

# THAILAND 2022: THE «POST-PANDEMIC» ERA

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*In 2022, Thailand entered a period labelled by state agents as «post-pandemic». Citizens resumed their lives as normal, but discontents for a stagnant political environment and a slow economic recovery intensified. In particular, civil society expressed frustration toward the Constitutional Court for allowing PM Prayuth Chan-ocha to remain in office despite the alleged legal expiry of his mandate. The Prayuth Government's continued cordiality to China and the Burmese junta also generated criticism. As pandemic-related restrictions were lifted, and the country re-opened to international tourists, the economy improved slightly. Global economic trends, aggravated by the Government's withdrawal of the relief packages of the previous year; however, affected less privileged constituencies. Even the generally conservative and financially stable Bangkok residents elected a City Governor deemed progressive, suggesting new political sensitivities. The waning popularity of the Prayuth Administration is significant as the kingdom prepares for a general election in 2023.*

KEYWORDS – Prayuth Chan-ocha; COVID-19 Thailand; Bangkok Governor elections; Thailand-China relations; Thailand-Saudi Arabia relations; Thailand-Myanmar relations; Thailand-U.S. relations; Thailand-Russia relations; Thailand economy.

## 1. Introduction

Throughout 2020-2021, the Thai Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic caused much dissatisfaction, with critics accusing the Prayuth Administration of generating unnecessary health hazards and economic hardship [Siani 2021, pp. 237-246]. In 2022, the pandemic faded out as the COVID-19 variant most common in the kingdom, Omicron BA.2.75, was mild. The Ministry of Public Health declared that, on 1 July, Thailand entered a «post-pandemic» stage [*Hfocus* 2022, 9 March], and that, on 1 October, COVID-19 had become endemic [Royal Thai Government 2022]. Discontents with the Prayuth Government's *modus operandi* in domestic and international politics, however, remained, and the economy, while improving, continued to let down less privileged constituencies.

This essay explores «post-pandemic» 2022 Thailand in relation to domestic politics, international policy, and economy. Moving chronologically, the first four sections focus, respectively, on the election of the Bangkok

Governor (2.1); the controversy surrounding the tenure of PM Prayuth, deemed expired by the opposition (2.2); the tragic slaughter of nursery children at the hands of a member of the armed forces (2.3); and the contestations to the Prayuth Government by young activists during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum of November (3.3). The next two sections, dedicated to foreign policy, address Thailand's managements of relations with the United States, the authoritarian Governments of China, Russia and Myanmar (3.1) as well as the historic re-establishment of relations with Saudi Arabia, severed since 1990 (3.2). The final section turns to the economy, and highlighting successes and failures as Thailand attempted to leave behind the hardship caused by the pandemic (4.1).

## 2. *Domestic politics*

### 2.1. *The election of the Bangkok Governor*

On 22 May 2022, residents of Bangkok voted for the new City Governor for the first time in nine years [*The Standard* 2022, 14 March]. The election winner, Chadchart Sittipunt, was an independent candidate, previously associated to the Phueu Thai Party, and known for his relatively progressive views and open criticism of the Military. His victory displayed impressive figures, having gained over 1.3 million votes *vis-à-vis* the 250,000 of his most popular rivals, Suchatvee Suwansawat of the Democrat Party and Wiroj Lakkhanaadisorn of the Move Forward Party [*BBC Thai* 2022, 29 May]. Chadchart is additionally the first Bangkok Governor in history to have gained a majority of votes in all the 50 districts (*khet*) of the capital [*BBC Thai* 2022, 30 May].

Treating the election results as symptomatic of changing political attitudes, analysts suggested that the event might indicate novel trends in view of the national election which is expected to take place in 2023 [*Thairath* 2022, 22 May]. The Bangkok electorate has been generally conservative for the past twenty years, dominated by vocal supporters of the Monarchy-Military axis. The previous election, held in 2013, saw the victory of Sukhumbhand Paribatra of the Democrat Party, hostile to the democratically elected Governments of Thaksin and Yinluck Shinawatra that were overthrown, respectively, with a coup in 2006 and one in 2014 [*The Standard* 2022, 14 March]. In 2016, Sukhumbhand was replaced by Assawin Kwanmuang, a bureau commissioner of the Metropolitan Police appointed directly by the military junta of Prayuth Chan-ocha [*The Standard* 2022, 14 March].

Stunned by the results of the 2022 elections, a conservative political activist, Srisuwan Janya, filed a complaint to the Election Commission in which he accused the governor-elect of having «bought votes» as he enabled supporters to profiteer by means of recycling his campaign posters into items including bags and aprons [*BBC Thai* 2022, 30 May]. The activist also

attacked Chadchart for critiquing the bureaucracy [BBC Thai 2022, May 30]. As they considered the complaint, the Election Commission delayed the endorsement of the results [BBC Thai 2022, May 30], sparking a backlash on media and social media [Manager Online 2022, June 1]. They eventually dismissed the accusations on 31 May, thereby declaring Chadchart Sittipunt the 17<sup>th</sup> Bangkok Governor [BBC Thai 2022, May 30].

## 2.2. Controversy over the tenure of PM Prayuth Chan-ocha

On 17 August, opposition parties filed a petition for the removal of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, the mandate of whom they claimed to be about to legally expire [BBC Thai 2022, 15 September]. According to the 2017 constitution, a prime minister cannot be in office for longer than eight years. Prayuth had first installed himself premier, as the head of a military government, on 24 August 2014, after staging a coup d'état; he was next confirmed premier for a second mandate as the leader of a civil government following the victory of the military-backed party, Phalang Pracharat, at the general election of 2019. Counting both tenures, the opposition argued that Prayuth had been in power altogether for eight years [iLaw 2022, 11 August].

The Constitutional Court suspended Prayuth from office until they made a decision [BBC Thai 2022, 15 September]. Meanwhile, they allowed Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, another retired Army general with longstanding links to Prayuth, to act as Caretaker Premier [Thairath 2022, 24 August; BBC Thai 2022, 29 September]. They additionally let Prayuth attend cabinet meetings in his capacity of the Minister of Defence [Thairath 2022, 24 August]. Their ruling, on Friday 30 September, established that Prayuth had not exceeded the maximum term of eight years in office, thus enabling him to resume his premiership the next Monday, on 1 October [BBC Thai 2022, 3 October]. Controversially, the Court explained that Prayuth's tenure should be counted beginning in 2017, the year when his government promulgated the current constitution after the former was abrogated by the coup [Thai Post 2022, 2 October].

## 2.3. The nursery attack

On 6 October, Panya Kamrab, a former policeman aged 34, killed thirty-six people, including numerous children, in the province of Nong Bua Lam Phu, in North-eastern Thailand [BBC Thai 2022, 7 October(a)]. The man first opened fire in a nursery [Komchadluek 2022, 6 October], and, upon fleeing, stabbed and fired at passers-by [BBC Thai 2022, 7 October(a)]. Back home, he killed his wife and child, and committed suicide. The officer had been dismissed from service the previous June for possession of narcotics [BBC Thai 2022, 7 October(a)]. An autopsy ruled that he was not under the influence of drugs when he committed the murders [BBC Thai 2022, 7 October(a)].

Reacting to the news, the public called out a toxic culture of violence, corruption and patriarchy allegedly promoted by key state institutions [*Bangkok Post* 2022, 8 October]. The slaughter became especially controversial as the gun used for the murders was registered legally for Panya Kamrab's personal use, law enforcement officers enjoying legal concessions regarding the license for firearms [*BBC Thai* 2022, 6 November]. Only two years before, in 2020 [*BBC Thai* 2022, 7 October(a)], a soldier of the Royal Thai Army opened fire at a mall in the nearby province of Nakhon Ratchasima, killing twenty-nine people [*Matichon* 2022, 6 October]. Contributing to widespread discontents, authorities rolled out a red carpet at the nursery—only hours after the incident—for welcoming an official visit by King Vajiralongkorn and Queen Suthida [*Manager Online* 2022, 8 October]. The carpet was removed quickly amid online criticism, and the royal couple paid a visit to the injured at Nong Bua Lam Phu Hospital and Udon Thani Hospital instead [*BBC Thai* 2022, 7 October(b)].

#### 2.4. *Protesting the Government at APEC 2022*

On 18-19 November, Thailand hosted the 2022 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum at Bangkok's Queen Sirikit National Convention Center, named after the queen mother. Held under the slogan of «Open, Connect, Balance», **the Forum emphasized the need of a post-pandemic recovery that is inclusive and ecologically sustainable** [APEC 2022a]. In particular, it proposed «Bio-Circular Green» as an economic strategy «where technology and innovation are used to create value, reduce waste, advance resource efficiency, and promote sustainable business models» [APEC 2022b].

On 15 November, three days before the meeting, a small group of activists that called themselves «Citizens Stop APEC 2022» protested in the major northern city of Chiang Mai [*Prachathai* 2022, 15 November]. Donning the masks of Guy Fawkes, they rallied against the proposed Bio-Circular Green strategy, deemed favourable only to state agents and big corporations, as well as against the leadership of PM Prayuth [*Prachathai* 2022, 29 November]. The activists demanded the stepdown of the Premier as Chairman of the meeting, the dissolution of Parliament and the rewriting of a new, «truly democratic» constitution. Written in English, presumably for an international audience, one protest sign read: «FUCK APEC 2022» [*Prachathai* 2022, 15 November]. Activists of the same group marched to the venue where the summit was being held in Bangkok on 18 November [*BBC Thai* 2022, 18 November]. Stating that they aimed to take advantage of the presence of world leaders [*BBC Thai* 2022, 17 November], they repeated their three demands to the Prayuth Government [*BBC Thai* 2022, November 17]. The rally was dispersed as police shot rubber bullets and tear gas, resulting in 3 injured [*BBC Thai* 2022, 18 November].

### 3. *Foreign policy*

#### 3.1. *Continued complicity with regimes, and the United States*

Throughout 2022, Thailand maintained warm relations with the authoritarian Governments of China, Russia and Myanmar, with Washington seeking to strengthen their position in the face of increased competition from Beijing. According to some analysts, in the first half of 2022, Thailand's perceived increased proximity with China was causing concern in Washington [Detsch 2022, 17 June]. In a twofold effort to strengthen relations with Thailand, in June, the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin III, travelled to the country to meet with PM Prayuth and the Minister of Defense [U.S. Department of Defense 2022], while, in July, the U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken paid a second visit. According to Sebastian Strangio, the latter «reflects the palpable warming of relations between Washington and Bangkok, as the U.S. Government learns to live with Prayut, who led the 2014 coup, and Thai policymakers begin to chafe at China's increasing economic and strategic inroads in the country» [Strangio 2022, 14 June]. For the scholar Tyrell Haberkorn, things are less straightforward, however. She asserts that «(i)f the Prayuth government remains in power, greater authoritarianism and a further lean towards China are very likely» [Detsch 2022, 17 June].

In Thai civil society, suspicions toward the Government's warming up with China are especially prevalent among the young and the more progressive. In November, President Xi Jinping met PM Prayuth at the 2022 APEC Forum, from which US President Joe Biden was absent, substituted by his Vice, Kamala Harris [McCarthy 2022, 23 November]. A video clip released by the Thai Government shows Xi Jinping celebrating his wife's birthday along with Prayuth and his spouse—a «very unusual» display of affection by the Chinese leader, according to an analyst [*Bangkok Post* 2022, 23 November]. Following the visit, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of both countries issued a statement claiming that Thailand and China are «as close as one family» [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Thailand 2022; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2022]. Three days before the Forum, a small group of protesters named «Sai Iiw», one of the characters who brought the teachings of the Buddha to China in the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, marched along the streets of Yaowarat, Bangkok's Chinatown, to protest against the «One China principle» that they argued was upheld by the summit [*Prachathai* 2022, 15 November]. They additionally manifested against the «dictatorial leaders» present at the meeting [*Prachathai* 2022, 15 November].

Conveying a lack of interest in following the line dictated by the United States was Thailand's ambiguous positioning toward Russia. Having failed to criticize the invasion of Ukraine [Strangio 2022, 23 February], in March, Thailand voted in favour of a UN's resolution demanding Moscow

to «withdraw all of its military forces from the territory of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders» [Tiezzi 2022, 3 March]. On 12 October, however, the kingdom abstained as the United Nation General Assembly voted for a reverse of Russia's declared of annexation of four Ukrainian provinces, arguing that the measure could jeopardize the «chance for crisis diplomacy to bring about a peaceful and practical negotiated resolution to the conflict» [Strangio 2022, 13 October]. Tita Sanglee [2022, 6 October] advanced that Thailand may have been cautious in the hopes that Putin might join the APEC Summit, thereby adding prestige to the event (he eventually did not [Hutt 2022, 18 November]). Disagreeing, Thitinan Pong-sudhirak [2022, 28 October] described Putin's attendance as «problematic for the host as other leaders may boycott due to sanctions against Russia's invasion»; he suggested that the Prayuth Government's Russian agenda remains undisclosed to the public.

In 2022, the Government of Prayuth Chan-ocha likewise demonstrated a willingness to continuing cooperating with the Burmese junta, despite renewed pressures from the international community to take a stance against the regime [U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Thailand 2022]. As of April 2022, human rights experts and aid groups claimed that Thailand was sending Burmese refugees back into Myanmar every time there was a pause in fights, potentially putting their lives at risk [VOA 2022, 7 April]. In July, a delegation of senior Thai military men travelled to the Burmese capital, Naypyidaw, to pay an official visit to the ruling generals for purpose of «enhancing the existing friendship and cooperation between defense forces of the two countries» including «stability in the border area» [*The Global New Light of Myanmar* 2022, 30 June].

In September, Thailand prevented Han Lay, a Burmese model and a contestant for the title of Miss Grand International, critical of the Burmese coup of 2021, from entering the kingdom where she was seeking asylum [Reuters 2022, 22 September]. «Han Lay was the victim of a deliberate political act by the junta to make her stateless» commented Phil Robertson, Asia deputy director of Human Rights Watch [Olarin and Chern 2022, 28 September]. Stopped at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport, she resorted to flying off for Canada [Olarin and Chern 2022, 28 September]. *Par contre*, in December, Thailand welcomed members of the Burmese junta for a talk organized to discuss the very Myanmar crisis. Key figures from the Governments of Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam joined the meetings, while Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore, the most outspoken critics of the Burmese junta within ASEAN, refused to send delegations [Reuters 2022, 23 December]. According to Reuters [2022, 23 December], «(n)o concrete results were reported from the discussions». These different approaches within ASEAN reveal significant splits as the military-run Burmese Government, very much like its Thai counterpart, prepares for a general election in 2023.

### 3.2. *Saudi Arabia: New openings*

On 25 January, PM Prayuth paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia on the invitation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman [*BBC Thai* 2022, 26 January]. The visit is historic as Thailand has not entertained diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia for over 30 years [*BBC Thai* 2022, 26 January]. The relationship between the two countries deteriorated after the import into Thailand of jewels that were stolen from the Saudi royalty by Kriengkrai Techamong, a locally employed Thai janitor, in 1989 [Sarawut, no date]. Four Saudi diplomats who travelled to Thailand to recover the valuables were killed in separate incidents, and a member of the Saudi royal family who vowed to investigate disappeared the next year, never to be found [*The Momentum* 2021, 26 August]. The Thai police arrested Kriengkrai Techamong in 1990 [*The Momentum* 2021, 26 August], but the Saudis were returned only part of the booty, replete with fakes and short of a highly prized blue diamond [Sarawut, no date]. After the incidents, in addition to severing diplomatic relations, Saudi Arabia banned its citizens from travelling to Thailand, and imposed limitations to the numbers of Thais who may work in Saudi Arabia [*The Standard* 2022, 25 January]. The new openings, which are imputable to the modernization pushes of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, serve economic interests on both sides, especially in the fields of tourism, labour, energy and food security [Sanglee 2022, 8 September].

## 4. *The economy*

### 4.1. *Economic successes and failures*

According to the World Bank, in 2022, «(e)conomic growth accelerated to 4.5% in the third quarter (...) fuelled by resurgent private consumption and strong tourism inflows» [World Bank 2022]. One among the industries that were most gravely affected by the COVID-19, tourism proved crucial to recovery [Strangio 2022, 25 January]. The National Economic and Social Development Council explains that, in addition to helping the gross domestic product, it “gave a big boost to personal consumption» [Apornrath 2022, 21 November]. In 2022, foreigners were allowed to enter the kingdom via different programs that required either a mandatory quarantine, one or more negative tests, or a period of stay in a designated «sandbox» area such as the islands of Phuket and Samui. Many among these programs were first introduced in late 2021, with the requisites for entry being progressively eased. Beginning on 1 October, as COVID-19 was declared endemic, Thailand lifted all regulations for incoming tourists [Royal Thai Embassy in France 2022]. Altogether, over 11 million foreigners, mainly from Asia, visited the kingdom in 2022, compared to the 428,000 of the previous year, exceeding Government's expectations [Orathai and Kitiphong 2022, 29

December]. Paired with the weakening of the US Dollar, the tourism industry also provided a boost to the Thai national currency, the Baht [Thanaphum 2023, 6 January].

At the same time, however, other factors impacted negatively the Thai economy. 2022 opened with a sudden spike in the selling price of pork, a key and affordable staple in Thai diet. In January, the retail price amounted to 215 baht per kilogram, compared to 150 baht per kilogram in the first quarter of 2021 [Thairath 2022, 21 January]. Reasons for the spike varied from a deliberate decrease in production in response to a lower demand in the years of the pandemic to the outbreaks of PRRS (Porcine Reproductive and Respiratory Syndrome) [BBC Thai 2021, 31 December] and AFS (African Swine Fever) [Thairath 2022, 21 January], which decimated live stocks [BBC Thai, 26 January]. Former-PM Thaksin Shinawatra, a major critic of the Military since he was ousted in a coup in 2006, claimed that some corporations were additionally withholding their supplies in an attempt to inflate prices [Amarin TV 2022, 19 January]. In early February, the Prayuth Government identified eight companies that were refusing to release altogether twenty-four million kilograms of pork meat on the market—an unsanitary practice, which contravened existing regulations [Thansettakij 2022, 21 January]. The Government filed lawsuits against such companies under the Epidemic Act and the Animal Slaughter Control Act, thereby stabilizing the retail price at a rather high 198-208 baht per kilogram: [Thairath 2022, 6 February].

Global trends, including those set into motion by war in Ukraine, further penalized recovery. In March 2022, the U.S. Department of Agriculture predicted that Thailand's reliance on imported feed grains would affect livestock production as well as, indirectly, fertilizer prices and ultimately field crops as «(p)rices of feed ingredients increased by 18-20 percent in February 2022 after the surge in prices of feed-quality wheat from the Black Sea, including Ukraine» [United States Department of Agriculture 2022]. The World Bank additionally reports «a significant slowdown in exports growth like other ASEAN peers, reflecting the impact of the global economic slowdown» [World Bank 2022]. These factors impacted less privileged constituencies, contributing to the scarring of the COVID-19 period. In fact, even the official end of pandemic did not bring about only positive change. As the Prayuth Government discontinued the relief measures offered to citizens the previous year [Siani 2021, p. 255], poverty is «projected to rise to 6.6 percent in 2022 from 6.3 percent in 2021» [World Bank 2022].

## 5. Conclusion

In 2022, while officially entering a «post-pandemic» stage, Thailand continued to display political and economic grievances associated to the CO-



VID-19 crisis. The Government's handling of domestic and international politics alighted existing discontent, while its perceived economic incompetency took the centre stage in public debates as the year came to a closure. While street politics paled in comparison to the youth-led rallies of 2020, the dissatisfaction remained palpable. Responding to the waning of Prayuth's popularity, in December, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan anticipated that his longstanding associate will leave Palang Pracharath, the very military-backed party that named him premier, seeking to further his career by joining another party for the general election of 2023 [Wassana 2022, 13 December].

The year closed with an event that may have significant repercussions. On 15 December, the Bureau of the Royal Household announced that Princess Bajrakitiyabha, the first child of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, collapsed the night before because of a heart-related condition while she was training her pet dogs in the Nakhorn Ratchasima Province. Flown urgently to Bangkok, she was admitted at Chulalongkorn Hospital [Royal Office of Thailand 2022], where she remains as of mid-March 2023. Analysts claim that the 44-year-old princess is a key asset for the Court, some identifying her as a likely heir to the throne [BBC 2022, 15 December].

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