastructure, and their education. In the BBC interview, Rama IX revealed that the death of his brother Rama VIII was very political. There were people in high places, he said, who put forth “facts”, not theories but “facts” about the death of Rama VIII. “Everyone was political”, said Rama IX, “the police were political, the military was political”; even those in the Palace were political.

Unfortunately, because of Bangkok-centrism, the many decades of government corruption under Plaek Phibunsongkhram, Sarit, and others had left Thai politics and economics in the hands of ruffians, scallywags, and *jao pho*. The *jao pho* were local business mafia that had established considerable networks and relationships with low to high ranking military officers, police officers, foreign investors, as well as informers that included the palace, administrative bureaus of the government, business firms, and markets. Hardly any business deal went through without their knowledge or consent. The conjoint action of the King and Prime Ministers like Sarit and Prem helped weaken the prowess of the *jao pho* although several families remain today. In fact, one Thai political scientist noted that Bangkok’s crime situation and the Bangkok Metropolitan Police were no different from the New York City police and their corrupt organisations since the 1960s. In a series of interviews with the BBC’s Mr David Lomax (1978–1979), King Bhumibol, speaking from his radio congested operations’ room while seated on the floor spoke of his brother’s untimely death. When asked about his brother’s death, the King mentioned that it was a fact that he had died from a bullet wound to his forehead and therefore it was not an accident or suicide. “Immediately after the death, many of the evidences were shifted. And because it was political, everyone was political; even the police were political; so it is a fact that is not very clear. Many people wanted to advance not theories but facts to clear up the affair. They were suppressed. And they were suppressed by influential people in this country or in international politics”. In the 1970s, the young King was concerned about the dangers of communist encroachment in the northeast provinces and within sprawling urban centres like Bangkok. But he was too politically weak to control the university students or prevent the outbreak of violence as seen in the 1973 Back October crisis. Seventy Thammasat University students were killed by riot-police in a frenzy of protests against Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn. The return of Thanom in 1976 saw more bloody riots after a large crowd of over half a million people protested his return. Although King Bhumibol proposed a National Convention for healing and unity, that did not last long. Over a three-year period between 1977 and 1980, Kriangsak Chomanan plotted and led a series

of coups against Prime Minister Thanin Kraivixianne. Prem was a deputy minister and minister in Chomanan's government but as a firm believer in peace. Under more mysterious circumstances, Chomanan suddenly resigned in favour of Prem in 1980. Surviving a total of six assassinations and mini-coups, Prem stepped down as Prime Minister in 1988 and was appointed Privy Counsellor by the King. The King's power only began consolidating when a new Prime Minister General Prem Tinsulanonda retained power for eight years. He was quoted as saying eight is for man, and nine for the King (referring to the sacred number of royal umbrellas in the Chakri Dynasty). Prem's administration was marked as one of the least violent episodes in Thai history and up until 2014; he has remained at times, the sole voice representing the King. Prem became close to the King because he solved the King's greatest fear during the 1970s and 1980s, which was the Communist Party of Thailand through an armistice as well as ensured positive relations with the Muslim separatists in the Southern Provinces. During Prem's reign, the Kingdom's GDP per capita rose from US\$681.38 in 1981 to US\$1,113.72 in 1988, the Chinese Year of the Dragon. Whatever might be said or published about Prem, his government was marked with a long peace in the south and low levels of public protests in the urban centres. He had gained the confidence of the King who had by now built a significant network of power built on his own personality and networking abilities; it was all based on the mythical, demi-God status of the King.

General Chatichai Choonhavan took over as Prime Minister (PM) in 1988. The new PM was immediately thrown into the fire. He was accused of corruption before he could hardly move into his office. But some Thai political scientists believe that it was because the Chatichai government did not "compensate" the right people in the military as well as the police. Thaksin Shinawatra too had failed to do so and was condemned to repeat Chatichai's mistake in 2006 as Prime Minister. Less than three years later, General Sunthorn Kongsompong overthrew General Chatichai in a 1991 coup. The Royal Thai Army (RTA) generals in power expect to be consulted when a new Minister of Defence is to be appointed. Instead of applying the King's National Convention, a new National Peace Keeping Council (NPKC) was established to restore stability to the Kingdom. When, for example, the post was offered to General Suchinda, the protests were so violent that the King had to come out of the Palace to quell the riots, leaving Anand Panyarachun as Prime Minister until Chuan Leekpai took over in 1992. A former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's scandal ridden administration led to its downfall. Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-Archa's similarly weak coalition fell in 1996 with the PM's resignation. Later that year, Prime Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh assumed power but the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis saw a return of his predecessor when the former was forced to resign. Despite all these political distortions and contortions, the baht remained relatively strong. Just before the Asian Financial Crisis, the GDP was a remarkable US\$2,476 per capita. It was only when the amount fell to US\$1,808 in 2001, that a new Prime Minister billionaire businessman turned politician, Thaksin Shinawatra, was democratically elected. He raised the GDP per capita to US\$3,078 in 2006 before he was ousted in another coup. In 2014, his sister—the democratically elected Yingluck Shinawatra helped to raise the GDP per capita to US\$5,473.75. Yet, she was threatened with kidnapping by former Deputy Prime Minister and protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban who led the Bangkok blockade of 2014.

Conclusion

The paper analyzed Siamese and Thai politics and economics within the framework of autochthony politics. While Thailand is not a

perfect autochthony, it does provide several features that make it more likely a contender of autochthonous politics than otherwise. There is a strong association exists between the country's norms, public protests, political violence, systemic corruption, low wages, widening wage gap between the richest rich and the poorest poor, and the symbolic power of the monarch. The capitalist development of Thailand is carved out of a set of factors, politicized issues and resilient policy problems of the Thai autochthony. While a benign monarchy appears to be the politically correct measure of the Kingdom for the past 63 years, it is not too difficult to understand or comprehend how one man, the richest man on earth, has remained in power despite over 20 coups, 21 prime ministers and acting prime ministers, and over 15 (re-written) Constitutions.

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