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Starving for humanity: Thai youth's hunger strike resistance in the Buddhist kingdom

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It does not matter if anyone says that we are only dust.
Today, all of the dust is coming together to be the earth …
Down with feudalism, long live the People.
Parit 'Penguin' Chiwarak (Parit 2021, 48–50)

Nature did not make anyone higher than anyone else …
Every one of us, we are all humans whose blood flows the same red …
Everyone has equal dignity and rights as a human.
No one is higher than anyone else. No one.
Panusaya 'Rung' Sithijirawattanakul (Panusaya 2021, 24)

The word 'human' is etymologically connected to the Latin term *humus*: earth. In Buddhist Thailand, however, not everybody is made of 'dust of the ground'. Notably, the king is not. As Dharmaraja – Bodhisattva of highest merit and unmatched virtues – the king reaches up into the higher spheres of the Thai hierarchical cosmos, among the celestial beings (see Tambiah 1977; Jory 2016). Not by chance, the monarch is referred to as 'Lord of the sky' (*jao fa*) and 'Lord of lives' (*jao chiwit*). In the special register of Thai speech used to speak to the king, common citizens refer to themselves as 'beneath the dust under the soles of Your Majesty's feet' (Elinoff 2024, 358).

Parit 'Penguin' Chiwarak's libertarian speech, 'Down with feudalism, long live the People', given at a pro-democracy protest in the northeast of Thailand on 20 August 2020, challenged Thailand's cosmological hierarchy and the idea of citizens as dust under the sole of the monarch's foot (Parit 2021). It did so by invoking 'the People' in a way that echoed European Enlightenment's foundational revolutions. A week earlier in

Bangkok, Panusaya 'Rung' Sithijirawattanakul's historic speech, 'No one is born higher: Everyone stands on the same ground', appealed directly to 'humanity', emphasising everybody's 'equal dignity and rights as humans' (Panusaya 2021).

Yet, as Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin have observed, the meaning of humanity is not as clear as its widespread appearance in ethical discourse and transnational politics might suggest (Feldman and Ticktin 2010, 2). While everyone agrees that, as human beings, we are all members of the same species, interpretations of humanity vary greatly. In the Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions, which even secular humanitarianism has drawn upon (see, for instance, Fassin 2011; Benthall 2011), God provides the ontological basis for equality claims: 'Humans are all equal in the eyes of God.' However, in the Thai Buddhist cosmology, as it is conventionally understood by Thai royalists, notions of karma and merit lay the foundation for social hierarchy; it is true that human beings are equal in the sense that they are all subject to the law of karma, but the fundamental truth of dharma is that humanity is characterised by moral inequality.[1] Monks and laypeople, parents and children, teachers and students, rich and poor are bearers of unequal stores of merit, all under the guidance of the king, who – like a benevolent father – should love the holders of successively lower ranks equally (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982, 148; Bolotta 2024, 299).

Furthermore, humanity's purported universality does not fully escape the logic of the nation. Thai pro-democracy activists invoke the concept of humanity with the precise aim of redefining 'Thainess', the Thai national identity, which is codified as resting on three pillars: Nation, Religion and Monarchy. Crafted by royals and right-wing intellectuals in the early twentieth century, the discourse surrounding Thainess establishes that being Thai means embracing the cosmologically grounded theory of politics in which Buddhist kingship is the nation's guiding light. Moral order reigns when 'small people' (*phu noi*) know their place and behave accordingly, in obedience and grateful service to the higher-ranking 'big people' (*phu yai*) (Bolotta 2021, 23–6). It is in this context that Panusaya and Parit cried out for humanity, meant as a condition of universal equality that encompasses all human beings, *including the king*. Thainess, in their opinion, tramples human rights under the king's foot. They are not alone in thinking this.

Panusaya and Parit were taking part as protest leaders in the nationwide youth-led rallies that saw hundreds of thousands of young Thais take to the streets in 2020. Their demands included the resignation from government of General Prayuth Chan-o-cha (who became prime

minister after leading a coup d'état); the revocation of the military-drafted 2017 constitution; and, for the first time since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, limits to the king's arbitrary exercise of power.

The call for monarchy reform aimed in particular to abolish Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code – the world's harshest lese-majesty law, which stipulates that: 'Whoever defames, insults, or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent shall be subject to imprisonment of three to fifteen years' (Streckfuss 2011). Since the protests began, nearly three hundred pro-democracy youth and child activists have been charged with lese-majesty offences and held in pre-trial detention for exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.[2] On many occasions, as observed by Pasit Wongngamdee (2020), these youths had asked the question 'Are you still human?' in public, urging royalists who vilify pro-democracy groups to reconsider if protecting Thainess can justify the sacrifice of basic human rights. A popular slogan among supporters, 'Decrease Thainess, Increase Humanness', summarises their argument well.

The imperative to protect human life across religious, social and national divides also defines the core of transnational humanitarianism, whose global reach was set forth by the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thailand was amongst the first nations to sign it. Significantly, Thai monarchy reform activists' calls to uphold people's universal humanity have not gone unheard. What began in 2020 as a local rebellion against the Thai royal-military establishment gradually evolved into a field of international humanitarian concern – particularly after Parit and Panusaya began resorting to hunger strikes to protest the pre-trial imprisonment without bail of peaceful dissenters. Thai and international NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, iLaw and Thai Lawyers for Human Rights took the stage, providing detained demonstrators with global visibility and crucial legal, economic and psychological support. In the process, Panusaya and Parit became iconic figures of Thailand's democracy movement: selfless young people, hungry for humanity, and willing to sacrifice their own lives to protect their fellow citizens from royalist military abuse. Parit was remanded on 9 February 2021 and released on 11 May, after a 57-day hunger strike. Panusaya, remanded on 8 March, was released on 6 May after a 39-day hunger strike. They were denied bail nine and five times, respectively. Both face lese-majesty charges and potential life sentences.

Over the past four years, other youths have followed Panusaya and Parit's example, initiating hunger strikes in support of one another's rights.[3] 'Free our friends' became their slogan (Bolotta 2024).

Their uncoordinated initiatives stand against the military government's judicial harassment of predominantly peaceful demonstrators. In doing so, these youths have embodied dramatic expressions of humanitarianism from below.

These hunger strikes are humanitarian acts not only because they are explicitly designed to help others – imprisoned friends and the Thai citizenry more broadly – but also because hunger-striking activists consciously and performatively instrumentalise their suffering bodies – the universal biological substratum of humanity – as a powerful catalyst for humanitarian responses (compassion, desire to help) from observers, both local and international. These responses, in turn, gain political significance when they pressure state authorities to make concessions. The term 'from below' denotes the spontaneous, people-driven inception of such initiatives. It also serves to distinguish individual forms of political solidarity from more conventional instantiations of humanitarianism, such as NGO work, religious charity or other institutional or financial endeavours that offer help to human beings in distress (Kloos 2020). However, as we shall see, these typological distinctions are often blurred by Thai youths' simultaneous engagement within multiple discourses and practices of humanity, both Thai and foreign.

In this chapter, I approach Panusaya and Parit as key figures of humanitarianism, from below and from above. I show how, across geographical, cultural and political scales, their gestures are perceived and typified as either distinctively local or paradigmatically universal symbols of moral commitment to humanity. Panusaya and Parit are *figures* because they are recognised by others, both within and outside Thailand, as 'standing out', prompting reflection on the sociohistorical world they inhabit (Barker et al. 2014, 2). They are concrete individuals, grounded in reality, and yet they also serve as symbolic anchors for local, national and transnational discourses and affects (see Figure 4.1).

They are figures *of humanitarianism* because their hunger strike activism encapsulates an imaginary of selfless devotion to the commons – an altruistic sacrifice undertaken on behalf of those unable to defend themselves. Importantly, as Barker, Harms and Lindquist argue, while figures are often overshadowed by powerful narratives, an anthropological approach demands contextual attention to 'the tensions that the figures themselves feel – or that we observe through their experience – as they struggle to define their own historical agency' (Barker et al. 2014, 3–4). Although Panusaya and Parit's human rights activism unfolded within the Thai Buddhist polity, they also engaged with NGOs, media and academics outside the country, provoking a rescaling of their

Figure 4.1 Panusaya and Parit in front of the prison at Prachachuen Police Station in Bangkok, 30 October 2020. *Source*: courtesy of iLaw (Internet Dialogue on Law Reform) 2020. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

humanitarian and political struggle – from below upwards, and from the inside out.

My take on humanitarianism is intentionally broad and inclusive, and it is receptive to recent scholarly attempts to both decentre and decolonise the normative understanding of the term. Humanitarianism may thus be loosely defined, to borrow Ticktin's words, as 'an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene, and a form of government', with the declared desire to help others at its core (Ticktin 2014, 274). As I shall show, Panusaya, Parit and their young Thai friends' hunger strikes demonstrate how this desire can articulate, in original ways, bonds of friendship, modern Western theories and older local conceptions of human universality, including Buddhist notions of hierarchy, giving and selflessness. Together, these elements can generate what Mostowlansky and Muratova describe in this volume as an 'alter-politics of humanity': an alternative ethos that both engages with and redefines the epistemic foundations of dominant political orders.

In the following section, I elaborate further on the theoretical underpinnings of my argument, focusing on the hunger strike's insufficiently scrutinised humanitarian dimensions. Subsequently, I analyse Panusaya and Parit's initiatives as distinct calls for humanity within the context of Buddhist Thailand's military royalism. I also explore the roles

of media, NGOs and related financial flows – commonly recognised structures of humanitarianism from above – in supporting, amplifying and reshaping their activism. Throughout, I demonstrate how Parit and Panusaya draw on conflicting notions of humanity, both local and global, to advance their humanitarian and political concerns. Through these endeavours they are bridging cultural divides and contributing in innovative ways to infuse in Thailand a special awareness of humanity – even at the risk of their own lives.

Hunger strike as humanitarianism

Hunger striking – a deliberate refusal to consume food as a last resort for political protest or to express solidarity – punctuates global modern history, weaving through an enduring path of self-harming resistance. From early twentieth-century British suffragettes to 1970s Cuban dissidents, from Irish Republican Army combatants to heroes of the Indian independence movement, the hunger strike's cult of self-sacrifice has long served as a tool to draw attention to a vast array of causes, from fighting colonial regimes to opposing political violence and protesting prison conditions. Hunger strikers, incidentally, are very often held in custody themselves (see, for instance, Vernon 2007), and those in Thailand are no exception.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Democrat Party activist Chalad Worachat resorted to hunger strikes to protest Cold War-era military dictatorships. Similarly, Chamlong Srimuang, a Thai general turned right-wing Buddhist, went on a hunger strike as part of the 1992 Thai uprising known as Black May, which brought down Suchinda Kraphrayoon's military government after nearly a hundred civilians lost their lives (Maisrikrod 1993). However, these opposition leaders – mostly male, high-status public figures – never questioned the monarchy's sacred role in Thai society. While standing against dictatorship, they nevertheless regarded the king as both a bastion of democracy and a celestial arbiter of mundane disputes.

Today's hunger strikers, by contrast, are teenagers and young adults, common citizens and students who weaponise their bodies in explicit opposition to this monarchist outlook – a clear departure from the 1990s mantra of 'Thai royalist democracy' (Thongchai 2016). Unsurprisingly, several youth activists I spoke to were either unaware of their predecessors or actively distanced themselves from them.[4] All perceived this form of protest as an altruistic act of self-sacrifice

(*kansiasala*), the last non-violent option that remains when conventional political means prove ineffective and life becomes unbearable. Unlike other 'offensive' or 'punitive' types of self-inflicted violence such as suicide terrorism, hunger strikes are enacted 'defensively' – hence their (debated) association with non-violent resistance (Bargu 2016, 15). As Karin M. Fierke put it, the power of political self-sacrifice 'does not lie in the ability to harm another … it rests on accepting harm to the self' (Fierke 2012, 84). This harm – expressed on the hunger striker's body as an 'organ of representation' for the whole polity's wounds (Bargu 2016, 17) – has prompted humanitarian debates as to its meaning, and, ultimately, on what it means to be human.

In Thailand, as mentioned, the meaning of humanity has shifted over the decades alongside the political and semantic fluctuations of Thainess.[5] The notion of being Thai publicly advanced by Parit and Panusaya transcends the archetypes of previous opposition movements – such as 'the proletariat', 'the farmer', or 'the urban poor' (Pasit 2020). It embraces contemporary humanitarianism's universalism while addressing Thai Buddhist cosmology's hierarchical implications: the monarch, as Parit and Panusaya's public statements imply, should be brought down to earth from the skies. But in what sense can a politically motivated hunger strike come across as a form of humanitarianism?

Contemporary hunger striking is deeply tied to the global circulation – via multipolar genealogies, ethical sentiments and transnational institutions – of a universalist idea of humanity, now enshrined in both national and international law: 'Everyone has the right to life', stipulates Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In practice, however, not everybody is granted equal access to humanity (and, in Thailand, some individuals are even placed above it as more-than-human demigods). Confronted with this inescapable evidence, hunger strikers intentionally reduce themselves to *zoe* or 'bare life' (Agamben 1998), for the humanitarian gaze is often seduced by the suffering body construed as a biological common denominator of being human (Feldman and Ticktin 2010, 11). As Panusaya herself underscored, 'We are all humans whose blood flows the same red.'[6]

Analytically, it is important to distinguish hunger strikes enacted as a personal claim from those that are explicitly undertaken to promote collective rights. We might be tempted to speak of humanitarianism only with regard to the latter category, as the self-referential quality of the former does not directly suggest an altruistic motive, though the boundaries between the two are not clear-cut. A consequent distinction – related instead to the differentiation between humanitarian efforts that

develop either from below or from above – demarcates spontaneous decisions to abstain from food from externally orchestrated and institutionally supported hunger strike initiatives. These dividing lines, too, are commonly transgressed in practice. Ultimately, the potential success of a hunger strike lies in its capacity to garner humanitarian attention from public authorities, based on the state's theoretical obligation to protect the physical integrity of its citizens. Yet, there are constitutional differences worldwide regarding the balance between prisoners' rights to self-determination and the state's duty to preserve their lives at any cost – and this is where diverging interpretations of humanitarian law's supposed universality manifest themselves at the juridical level, as legal anthropology shows.

Technically, Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, that is, a democracy with the king as head of state, but the constitutional provisions for this framework are anything but clear. Many of these are cobbled together from European legal doctrines and Hindu-Buddhist theories of kingship that complicate modern distinctions between the religious and the secular (Mérieau 2021). The Thai words for 'constitution' (*rattathammanun*) and 'rule of law' (*nittitham*) are both built on the notion of dharma (*tham*), which is embodied by the king (3). As a result, it remains highly disputable whether the constitution derives its authority from the people or from the king, who is the dharma-giver.

As a part of the criminal code since 1956 that has been used increasingly over the past few years, the Thai lese-majesty law reflects these ambiguities well. Inherited from ancient Rome, and deployed extensively until the sunset of Europe's absolute monarchies, the crime of lese-majesty remains recognised in places like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, though sentences are quite rare. Thailand is a notable exception to this trend. While the United Nations Committee on Human Rights recommends abolishing it, Thai royalist lawyers have defended its legitimacy based on blasphemy laws in Muslim countries against the defamation of God (Mérieau 2019, 57). The implicit, if unspeakable, argument here is that the king, as Dharmaraja, is not just a head of state, but a Bodhisattva, a Buddha-to-be. Despite their fiercely secular public claims, Panusaya and Parit are forced to deal with these unresolved theopolitical ambiguities. Torn as they are between humanitarian and Buddhist rules of law, they navigate through multiple registers, both secular and religious – something hunger striking is intrinsically renowned for, after all.

A hunger striker's ambivalent suspension between non-violence and self-inflicted violence, between politics of life and politics of death, indeed subverts the supposedly rational fabric of modern politics

(Bargu 2016, 16). Its sacrificial nature raises ontological questions about the ultimate ends of the human condition, which surpass the secular formulation of the liberal human that Thai activists are advocating for (Bolotta et al. 2020). Indeed, questions of suffering, sacrifice and selfless giving all have long histories, as literature on religious fasting and martyrdom attests. Gandhi's *satyagraha* theory, rooted in Hindu principles of non-violence (*ahimsa*), is one well-known example. These religious constructions, in turn, continue to inform ostensibly secular practices of solidarity around the world. Jesus Christ's self-sacrifice was notably identified as the symbolic core of the modern West's 'humanitarian reason' (Fassin 2011). Regardless of its non-linear religious underpinnings (see, for instance, Mostowlansky 2020), the twentieth-century language of human rights constitutes a common, if abstract and contested, transnational reference for many self-sacrificial altruists around the world today, including Thai hunger strikers.

And yet, the decision to sacrifice oneself for others may not arise solely from adherence to abstract ethics, religious precepts or political ideology. It can also emerge spontaneously from an emotional impulse to alleviate the perceived suffering of kin, friends or partners, irrespective of rational motives (Amarasuriya et al. 2020). Erica Bornstein's (2012, 170) distinction between 'liberal altruism' and 'relational empathy' becomes pertinent in this context. While liberal altruism is embedded in the fundraising procedures and market-inspired mechanisms of international NGOs, relational empathy thrives in situations of proximity amongst kin. At the same time, kinship transcends personal bonds and extends to broader ties, such as with the nation or the human family (Herzfeld 2005).

By resorting to hunger-striking's inherent display of bodily frailty, Thai youth activists seek to awaken public empathy – a vital precondition for the humanitarian impulse to help. Their hunger strikes, however, are not only derivatively but also fundamentally humanitarian, as their decision to abstain from food is, in many cases, driven by a profound desire to support their imprisoned friends, whose suffering they find unbearable to witness without acting.

In the following sections, I show how Panusaya and Parit's hunger strike initiatives work as polysemic acts of humanitarianism from below, capable of attuning distinctively Buddhist sensitivities to universalist calls for humanity from above. Their alter-political endeavour is situated at the intersections of Buddhist hierarchy and human rights equality, of kinship and political ideology, of relational empathy and liberal altruism. As middle-class, tech-savvy and cosmopolitan youths, they are

well-positioned to act as brokers and translators of local and international ethics, morals and affects, moving up and down various scales and cultural lexicons of humanity, according to time, place and audience.

Parit: hunger strike as *barami*

In November of 2023, I met Parit 'Penguin' Chiwarak at a coffee shop on the outskirts of Bangkok. The 25-year-old political science student, a budding intellectual despite his young age, had embraced Buddhist monkhood two months prior. Had I spoken with him in 2020, at the time of his 20 August speech, Thai kinship-based hierarchical etiquette would have required me to address him as *nong* (junior brother), since he is much younger than I am, but he is now considered a different man: he is a *phra* (monk) – hence a *run phi* (senior) to everyone he talks to, regardless of their relative age.

However, his unique status – that of a human rights and monarchy reform activist released on bail – means that he needs to leave the temple and report to court whenever the overseeing judge deems it necessary. We talked during one of these occasions, as Parit was about to return to the temple after a bitter and abrupt legal interruption of his monastic path. Away from the high stakes and intense lights of the political stage, Phra Parit tidied his saffron robes with an almost imperceptible yet nervous gesture and explained to me his decision to go on a hunger strike:

> Hunger strikes hold a distinctive religious significance in Asia. I had been contemplating embarking on a hunger strike since my first detention, but it was during my second detention that I decided to take this step – a decision I made alone. Undoubtedly, Mahatma Gandhi served as one of my inspirations, but fasting has a long-standing tradition in Thailand as well, predating the modern era when its political use emerged as hunger strike. Notably, Khruba Siwichai employed non-violence as a form of protest.

As a native of Northern Thailand (formerly the Kingdom of Lanna before its nineteenth-century incorporation under Siamese administrative control), Parit is deeply passionate about his region's premodern, largely separatist history. Significantly, he chose to enter the monkhood in Chiang Mai, Lanna's former capital and Thailand's second largest city, where the gestures of Buddhist monk Khruba Siwichai (1878–1938) endure in the hearts of the locals. Known as the Saint of the North for

his ascetic virtues, Bodhisattva-like compassion for others and believed supernatural powers, Siwichai clashed with the newly established national Sangha (the Thai Buddhist church), presided over by the king in Bangkok and regimented into the service of a wider nation-building process. The royally unified Buddhist hierarchy was unwilling to recognise Siwichai's ecclesiastical titles, thereby undermining his authority to ordain new monks.[7] Faced with persecution and multiple incarcerations, the Saint of the North responded with non-violent resistance (*santhi withi*), earning recognition as a millenarian holy man (*tonbun*) and a charismatic saviour who is endowed with merit (see Bowie 2014; Keyes 1982).

The fact that Parit discussed his activism with me in the guise of a monk lent greater credibility to his words about the Buddhist significance of his hunger strike protest. However, amidst the Thai youth rebellion in 2020 and 2021, many observers, especially in the West, could hardly have guessed that one of the most vociferously secular amongst the youth movement's leaders harboured such deeply rooted vernacular sentiments. In fact, Parit himself did nothing to suggest this, at least judging by his public declarations before the international press, as when, standing in front of journalists outside the Bangkok court in August 2020, he raised three fingers to the sky and explained that the Thai youth movement's protest gesture symbolises its call for 'liberty, equality, fraternity'. Likewise, his frequent citations of the American revolutionary Thomas Paine, and his references to the British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst's famous speech 'Freedom or death', only appeared to indicate that the new generation of Thai youths represented the vanguard of Enlightenment-era ideals of equality, human rights and liberal democracy in the Buddhist kingdom.

According to mainstream media and academic observations, these youths were digital natives accustomed to robust debates on social media, and they were fighting against the antiquated traditions of the monarchised gerontocracy that stands for Thainess (see, for instance, Tann 2020). Yet, this characterisation of Parit was mainly crafted by and for international audiences. Conversely, the cultural significance of his humanitarian ardour within Thai society, mostly inaccessible to external spectators, concerns Buddhist notions of moral hierarchy, giving and self-sacrifice as much as equality-inflected human rights discourse. But, let me rewind the tape to the beginnings of Parit's activism before exploring further the local meanings of his remarks.

Parit's criticism towards the Thai establishment and his engagement with liberal political theory began during his education at Bangkok's

prestigious Triam Udom Suksa School, as a member of the high school group Education for the Liberation of Siam. At that time, Thailand was under the grip of a repressive military junta led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the former army chief who toppled Yingluck Shinawatra's government in 2014, inaugurating a decade-long quasi-dictatorship. Described as a 'post-coup political entrepreneur' who fostered activist youth networks during the 2015–19 period (Akanit 2023), Parit organised protests opposing the junta and its use of public schooling as a tool of monarchist propaganda, and he demanded reform of the Thai education system and its seniority-driven structures, all in the name of democracy and human rights. These youth-led initiatives, during a period when political parties were effectively silenced, were amongst the few protests that attained public visibility in Thailand. But it wasn't until Parit enrolled at the progressive Thammasat University in Bangkok that the political influence of youth activists began to gain momentum – especially after the controversial March 2019 elections that gave coup leader General Prayuth a second term in office.

In June of 2020, Parit, along with Panusaya, led a Student Union of Thailand protest to commemorate the 88th anniversary of the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy – a highly symbolic initiative. In July, as COVID-19 restrictions were eased, Parit contributed to the Free Youth anti-government rally at Bangkok's Democracy Monument, the biggest political gathering in the post-coup era, which was largely organised through Twitter (now X). Tens of thousands of protesters gathered, some as young as 14 years old, chanting 'Down with dictatorship, long live democracy'. This event was a prelude to the youth movement's most daring move in August 2020: publicly calling for the reform of the monarchy under the English-language slogan 'No God, no King, only Human'.

Other major monarchy reform gatherings followed, as did Parit's legal troubles. The young man was first arrested in August of 2020, and then released on bail. He was arrested again in February of 2021, but initially denied bail. In March, he started a hunger strike protest that caused him to be hospitalised on 30 April 2021. Ten days prior, Brad Adams, Asia Director at Human Rights Watch, had urged Thai authorities 'to stop this witch hunt against peaceful dissenters … The government should engage with United Nations experts and others about amending the lese majeste law to bring it into compliance with Thailand's international human rights law obligations' (Human Rights Watch 2021). Fuelled by humanitarian compassion for Parit's deteriorating health, multiple youth-led demonstrations called for his immediate release. Parit

was finally granted temporary and conditional bail in May, after 57 days of no food. In August of 2023, he became Phra Parit, but this does not protect him from the risk of a life sentence. He is now facing 20 charges under Thailand's draconian Article 112.

Conversing with me, a Thai-speaking anthropologist considered capable of understanding the specificities of Thai society, he indulged in further reflections on the cultural distinctiveness of his humanitarian efforts:

> Don't get me wrong – when I refer to people like Emmeline Pankhurst and appeal to human rights, I mean it. Mahatma Gandhi's self-sacrifice was likewise aiming at the freedom of his people, after all. This is easily understandable by international observers and aligns with the principles of democratic countries. But for Thai people, the significance of an act like a hunger strike is also related to the moral qualities of a leader and to barami.

In the karma-shaped Thai social universe, *barami* – derived from the Pali term *parami* – designates moral perfection, and it is usually associated with kings. Because he follows the path of the Buddha and embodies his moral virtues, the king has barami, and thus occupies the highest position in the social hierarchy. The emphasis lies here in compassionate selflessness: instead of using his power to attend to his own wants, the righteous ruler feeds his subjects before turning to his own meal (see, for instance, Hanks 1962).[8] Yet, according to Parit, barami is not necessarily a royal prerogative, for it can be associated with particularly meritorious – that is to say, selfless – commoners outside the court as well, such as teachers, statesmen and monks. The aforementioned Khruba Siwichai is a historical case in point. As Parit explains:

> In the Buddhist scriptures, barami corresponds to a number of virtues. They can be ordered in three ascending levels, the highest and ultimate of which consists in sacrificing one own's life. Hence, a hunger strike enacted for the benefit of others can be perceived as a highly meritorious act in Thai society.

In the days following our meeting, Parit sent me an academic article to further substantiate this statement. It is a piece in Thai titled 'The thirty perfections in Theravada Buddhism', by Japanese scholar Karen Katsumoto (2018), which reviews discussions on barami in early Buddhist texts, and refers to the act of sacrificing one's life as *paramattha*

parami – paramattha being a Pali term designating truth in the ultimate sense. This is a Buddhological analysis, typically beyond the grasp of non-specialists, yet it effectively captures a deep-rooted sensitivity amongst Thais towards self-sacrifice – of which hunger striking is a compelling instance – as a realm of merits. This shared sensitivity has led several observers I interviewed to notice the contrast between Parit's barami-infused sacrifice and the current monarch's apparent indifference towards his young subjects' suffering – a perceived lack of royal compassion interpreted as a deficiency in the new king's barami.

This perceived contrast, in turn, provided moral legitimacy to the youths' demand for monarchy reform. To be sure, while he affirms the equality of all human beings, Parit does not appear to reject the ontological validity of Thai Buddhist hierarchy. Rather, his words imply that insufficiently meritorious leaders should be replaced by those who truly embody barami.

Not coincidentally, Parit's decision to end his hunger strike was propelled by the controversial public intervention of a prominent progressive monk – a development exclusively covered by Thai media. Phra Payom Kanlayano, the abbot of Wat Suan Kaeo, publicly implored Parit and Panusaya to resume sustenance and preserve their lives. Employing a Buddhist expression, *bintabat chiwit* (receiving life as an offering), the monk expressed the desire 'to be donated the intact lives of Parit and Panusaya as a form of alms' (Thai Rath 2021). In Theravada Buddhist Thailand, *bintabat*, derived from the Pali term *pinda pata* (literally, falling of rice balls), signifies the virtuous act of providing alms to Buddhist monks on their daily morning collection of offerings. The popular monk thus underscored the Buddhist relevance of the youths' hunger strikes, igniting public humanitarian sympathy and causing significant embarrassment to state authorities. Consequently, both Parit and Panusaya were finally released on bail.

Parit's hunger strike protest is thus associated with a seemingly Janus-faced representation. Externally, if one sticks to international media and NGO narratives, his protest embodies humanist principles rooted in predominantly Western icons of democracy, equality and liberal political theory. Internally, these universalist formulations blend with a redefined understanding of Thai humanity, as led by a selfless citizenry. Thai media accounts of the young activist's hunger strike reveal, as do Parit's own words on the matter, the persisting influence of Buddhist moral hierarchy and the subversive reinterpretation of Thai royal cosmology's humanitarian foundations in shaping the youth movement's attempt to humanise Thainess.

Panusaya: hunger strike as an act of friendship

A few days later, as we were sharing a meal in Bangkok, I posed a question to Panusaya 'Rung' Sithijirawattanakul: 'Why did you choose a hunger strike as a form of protest?' The 23-year-old anthropology student and amateur violinist, her eyes moist with emotion, provided a simple response: 'When Penguin [Parit] started his hunger strike, I felt I could not let my friend experience this torture in solitude. I just didn't want him to feel alone in this. He is my friend.'

Panusaya's motivation is, to me, as admirable as Parit's, but it sounds less imbued with abstract ideals or cumbersome references, revealing instead the affective role of a sense of kinship as an important basis for solidarity. Humanitarianism's double nature – as an all-encompassing ethical category and as an emotional response towards the suffering of others (Fassin 2009, 271) – seems to present itself here in the latter form, which is arguably a clear instance of humanitarianism from below. Yet, human rights theory is certainly not unknown to Panusaya.

Her political activism began at Thammasat University, but her engagement with universalist paradigms of humanity was far more precocious. During high school, through a number of volunteering experiences in Thailand and abroad, she developed a great sensitivity to suffering, along with the conviction that promoting human dignity in Thailand is essential for dismantling long-standing constructions of karmic hierarchy. These constructions, as she acutely articulated as a university student, provide legitimacy both to the monarchy's postulated sacredness and to the perceived naturalness of the kingdom's class, ethnic, gender and generational inequalities.

Despite Thailand's ratification of several UN conventions, Panusaya believes abstract discussions on human rights and democracy are only partially comprehensible within the context of Thai culture. Therefore, 'It is crucial to present concrete, contextual examples' illustrating how these concepts can be applied in social practice. Building on this premise, a particular principle has become the focal point of her activism: 'Everyone's right to freedom of opinion and expression'. In the context of Thailand's Buddhist royalism this signifies, above all, 'every citizen's right to inquire into the constitutional appropriateness of the monarch's political conduct' – the taboo of all taboos.

This pivotal recognition unfolded at a time marked by the palpable repression of this very principle. Panusaya's coming of age coincided with a series of significant events, including the 2014 military coup, the passing of Thailand's revered King Bhumibol in 2016, a tense

interregnum, the controversial ascent of the king's son, Vajiralongkorn, to the throne, the contentious 2019 general elections, and the pandemic with its resulting lockdowns. Throughout this period, arbitrary arrests, lese-majesty charges and an intensification of royalist propaganda all featured in the military junta's concerted efforts to repress dissent and to preserve hierarchies.

In 2020, Panusaya responded to these tactics by calling for monarchy reform in the name of humanity. Like Parit, she was imprisoned for lese-majesty. During her detention, she was diagnosed with COVID-19, and she went on a 39-day hunger strike before finally being released. Like her friend, she is now facing several charges and, if found guilty, could be sentenced to life in prison. Interestingly, however, Panusaya's dedication to freedom of expression represents ideas somewhat divergent from those upheld by Parit, despite sharing the same political goals:

> My activism has nothing to do with Buddhism. Unlike Penguin, I do not believe in religion. As I mentioned, when my friend decided to initiate a hunger strike, I felt compelled to do something because he had nobody to stand up for him. I wanted to make him feel that he was not alone in this.

Panusaya's actions, in this sense, were explicitly driven by humanitarian concerns. As Amarasuriya et al. (2020, 7) observed: 'for would-be revolutionaries … the sentimental intimate, the promised warmth of comradeship, of brotherhood and sisterhood, offers the possibility of scaling up into bigger forms of solidarity.' Panusaya's decision to join Parit in a hunger strike stemmed from a perceived moral imperative towards an intimate friend, and from the empathetic acknowledgement of his suffering. Her own hunger strike then generated, as a result, expanding circles of affective solidarity, starting with her family. She confided in me, becoming emotional to the point of tears, that her elder sister – a free woman with a clean criminal record, not involved in any political activism – stopped eating food, too. 'She didn't make her hunger strike a public act as I did; she just wanted to go through my same experience so that I'd feel my family is ready to suffer with me. I am very lucky.'

This 'efficacious intimacy' (Mohan 2024) spread like wildfire through social media, producing a sort of emotional contagion that turned Panusaya's humanitarianism from below into her youthful supporters' altruism at a distance. It prompted thousands to feel as if Panusaya and Parit, even though they had never met them personally,

were close kin who should be helped. Stronger than any political ideology, the emotional impulse to save 'our dear ones' motivated many sits-ins of young people rallying under the slogan 'Free our friends'.

This humanitarian impulse was propagated, nonetheless, through specific social forms. Although Panusaya publicly disavows Thailand's kinship-based hierarchy on the grounds of human rights theory, I often observed her relating to older Thai people with a notable degree of deference, adhering to the customs of Thai etiquette. Notable examples included her university professor, who acted as Panusaya's guarantor for the fulfilment of her bail conditions, and her elder sister, a steadfast pillar of emotional support. These individuals are perceived as elders who do not exploit their superior status, standing instead as advocates for her right to free speech, even in the face of criticism. Unlike those in government, they are *phu yai* (big people) who deserve her gratitude and humble respect. Parit might say, in other words, that they embody true barami.

Although Panusaya doesn't find Parit's cosmological language appealing, she knows that formal adherence to Thainess and its emotional frequencies can sometimes be required to bring about humanity in the kingdom. Panusaya's expressions of humanity, like those of her friend, can thus shift depending on expediency, sentiment, time and place. 'In order for Thai society to be emotionally triggered,' she explained bitterly, 'I have to act as a well-behaved young girl, making my mother proud. The fact that I come from a good family, and I am enrolled at one of Bangkok's most prestigious universities, is sadly important.' She was referring here to the normative Thai perceptions of Bangkok-based middle-class citizens as *khon di* (good people), cultivated and protected by the state for the sake of the development of Thainess (Funahashi 2015). As she clarified:

> If the hunger striker was a poor boy, an ethnic minority citizen, or a Muslim southerner, their case would've probably never reached public visibility, for many Thai people don't feel pity for those who are considered lower-ranking. But I am supposed to be the future of the Thai nation – hence my hunger strike generated media buzz. It's horrible but it's how it works here.

As seen by the right audience, then, Panusaya embraced convincingly the role of a grateful daughter whose tribulations deeply distressed her parents (see Figure 4.2). During her hunger strike, the poignant depiction of her mother's tears in the press and on social media evoked

Figure 4.2 Panusaya hugs her relatives and supporters at the Central Women's Correctional Institute in Bangkok after being granted bail, 6 May 2021. *Source*: courtesy of Prachathai, Thikamporn Tamtiang 2021. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

empathetic responses, which carried significant political weight in a nation envisioned as a family. A royally endorsed state that induces a compassionate mother to cry by subjecting her dutiful daughter to lese-majesty-related torture fails to exemplify the parental love it is expected to embody.[9] In turn, the monarch can be perceived as falling short of the fatherly Buddhist virtues of selfless compassion that he is supposed to personify.

Panusaya proved capable of interpreting international humanitarianism's internal inconsistencies, acting as a cultural broker of seemingly incompatible moralities. Her genuinely spontaneous hunger strike generated a broad affective resonance not only within Thailand but also internationally: 'The image of a vulnerable girl's suffering is best at triggering emotional responses, also outside the country, though for different reasons. I thought that my hunger strike could sensitise international publics more powerfully than Parit's.' Through her experience in the NGO sector, Panusaya learned that humanitarianism's declared neutrality and equal treatment of all humans can produce contradictory hierarchies of deservingness between different categories of people (Fassin 2010). As symbols of innocence and moral purity, women and children can more easily collect the political dividends of humanitarian operations (Malkki 2010; Ticktin 2017). In fact, as Kerry Anne

Mackereth (2020, 24) underscored, even the universal level of human biology, as projected by the hunger striker's emaciated body, is already differentiated along gender, ethnic and age lines.

Perhaps also for this reason, renowned Western organisations took Panusaya's struggle to heart, framing her courageous endeavour as either a manifesto against human rights violations in Thailand or an emblem of young women's democratic activism in the Global South. The BBC listed Panusaya as one of the 100 most inspiring and influential women of 2020 (BBC 2020). During Panusaya's hunger strike, Amnesty International launched a global petition urging all charges against her to be dropped, and it had thousands of letters of support from young sympathisers around the world delivered to her (Amnesty International 2021). 'Reading them touched my heart; I felt I was not alone,' she recalled, deeply moved.

We thus observe a complex interplay in Panusaya's hunger strike initiative, wherein her self-harming solidarity both spontaneously emanates from and consciously surpasses her personal connection with a friend. This dynamic shifts the realm of relational empathy into a broader context of humanitarian emotions in order to foster public engagement and liberal altruism. Realising that these emotions are influenced by distinct motivations within and outside the domain of Thainess, Panusaya endeavoured to represent human rights equality and merit-based hierarchy, liberal and Buddhist compassion, all while navigating through local and international political articulations of what it means to be human. Like Parit, she selflessly put her own life at stake – for the benefit of her friends, and for the Thai people.

Conclusion: Thai humanity under question

A hunger strike's humanitarian effectiveness requires public attention. Parit, Panusaya, and their thousands of young allies thus had to continually find ways to remain in the spotlight. Amongst activists, hunger strikers in particular need their suffering bodies to be constantly visible as *zoe* (bare life), exposed to the concerned gaze of multiple publics, in order for their claims to humanity as *bios* (political existence) to be addressed (Agamben 1998). Human rights organisations and the media – worlds which Parit and Panusaya were already engaged with – contribute to keeping the spotlight on. A Thai NGO worker I spoke to provided a meaningful example of how this need to stage the hunger-striking body as a live political spectacle has been addressed:

> We tried to raise public awareness about the activists' hunger strike situation. A critical point in our efforts was the inability to photograph Parit. Normally, we could take photos when the detainees were brought from the prison vehicle to the courthouse basement, but after Parit started the hunger strike, there were attempts to block all photo opportunities, leaving the public unaware of his actual condition. We thus employed illustrators to enter the courtroom and create drawings to communicate Parit's condition to the public [see Figure 4.3].

While organisations like Amnesty International, the BBC and Human Rights Watch invited Western pity (and humanitarian donations) to enter Thai politics, thereby fortifying youth resistance via liberal altruism, Thai NGOs did much more. They not only provided essential aid to hunger-striking political prisoners in the form of psychological support and fundraising for payment of bail, but they were also pivotal in expanding the scope of the prisoners' sacrifices beyond that of the individual. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, amongst others, ensured pro bono legal assistance to jailed youths, representing their interests in the courtroom, reporting on their condition to the public, and compelling the judicial system to comply with the

Figure 4.3 Parit, with a wheelchair and an intravenous drip after a prolonged hunger strike, is hugged by his mother as prison guards loom over them, 1 April 2021. *Source*: © iLaw (Internet Dialogue on Law Reform) 2021.

principle of presumption of innocence which is enshrined in the constitution. In their capacity as lawyers, members of the organisation also visited imprisoned activists regularly, sharing with them Thai society's polarised reactions to their arrests and word of other youths initiating hunger strikes in response, which helped to connect the activists' often disjointed relational empathy. Thai NGOs helped integrate grassroots sentiments and vernacular ethics – whether Buddhist selflessness, kinship-based hierarchy, or friendship bonds – into a broader, internationally effective humanitarian discourse. In the process, the particular Thai being faded into a universal human being, elevating Thai youth's polysemic humanitarianism to a global scale.

The May 2023 general elections proved that Parit and Panusaya's readiness to sacrifice had not been in vain. The youth-supported Move Forward Party, which promised the reform of Article 112 and full amnesty for all activists convicted of lese-majesty, won in a landslide. However, the junta-appointed senate blocked the party from forming a government. Startlingly obscure backstage machinations culminated in the second-ranked Pheu Thai Party's candidate, property tycoon Srettha Thavisin, becoming Prime Minister at the head of a coalition that includes his former opponents, the army-backed royalist parties who suffered a resounding defeat in the elections. Incidentally, hours before Srettha assumed the country's top job, Pheu Thai's shadow leader, convicted ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, made a historic return home after years spent abroad in self-imposed exile to avoid serving a six-year sentence. He was paroled soon after via a royal pardon – evidence, critics speculate, of a deal between the Pheu Thai Party and the military-royal establishment. To make matters worse, in April 2024, as I was finalising revisions to this chapter, the Thai Constitutional Court accepted a case seeking the dissolution of the Move Forward Party, now in opposition as the People's Party, on the basis of its electoral campaign to reform the lese-majesty law, which was deemed tantamount to overthrowing the system of government with the king as head of state.

As Tyrell Haberkorn (2024, 74) has pointedly wondered: 'If calling for reform and proposing a law are forbidden, it is unclear what democracy means.'

This is bleak news for political prisoners like Parit and Panusaya, figures of youth humanitarianism whose once-sparkling colours are now fading under the blows of old Thainess. Once again, the 'constitutional bricolage' of Buddhist kingship and parliamentary democracy (Mérieau 2021) is trapping the citizenry, however selfless it may be,

in its ambiguities. As a result, Thai youths' calls for humanity can turn deadly. On 14 May 2024, one of Panusaya and Parit's followers, Netiporn 'Bung' Sanesangkhom, 28 years old, passed away in prison after a months-long hunger strike. She is the first non-violent, hunger-striking youth activist in Thailand to have died in jail while awaiting trial for lese-majesty.

The shocking news of Netiporn's death sparked public debate. Amnesty International immediately declared, 'This is a grim day for Thai society, highlighting the severe judicial harassment and the justice system's failure to recognise basic human rights' (Amnesty International Thailand 2024). Prominent Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul (2024), a survivor of the 1976 Thammasat University Massacre who knows the Thai jail system well, cited the degrading treatment of prisoners in the Buddhist kingdom. He described overcrowded cells, substandard food, poor health care, compulsory use of shackles and an environment defined by raw power as contributing factors to the young woman's death. As he noted, the Thai term for 'correctional system', *rachathan*, does not reflect its English equivalent's implications. *Rachathan*, literally 'royal punishment', rather retains its 'old meaning', according to which 'prisoners are less than humans, who deserve to be punished'. This is particularly so for those accused of lese-majesty, who, in the military government's royalist vision of humanity, were ineligible for Thainess, and thus no longer deserving of fair treatment (Farrelly 2016, 338). Ready to sacrifice themselves in order to humanise Thainess, youth activists risk being dehumanised for their alleged betrayal of it.

Panusaya, Parit and, tragically, Netiporn's commitment to creating distinctly plural ways of being human is something more than just dust. At the crossroads of past and present, local and global, ethical and affective, their hunger for humanity is a peripheral alter-politics that rearticulates Buddhist narratives of compassion and the warmth of kin-like solidarity in contemporary global discourse on human universality.

In a world torn apart by rampant warmongering, ethno-religious nationalism, rapacious capitalism, and old and new imperialisms, Thai youth activism represents a testimony of non-violent idealism that is highly meaningful, not only in Thailand but worldwide, including in the West, where the idea of the commonality of human beings ceased to warm hearts some time ago.[10]

Notes

1 The Thai word for 'human' (*manut*) derives from the Sanskrit *manuṣya* and from the Pali *manussa*, terms that, in various religious texts, designate the quality of human life in relation to the path to enlightenment (Davids and Stede 1999, 520). While the word is now predominantly used in secular contexts, its etymology suggests that it entered the Thai language through Buddhist scripture.

2 As accusations of lese-majesty progress from police investigation to indictment in the Criminal Court, activists have the constitutionally granted right to apply for bail. However, the Criminal Court has frequently denied bail for youths accused of breaching Article 112, based on unspecified national security concerns.

3 While not all of these jailed youths gained the same media visibility or belonged to the same group as Parit and Panusaya, many went on hunger strikes to advance the rights of political prisoners. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (personal communication), between 2016 and 2023, 25 youth activists charged with lese-majesty, sedition, and related crimes went on hunger strikes while in detention.

4 Today's youth activists instead trace their militant genealogy to the 2010 'Red Shirt' United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, 85 members of which were brutally killed by the Thai military in the centre of Bangkok; to the pro-democracy students who were massacred in 1976 by the army, police and royalist paramilitary forces at Thammasat University; and, especially, to the People's Party (*khana ratsadon*), a coalition of military and civilian leaders who orchestrated Thailand's transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932. Significantly, beginning in 2020, various youth groups have united as People's Party 2020 (*khana ratsadon 2563*) – a reincarnation of sorts of the original People's Party (Bolotta 2024, 320).

5 During the Cold War, US-supported Thai juntas emphasised that being Thai equated to being anti-communist and, in particular, not Vietnamese. By the 1990s, the core of Thainess was primarily defined by loyalty to the royal institution (Thongchai 2016).

6 This is not the first time that Thai pro-democracy forces have relied on blood as a medium to stress that their humanity is biologically equal to that of the powerful, as when, in 2010, Red Shirt protesters gathered at the Government House to symbolically spill their own blood in the name of returning to democracy (see Elinoff 2020).

7 Kruba Siwichai's story is one significant example of various 'holy men-led rebellions' against the centralised religious and political structures of Bangkok's royal elites. These rebellions were characteristic of separatist dissent in Siam-Thailand's formerly semi-autonomous border regions, especially at the turn of the twentieth century (see, for instance, Wilson 1997).

8 In the *Vessantara Jataka* – the penultimate of Sakyamuni's ten major incarnations before achieving Buddhahood, and the most popular Jataka in Thailand – Vessantara, an endlessly generous and charitable prince, acquires barami by giving away all of his possessions, including his own children and wife, to those in need (Jory 2016).

9 The political significance of motherly love, a referent for moral goodness (*khunatham*) in Buddhist Thailand (Keyes 1984, Bolotta 2017), was dramatically evident also in Parit's case. On 30 April 2021, his mother, overcome with desperation, shocked onlookers by shaving her head in front of the Bangkok Criminal Court. As the bald mother demanded bail for her hunger-striking son, bystanders and journalists couldn't hold back their tears (Khaosod 2021).

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