



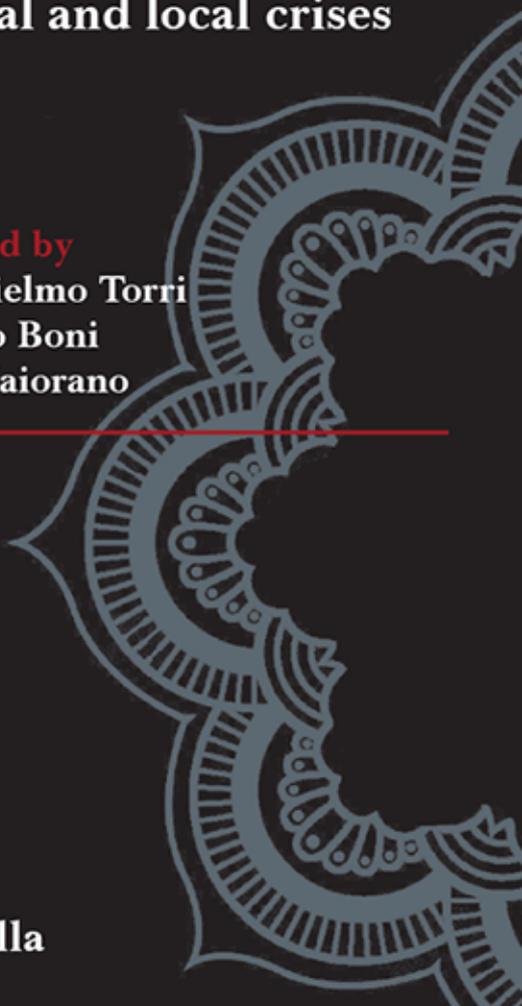
ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXII / 2021

Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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THAILAND 2019-2021: MILITARY, MONARCHY, PROTESTS

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2019-2021 was a peculiar triennium for Thailand. In 2019, the military leaders who had seized power five years earlier with a coup d'état formed a civilian government via a carefully managed general election. Concomitantly, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, on the throne since 2016, underwent his coronation. While the rituals celebrated the formal beginning of his reign, the King exercised his influence over politics in ways deemed unusual for a country that calls itself a constitutional monarchy. In 2020, as COVID-19 spread worldwide, Thailand experienced more an economic than a health crisis. The number of infections remained remarkably low, but the economy recorded its worst performance since the financial crash of 1997. Only in 2021 did the pandemic become more important, the Government responding with Chinese-developed vaccines that many in Thailand deemed little efficacious. Enraged by political instability, economic stagnation, public health emergencies, and deepening relations with China, throughout 2020-2021, young people protested nationwide. Their mobilization marked the biggest instance of generational resistance since the student protests of the 1970s.

KEYWORDS – Prayuth Chan-ocha; King Maha Vajiralongkorn; student protests; Thailand-US relation; Burmese coup

1. Introduction

In Thailand, the triennium 2019-2021 was inaugurated by a general election, the first after five years of military rule. Carefully managed by the Military, the election re-confirmed former-General Prayuth Chan-ocha as premier. Concomitantly, in 2019, elaborate coronation rituals sanctioned the formal beginning of the reign of the politically assertive King Maha Vajiralongkorn. In fact, throughout 2019, Military and Monarchy consolidated their power, often acting in tandem. In 2020, Thailand displayed an exceptionally low numbers of COVID-19 cases. The pandemic nonetheless sparked a major economic crisis. It turned into a health emergency in 2021. Enraged by the situation, throughout 2020-2021, young people led protests nationwide.

This essay explores 2019-2021 Thailand with reference to domestic politics, economy, and foreign relations. Section 2.1 focuses on domestic politics in 2019, the year when elections and coronation took place; sec-

tion 2.2, looks at the 2020-2021 period, when COVID-19 hit Thailand and young people took their frustrations to the streets. Section 3.1 offers updates on Thailand's positioning in a geopolitical landscape dominated by the rivalry between the US and China, while section 3.2 investigates the Kingdom's relationship with Myanmar, especially after the Burmese coup of 2021. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 address, respectively, the economy before and during the pandemic.

2. *Domestic politics*

2.1. *A year for Monarchy and Military: 2019*

On 24 March 2019, Thailand held the first general election after a royalist junta led by PM Prayuth Chan-ocha had taken power with a coup d'état in 2014. Numerous parties contested, coalescing in two rival camps that broadly reflected opposing ideological stances. One, backed by the Military, sought to appeal to an electorate willing to support the continued premiership of Prayuth under a veil of democratic legitimacy. The other vowed to uphold a progressive agenda, proposing, for example, a rewrite of the Junta-drafted constitution of 2017, deemed undemocratic, and cuts to the military budget.

Among the parties that joined the pro-democracy, so to speak, camp, some were loyal to Thaksin Shinawatra. A sweeping force in politics, Thaksin had risen to popularity in the early 2000s, thanks to economic policies beneficial to previously neglected rural electorates. Basically exiled since his overthrow via a coup in 2006,¹ guilty of unsettling existing power balances, Thaksin continued to influence politics via proxy parties. In the same coalition was the recently formed Future Forward Party (*Anakhot Mai*), led by the businessman Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. Young and progressive in outlook and composition, Future Forward managed to shake the Thai youth from a decades-long political apathy.² The Democrats, Thailand's oldest political party, chose not to affiliate to either camp. Previously associated to the anti-Thaksin axis and dominant, they now snubbed the Military-backed party, invoking the need for meaningful democratic change.

The 2019 elections advantaged the Military, also thanks to the Junta-drafted constitution of 2017. As explained by Pietro Masina in a previous *Asia Maior* issue, the constitution «created an institutional framework able to harness the democratic process by assigning key powers to the Senate, the Constitutional Court and other institutions, directly referring to and

1. Thaksin returned to Thailand in early 2008, only to leave again after some months for a conviction in a corruption case.

2. Duncan McCargo, *Future Forward: The rise and Fall of a Thai Political Party*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2020.

appointed by the Monarchy. For the political parties loyal to the army (and the palace) it would be enough to get 25% of the seats in the House of Representatives as the unelected Senate would participate in the selection of the new prime minister and the new government».³

Shortly before the election, the pro-democracy camp suffered more blows. In early February, one of Thaksin's two proxy parties, Thai Raksa Chart, nominated King Maha Vajiralongkorn's sister, Princess Ubolratana Rajakanya as their candidate premier. The move, while no-doubt designed to shock, was thought to be lawful, the Princess having resigned her royal status in 1972 upon marrying a foreigner. The same evening, the King repudiated her candidacy with a royal command.⁴ On a request by the Election Commission, the Constitutional Court subsequently dissolved the party, throwing the electoral strategy of Thaksin in disarray.⁵ Hours before the polls opened, the King issued another statement urging voters to support «good people (*khon di*)»,⁶ a phrase used in the rhetoric of pro-establishment actors to designate conservative leaders.

The official election results were published, after numerous delays, in May.⁷ The Junta-backed party, Palang Pracharath claimed 8.4 million popular votes, more than any other party,⁸ while Thaksin's main proxy party, Phuea Thai, won more seats than any other party (136 in the lower house).⁹ No party won an overall majority of seats. A combination of convoluted regulations and elite-level horse-trading that brought smaller parties into the pro-military coalition ensured that the pro-democracy coalition could not form a government.¹⁰ Prayuth Chan-ocha finally declared himself pre-

3. Pietro Masina, 'Thailand 2018: A country suspended between an illiberal regime and the hope for a democratic transition', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXIX/2018, p. 197.

4. 'พระราชโองการ ร.10 ทูลกระหม่อมหญิง ต้องอยู่เหนือการเมือง (Royal Command by Rama X: Princess Ubolratana Must Be above Politics)', มติชนออนไลน์, 6 February 2019 (https://www.matichon.co.th/politics/news_1355421).

5. Panu Wongcha-um & Panarat Thepgunpanat, 'Thai Court Bans Party for Nominating Princess for PM', *Reuters*, 7 March 2019.

6. 'เลือกตั้ง 2562: ร.10 โปรดเกล้าฯ อัญเชิญพระบรมราชโองการ ร.9 «ส่งเสริมคนดีปกครองบ้านเมือง และควบคุมคนไม่ดี ไม้ให้มีอำนาจ» (2019 Elections: Rama X Invokes Rama IX's Words: «Support Good People to Rule the Nation and Discipline Evil People to Ensure They Have No Power»)', *BBC Thai*, 24 March 2019 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-47681835>).

7. 'Thailand election results delayed as allegations of cheating grow', *ABC News*, 25 March 2019.

8. 'ผลเลือกตั้ง 2562: กกต. แถลงผลเลือกตั้ง 100% คะแนนมหาชนของ พปชร. พุ่งเป็น 8.4 ล้านเสียง (Election results of 2019: Office of the Election Commission Communication 100% of Popular Votes: Palang Pracharath Skyrockets with 8.4 Million Votes)', *BBC Thai*, 28 March 2019 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-47730271>).

9. 'เลือกตั้ง 2562: กกต. ประกาศรับรอง 149 ส.ส. บัญชีรายชื่อ (2019 Elections: Office of the Election Commission Communication Confirms 149 Party Lists)', *BBC Thai*, 8 May 2019 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-48197070>).

10. Aekarach Sattaburuth & Mongkil Bangrapa, 'Pheu Thai govt hope on ropes', *Bangkok Post*, 9 May 2019.

mier for a four-year term. Independent election monitors and human rights groups pointed out irregularities, including a counting process that lacked transparency.¹¹

Also in May 2019, from 1 to 6, King Maha Vajiralongkorn carried out the first part of his twofold coronation. Ceremonies comprised of a bathing ritual symbolizing purification, the actual placing of the crown on his own head, a circumambulation of the most sacred sites of Bangkok aboard a palanquin, and the first public appearance of the fully coronated King with his family from a balcony of the Grand Palace.¹² The concluding leg of the rituals, a solemn barge procession along the Chao Phraya River, took place in December.¹³

Prior to the coronation, King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who ascended to the throne in 2016 after the passing of his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, had proved to be unusually assertive for a constitutional monarch.¹⁴ He had taken direct control of the vast wealth previously managed by the Crown Property Bureau, a semigovernmental body.¹⁵ He had publicly refused to endorse the 2017 constitution until the Junta amended it to expand his prerogatives.¹⁶ He had brought the governing body of the Buddhist Clergy, the Sanga Council, under his control.¹⁷ He had secured the appointment of General Apirat Kongsompong, a loyal military man, as chief of the Army.¹⁸ He had finally removed from service an astonishing 1,261 military and

11. Human Rights Watch, 'Thailand: Structural Flaws Subvert Election', 19 March 2019; Patpicha Tanakasempipat & Panarat Thepgumpanat, 'Monitor says Thai election campaign 'heavily tilted' to benefit junta', *Reuters*, 26 March 2019; 'Election not free or fair, says poll monitor', *The Nation*, 25 March 2019.

12. For an ethnographic account of the rituals, see Edoardo Siani, 'Purifying Violence: Buddhist Kingship, Legitimacy, and Crisis in Thailand', in Pavin Chachavalongpun (ed.), *Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand*, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2020, pp. 145-166.

13. Artorn Pookasook, 'Thai king completes coronation year with barge procession through old Bangkok', *Reuters*, 12 December 2019.

14. For discussions of Thailand's ambiguous relationship with absolutism, see Kasian Tejapira, 'The Irony of Democratization and the Decline of Royal Hegemony in Thailand', *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no. 2, 2016, pp. 219-237; and Michael Connors, 'The two faces of democracy', in Pavin Chachavalongpun (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 55-70.

15. Phorphant Ouyyanont, 'Crown Property Bureau from Crisis to Opportunity', in Pasuk Phongpaichit & Chris Baker (eds.), *Thai Capital after the 1997 Crisis*, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008, pp. 155-86.

16. 'รัชกาลที่ 10 ทรงรับสั่งให้แก้ไขร่างรัฐธรรมนูญฉบับผ่านการลงประชามติ เรื่องพระราชอำนาจ (Rama X Orders the Constitution Draft to Be Amended after the Referendum)', ประชาไท, 10 January 2017 (<https://prachatai.com/journal/2017/01/69572>).

17. Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, 'Thailand's Sangha: Turning Right, Coming Full Circle', *New Mandala*, 7 August 2018.

18. Paul Chambers, 'A Rebuke against a Sister and the Personalising of Monarchical Control', *New Mandala*, 9 February 2019.

police officers.¹⁹ The coronation, understood as the ritual moment when a king transforms into a benevolent leader after consolidating power, was thought to inaugurate a more restrained mode of rule.²⁰

Shortly before the ceremonies began, however, a surprise news item announced that the king had just married a former flight attendant-turned-Airforce General, Suthida Tidjai, elevating her to queen overnight.²¹ On his birthday in August, the King next granted the title of «royal noble consort» (*jao khun phra*) to a woman called Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi, implicitly reviving the long-abolished tradition of the royal concubinage.²² In September 2019, he transferred the 1st and 11th infantry regiments under his personal control, citing an unspecified «emergency».²³ In October, he dismissed a number of palace officers for «extremely evil» conduct,²⁴ and stripped his royal consort of her titles for alleged disloyalties toward the Queen.²⁵ The woman reappeared again only in August 2020, absolved from all charges.²⁶

2.2. *The threat of COVID and the rise of the young: 2020-2021*

In January 2020, Thailand became the first country in the world to register a case of COVID-19 outside China, found in a tourist from Wuhan.²⁷ Alarmed, the Thai public asked the Government to close the national borders to the affected Chinese province. Prayuth refused, sparking criticism. In previous years, mass tourism from China had been at the centre of nu-

19. โปรดเกล้าฯให้ ทหาร-ตร.สัณยุบาบัตร 1,261 นาย พันราชองครักษ์พิเศษ (Removal of 1,261 Soldiers and Police Officers from the Royal Thai Aide-De-Camp)', ไทยรัฐ, 10 April 2019. (<https://www.thairath.co.th/news/politic/1541996>).

20. Edoardo Siani, 'Purifying Violence: Buddhist Kingship, Legitimacy, and Crisis in Thailand', in Pavin Chachavalpongpun (ed.), *Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand*, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 2020, pp. 145-166.

21. 'From bodyguard to queen: Thai king announces surprise wedding', *Al Jazeera*, 2 May 2019.

22. 'เจ้าคุณพระสินีนางุ: ในหลวง เสด็จฯ ร่วมบำเพ็ญพระราชกุศล เนื่องในวันเกิด (The Royal Noble Consort Sineenat: The King Engages in Merit-Making Ceremonies on Her Birthday)', *BBC Thai*, 26 January 2021 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-55811848>).

23. 'Thailand's king takes personal control of 2 key army units', *Reuters*, 1 October 2019.

24. 'Thai King fires 6 palace officials for «extremely evil» conduct days after dismissing consort for disloyalty', *The Straits Times*, 23 October 2019; 'Thai King fires more officials for «extremely evil» conduct and for being «lax» in their duties', *The Straits Times*, 31 October.

25. 'เจ้าคุณพระสินีนางุ: ในหลวง เสด็จฯ ร่วมบำเพ็ญพระราชกุศล เนื่องในวันเกิด (The Royal Noble Consort Sineenat: The King Engages in Merit-Making Ceremonies on Her Birthday)', *BBC Thai*, 26 January 2021 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-55811848>).

26. *Ibid.*

27. 'รู้มั๊ย...? คนไทยติดเชื้อติดเชื้อโควิด-19 ในไทยครั้งแรกเมื่อไหร่ (Do You Know When the First Thai Infection was Found in Thailand?)', ผู้จัดการออนไลน์, 11 January 2021 (<https://mgronline.com/infographic/detail/9640000002424>).

merous controversies, in part because of stereotypes concerning the Chinese *nouveau riches*.

In February 2020, the Constitutional Court disbanded Future Forward Party over a petty financial issue, also banning their leader, Thanathorn, from politics for ten years.²⁸ Students – a key constituency among the party’s voters – protested nationwide, some signs on display at university campuses conveying veiled innuendos toward the Monarchy.²⁹

In March, a cluster of COVID-19 infections formed in Bangkok.³⁰ Without prior notice, the city governor announced a lockdown, prompting migrant workers to crowd bus and train stations in the hope to make it back to their home provinces. On 24 March, amid widespread anxieties, the Government declared a state of emergency.³¹ As the decree banned public gatherings, expressions of dissent moved online. Here, criticism of the Government was extended to the King, who, according to international tabloids, was spending the lockdown in Germany with a harem.³² Some of the criticism seemed to contravene Thailand’s *lèse-majesté* law, among the most draconian in the world.³³ The online debate got increasingly heated when, in June 2020, Wanchaloem Satsaksit, a Thai dissident living in Cambodia, was kidnapped.³⁴ The episode drew attention to previous instances of anti-monarchy exiles, abducted from locations in Southeast Asia, never to be seen again.³⁵

Throughout 2020, the pandemic revealed to be extraordinarily mild in Thailand. The so-called «first wave», from January to 14 December, registered only 4,237 infections and 60 deaths.³⁶ In the same year, however, the economy recorded its worst performance since the financial crisis of 1997.

28. Amy Gunia, ‘A Thai Opposition Party That Pushed for Democratic Reform Has Just Been Disbanded’, *Time*, 21 February 2020.

29. James Wilson & Cod Satusayang, ‘The Students in Thailand Have Come Back as a Political Force; Now They Must Focus and Keep the Momentum’, *Thai Enquirer*, May 5 2020.

30. ‘ครบรอบปีระบอบของโควิด-19 (One Year of COVID-19 Pandemic)’, มติชนออนไลน์, 16 January 2021 (https://www.matichon.co.th/columnists/news_2531651).

31. Human Rights Watch, ‘Thailand: State of Emergency Extension Unjustified’, 27 May 2020.

32. Oliver Moody, ‘Thais Protest as King Takes Holiday amid Coronavirus Crisis’, *The Times*, 25 March 2020.

33. See David Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason and Lèse Majesté*, New York: Routledge 2011; David Streckfuss, ‘Lèse-majesté within Thailand’s regime of intimidation’, in Pavin Chachavalpongun (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, New York: Routledge, 2020.

34. Hannah Beech, ‘Thai Dissidents are Disappearing, and Families are Fighting for Answers’, *The New York Times*, 26 June 2020.

35. *Ibid.*

36. ‘โควิด-19: ลำดับเหตุการณ์ แผนที่ อินโฟกราฟิก ยอดติดเชื้อ-เสียชีวิตในไทยและทั่วโลก, (COVID-19: Chronology of Events, Infographics, Numbers of Infections and Deaths in Thailand and Worldwide)’, *BBC Thai*, 1 March 2020, updated on 6 January 2022 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-52090088>).

In July, the Government allowed a delegation of foreign military men to travel to Rayong Province, contravening normative restrictions on mobility. As one of them was found positive, hotels in the area lost 90% of their clients.³⁷ Many were outraged.

On 18 July 2020, around 2,000 protesters, mainly young, gathered at Democracy Monument in Bangkok.³⁸ Their speakers critiqued the Government's authoritarian practices, its bad handling of economy, and careless management of the pandemic. The protesters demanded the dissolution of parliament, an end to intimidations to citizens, and a new constitution.³⁹ Two weeks later in the same place, Anon Nampa, a human rights lawyer, delivered a speech critical of the Monarchy.⁴⁰ On 10 August, Panasaya «Rung» Sithijirawattanakul, a female student, read a manifesto at Thammasat University, asking that the royal institution be «reformed» (*patirup*) on the basis of ten specific demands. These included: the revocation of bans on criticism toward the Monarchy, a transparent management of the royal assets and budgets, the prohibition for the King to endorse coups d'état, and an investigation into the fate of exiled activists.⁴¹

Following this unprecedented request, youth-led protests spread nationwide. Colourful and witty, they merged international pop culture with religious symbolism,⁴² marking the biggest instance of generational resistance since the student protests of the 1970s. Rallies also featured groups with specific agendas, such as feminist and LGBTQ+ activists. Even a few Buddhist monks joined in.⁴³ The biggest event, held on 19 September 2020

37. 'ท่องเที่ยวระยองพังพินาศ แท้ก่อนจองโรงแรมรีสอร์ท 90% (Tourism in Rayong Destroyed after 90% of Hotel Cancellations)', *Daily News*, 14 July 2020 (<https://www.dailynews.co.th/regional/784774>); 'ประช.กังวลทหารอียิปต์-ครอบครัวซูดาน ท้า COVID-19 ระบาดใหม่ (People Concerned about Egyptian Soldiers and Sudanese Family Causing a New Wave of COVID-19)', *Thai PBS News* 19 July 2020 (<https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/294711>).

38. 'Thousands join Thailand's biggest anti-gov't rally, since virus lockdown', *Khaosod English*, 19 July 2020.

39. '«เยาวชนปลดแอก» เปิดแถลงการณ์ขอเรียกร้องฉบับเต็ม («Free Youth» Announce their Demands in Full)', *กรุงเทพธุรกิจ*, 19 July 2020 (<https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/news/detail/890036>).

40. 'ชุมนุมฮัมแฮรี่พอตเตอร์ ร้องยกเลิก-แก้กฎหมายขยายพระราชอำนาจ และฟังเสียงนักศึกษา-ประชาชน (Harry Potter-Themed Rally Demands Legal Reforms Concerning Royal Powers and Attention to the Voices of the Students and the People)', *ประชาไท*, 3 August 2020 (<https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/08/88882>).

41. '[Full statement] The demonstration at Thammasat proposes monarchy reform', *Prachatai*, 11 August 2020.

42. Edoardo Siani, 'The Sovereigns of Thailand and the Skies', *The New York Times*, 3 November 2020; Giuseppe Bolotta, 'Riscrivere la storia: la rivoluzione pop dei «bambini» thailandesi', *RISE*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2021.

43. As a whole, monks, including students from monastic universities, displayed little overt support to the protest movement. One explanation for their reluctance to join the rallies might be the establishment's increased control over the Sanga, the Buddhist clergy, since the 2014 coup. See Tomas Larsson, 'Royal Succession and the Politics of Religious Purification in Contemporary Thailand', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 52, no. 1, 2022, pp. 2-22.

outside the Grand Palace, attracted between 50,000 and 200,000 people, including members of the «red shirt» movement, which supports Thaksin Shinawatra.⁴⁴

The authorities did not intervene immediately. They did not resort to *lèse-majesté*, substantiating rumours according to which the King did not wish the law to be used in his reign. They did not even make much use of the emergency decree to limit affluence to the protests, despite extending it.⁴⁵ In October, however, the Government declared a «severe state of emergency», and began deploying riot police.⁴⁶ In several instances, officers employed tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannons that mixed dye with irritants.⁴⁷ They clashed with protesters, and made arrests.

With the stakes growing higher, the tone of the rallies became more serious. In October, protesters marched to the German embassy, asking investigations into the King's supposed political activity while sojourning in Europe.⁴⁸ In November, they demonstrated outside the headquarters of Siam Commercial Bank, of which the King is a major shareholder.⁴⁹ The Government responded with charges of *lèse-majesté*.⁵⁰ In December 2020, Free Youth, a key collective of protesters, declared themselves Marxist via their online channels, changing their logo to one mimicking the hammer and sickle. The association to communism caused a stir among supporters, creating (or perhaps revealing) internal fragmentations.⁵¹ This intense season of protest ended, the same month,⁵² with a boom of COVID-19 cases.⁵³

44. 'ชุมนุม 19 กันยายน: มาลชนเสื้อแดงร่วมเยาวชนรวมตัวกันสนามหลวง แขนงนำยื่นประเด็นปฏิรูปสถาบันกษัตริย์, (The Rally of 19 September: Red Shirt Groups and the Youth Overwhelm Sanam Luang, Leaders Insist on Goal of Monarchic Reform)', *BBC Thai*, 19 September 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-54217719>).

45. Human Rights Watch, 'Thailand: State of Emergency Extension Unjustified', 27 May 2020.

46. John Reed, 'Thailand declares state of emergency and cracks down on demonstrators', *Financial Times*, 15 October 2020.

47. See, for example, Masayuki Yuda & Dominic Faulder, 'Thai police resort to tear gas, arrest warrants against protesters', *Nikkei Asia*, 16 October 2020.

48. 'Thai protesters march on German embassy to seek probe of king', *Al Jazeera*, 26 October 2020.

49. Randy Thanthong-Knight, 'Thai Protesters Target King's Wealth in Latest Bangkok Rally', *Bloomberg*, 25 November 2020.

50. Sebastian Strangio, 'As Protesters Grow, Thailand's Authorities Dust Off Royal Defamation Law', *The Diplomat*, 25 November 2020.

51. 'Our writers weigh-in on Free Youth's controversial new logo', *Thai Enquirer*, 8 December 2020.

52. Apornrath Phoonphongphiphat & Masayuki Yuda, 'Thailand protesters take «a break» with key demands unmet', *Nikkei Asia*, 23 December 2020.

53. ยงยุทธ แฉล้มวงษ์ และทีมวิจัย, สถานการณ์ระบาด COVID-19 รอบ 1 ถึง 3 โดยสังเขป, Thailand Development Research Institute, 29 April 2021 (<https://tdri.or.th/2021/04/covid-19-2-3-affected-thai-labor-market/>).

In 2021, COVID-19 could no longer be minimised as a health emergency. From 15 December 2020 to 31 March 2021, the infections amounted to 24,626 (with 34 deaths),⁵⁴ going up to 3,000 per day in May,⁵⁵ and spiking to more than 20,000 per day in August.⁵⁶ The year ended with 2,226,446 cases,⁵⁷ a number deemed to be an underestimation.⁵⁸ Existing distrust toward the Government was amplified by the handling of the vaccination campaign. People critiqued the initial decision to privilege AstraZeneca, produced in Thailand by Siam Bioscience, a company owned by the King.⁵⁹ Even worse for the public opinion was the Government's decision to next rely on the Chinese-developed Sinovac, regarded by many in Thailand as little efficacious.⁶⁰ In this climate, those who secured a dose out of the few supplies of Pfizer and Moderna available in the country called themselves privileged.⁶¹

Throughout 2021, protests continued, albeit never reaching the numbers of the previous year. Hundreds of arrests were made, and over 1,600 charges were filed, including against underage protesters.⁶² Key figures in

54. 'โควิด-19: ลำดับเหตุการณ์ แผนที่ อินโฟกราฟิก ยอดติดเชื้อ-เสียชีวิตในไทยและทั่วโลก, (COVID-19: Chronology of Events, Infographics, Numbers of Infections and Deaths in Thailand and Worldwide)', *BBC Thai*, 1 March 2020, updated on 6 January 2022 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-52090088>).

55. 'ยืนยันตัวเลขผู้ติดเชื้อ COVID-19 ทั้งหมดในประเทศไทย (The numbers of all the confirmed COVID-19 cases in Thailand)', *Workpoint News*, updated on 15 May 2021 (<https://covid19.workpointnews.com>).

56. 'ย้อนดูสถิติการติดเชื้อ 14 วันที่ผ่านมายังไทย วันนี้ ยอดติดเชื้อ-ยอดตาย ยังพุ่งสูง (Looking Back at the Statistics of Infections in Thailand of the Past 14 Days: Today, Infections and Deaths Remain High)', มติชนออนไลน์, 14 August 2021 (https://www.matichon.co.th/covid19/thai-covid19/news_2884110); 'สรุปสถานการณ์ โควิด-19 ประเทศไทย เดือนสิงหาคม 2564 (Summary of COVID-19 Situation in Thailand of August 2021)', *Workpoint Today*, 31 August 2021 (<https://workpointtoday.com/covidaug/>).

57. ศูนย์ข้อมูลโควิด-19กรมประชาสัมพันธ์ (Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration), 1 January 2022 (<https://www.facebook.com/informationcovid19/>).

58. ชนาธิป ไชยเหล็ก, 'ยอดป่วยโควิดจริงของประเทศไทยเป็นเท่าไร? สิ่งที่ยังซ่อนอยู่ในตัวเลขที่ สมค. ไม่ได้รายงาน (What's the Real Number of Infections in Thailand? The Hidden Items in the Numbers that the Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration Did Not Report)', *The Standard*, 30 July 2021 (<https://thestandard.co/the-real-number-of-covid-patients-in-thailand/>).

59. Richard Lloyd Parry, 'Thai billionaire who questioned King Vajiralongkorn's profit faces 15 years in jail', *The Times*, 22 January 2021.

60. 'โควิด-19: ธนาคารโลกคาดสิ้นปีเศรษฐกิจไทยติดลบอย่างน้อย 8.3% ต่ำสุดในภูมิภาคอาเซียน ด้าน ครม.มีมติต่อ พ.ร.ก.ฉุกเฉินออกไปอีกหนึ่งเดือน (COVID-19: World Bank Believes that by End of Year Thai Economy Will Contract at Least by 8.3%, the Worst in ASEAN, while Cabinet Allows Extension of Emergency Decree for Another Month)', *BBC Thai*, 29 September 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-54338090>).

61. 'วัคซีน Moderna จากสหรัฐฯ อีก 1 ล้านโดส ถึงไทยแล้ว รวมส่งมอบ 2.5 ล้านโดส (1 Million Doses of Moderna Vaccines Arrives to Thailand from America, Amounting Altogether to 2.5 Million Doses)', *Workpoint Today*, 22 November 2021 (<https://workpointtoday.com/politics-modernaus2211/>).

62. 'Amnesty, Rung Panusaya seek end to alleged Thai Government human rights violations', *Thai BPS World*, 1 November 2021.

the movement made it in and out of jail, often on charges of *lèse-majesté* and even sedition.⁶³ In October, a teenage protester died after sustaining a firearm injury to his cervical vertebrae and brain.⁶⁴

With the kingdom tarnished by political instability, economic stagnation and health-related anxieties, the opposition filed two no-confidence motions against Prayuth Chan-ocha in 2021. The premier survived the first, in February, with the support of 272 MPs against 206,⁶⁵ and the second, in September, with 264 votes against 208.⁶⁶

3. Foreign policy

3.1. Learning to coexist with China

As in previous years, throughout 2019-2021, Thailand maintained good relations with the US, while simultaneously managing the opportunities and challenges represented by Beijing. Thailand's foreign policy suggests in fact that the kingdom is learning how to coexist with an increasingly powerful China, seeking a balance between securing strategic forms of cooperation and asserting its own interests.

While diplomatic relations between Thailand and the United States remained cordial throughout the triennium, the presence of China loomed in the background. Take Cobra Gold, an annual, multilateral Thailand-based military training that is co-sponsored by the US. «During the past 40 years, Cobra Gold has served as a cornerstone of the Thai-U.S. alliance», explained the US in 2021, stressing Thailand's role as a treaty ally in Asia.⁶⁷ The Cobra Gold initiatives continued, if scaled down, even during the COVID-19 emergency.⁶⁸ In the same period, however, Thailand «participated in more combined military exercises with China than any other Southeast Asian country».⁶⁹ China additionally surpassed the US as a provider of weapons to Thailand. In 2019, the Government of Prayuth Chan-ocha signed a

63. 'Thai protest leaders go on trial for sedition, royal insults', *Reuters*, 15 March 2021.

64. 'Teenager shot at Din Daeng protest dies after 2-month coma', *Prachatai*, 29 October 2021.

65. Randy Thanthong-Knight, 'Thai Premier Survives No-Confidence Vote as Protest Looms', *Bloomberg*, 20 February 2021.

66. 'Prayut, ministers survive no-confidence vote', *Bangkok Post*, 4 September 2021.

67. Spencer Garrison, 'US, Royal Thai Armed Forces complete 40th Exercise Cobra Gold', U.S. Army, 24 August 2021.

68. Wassana Nanuam, 'A Cobra Gold of old please', *Bangkok Post*, 14 October 2021.

69. 'China competes with US for weapons sales to Thailand', *Bangkok Post*, 3 December 2019.

nonspecific defence cooperation agreement with Beijing,⁷⁰ complete with an order for 3 submarines and 48 battle tanks.⁷¹ The purchase of the submarines was delayed in 2020, when critics called it an excessive expense, of little use to the Kingdom.⁷²

In November 2019, the US caused some controversy at the 35th ASEAN summit, which was held in Bangkok. Then-President Donald Trump skipped the meeting, sending a downsized delegation led by his National Security Advisor and the Secretary of Commerce.⁷³ Asian diplomats commented that the American representation marked «a significant, if not unexpected, disappointment in a region increasingly concerned about China's fast-expanding influence».⁷⁴ Numerous Southeast Asian leaders responded by deserting the summit, leaving PM Prayuth, the host, to attend along with the premiers of Vietnam and Laos.⁷⁵

The Biden administration also sent mixed signals to Thailand. In June 2021, Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman visited the Kingdom as well as Indonesia and Cambodia. On this occasion, Sherman met with Prayuth to discuss matters ranging from the *COVID*-19 emergency to the deteriorating situation in Myanmar.⁷⁶ In August, however, Vice President Kamala Harris excluded Thailand from a trip to Southeast Asia, in which she only visited Singapore and Vietnam. According to analysts, Harris' decision might be due to the Prayuth Government's poor engagement with democratic ideals since the coup of 2014,⁷⁷ further indicating the Kingdom's perceived unreliability as it was moving in the orbit of China.⁷⁸ These cautions aside, Thailand does remain highly strategic to Washington. In 2021, the US announced the construction of a massive, USD 625 million-worth annex to their existing diplomatic premises in Bangkok, already among the biggest in the world. The new building, which is set to open in 2025, will host as many as 2000 employees.⁷⁹

70. *Ibid.*

71. Ian Storey, 'Chinese arms: cheaper than US, no strings attached. Thailand is sold', *South China Morning Post*, 1 June 2019.

72. 'Thailand delays China submarines buy amid public outrage', *Reuters*, 31 August 2020.

73. 'Trump snubs meeting with ASEAN leaders in Bangkok', *Al Jazeera*, 30 October 2019.

74. *Ibid.*

75. 'Most ASEAN Leaders No-Shows in Meeting with Trump's Proxy', *VOA News*, 4 November 2019.

76. Sebastian Strangio, 'Amid Chinese Push, US Official to Visit Three Southeast Asian Nations', *The Diplomat*, 25 May 2021.

77. 'US snub a wake-up call', *Bangkok Post*, 4 September 2021.

78. Susannah Patton & Ashley Townshend, 'Kamala Harris's Asia Trip Can't Fix Biden's Troubled Indo-Pacific Strategy', *Foreign Policy*, 24 August 2021.

79. Sebastian Strangio, 'US Breaks Ground on Massive Thai Embassy Annex', *The Diplomat*, 31 August 2021.

Economic cooperation is a key area where China asserts its primacy over the US. In 2018, the Military Junta of Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha announced a series of economic strategies. Subsumed under the umbrella of «Thailand 4.0», some of these strategies sought to attract foreign investment in the so-called Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) via concessions such as fiscal privileges. The ECC is a special economic zone established in 2017 as a new incarnation of the earlier Eastern Seaboard, comprising of the three provinces of Chachoengsao, Chonburi and Rayong. The new project required the betterment of infrastructures, including U-Tapao International Airport and the two ports of Laem Chabang and Map Ta Phut, as well as the creation of «smart cities». While the original Eastern Seaboard was developed in the 1980s with Japanese investments, the ECC relies primarily on Chinese capital.

The EEC project also entailed the development of a new high-speed rail line, which will connect the area to U-Tapao Airport to the Bangkok airports of Don Mueang and Suvarnabhumi, as well as to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). To this end, in October 2019, the Thai Government signed a THB 224.5 billion agreement that grants the right to build the high-speed railway and to manage it for the next 50 years to a consortium led by the Charoen Pokphand Group (CP), which includes China Railway Construction Corporation Limited.⁸⁰ Owned by the Sino-Thai family of the Chearavanont, CP is the largest private conglomerate in Thailand with long-established ties with China. There, it is known as «Zheng Da», a household name, and famously holds the company registration number 0001.

The high-speed train line project, being the de facto Thai leg of the BRI, proved to be a fertile arena for both cooperation and contestation. Notoriously, the project suffered from several delays, also because of Thailand's questioning China's right-of-way in the national territory as well as whether the involvement of Chinese engineers might contravene legal restrictions on foreign labour.⁸¹ In 2017, China even excluded Prayuth from the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.⁸² In December 2021, however, the Thai Transport Minister reported that Prayuth was eager to make up for the time losses. In particular, the Thai Government announced the completion of the designs for the leg of the line that connects the major North-eastern city of Nakhon Ratchasima to Nong Khai, close to the Laotian border. The Government also stressed their commit-

80. 'Thailand signs \$7.4bn high-speed train project agreement', *Railway Technology*, 25 October 2019, updated on 31 August 2020.

81. Benjamin Zawacki, 'Of Questionable Connectivity: China's BRI and Thai Civil Society', *Council on Foreign Relations*, 7 June 2021.

82. Pongphisoot Busbarat, 'China's «Shame Offensive»: The Omission of Thailand's Prime Minister from the Belt and Road Initiative Summit 2017', *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute Perspective*, No. 54, 2017.

ment to connect the line as soon as possible to the Laos-China railway, inaugurated in December.⁸³

More tense was Thailand's cooperation with China for what concerns the procurement of vaccines against COVID-19. The Prayuth Government relied heavily on vaccines developed by the Chinese pharmaceutical house Sinovac Biotech, linked to CP Group.⁸⁴ Many protested, however, lamenting that the Chinese-developed vaccine was chosen on the basis of political interests and at the expense of the population.⁸⁵ In the face of mounting discontent, the Government resorted to ordering uniquely western makes such as Pfizer and AstraZeneca after supplies of Sinovac were exhausted in late 2021.⁸⁶ According to an analyst, the Government's decision to give in to the protesters «damaged China's image vis-à-vis the US in the vaccine diplomatic battle.»⁸⁷ In a heated statement, Beijing responded that Thailand had «devalued and smeared the Chinese vaccine for no reason», destroying «China's good will in its support of the Thai people in their fight against the pandemic».⁸⁸ As anticipated above, in the early days of the pandemic, many had similarly critiqued the Prayuth Government's allegedly soft approach toward China, in particular for refusing to restrict entry to visitors from Wuhan.

Thailand's cooperation with China for the development of a 5G mobile internet technology was also met with resistance. The Government's decision to involve Huawei, the Chinese giant technology corporation (which also has links with the CP Group), has been understood to be yet another signal of the Kingdom's leaning toward Beijing, away from Washington. Huawei is listed on the American cybersecurity blacklist.⁸⁹ With the pandemic, Thailand's cooperation with Huawei intensified, extending to the medical industry. In the period under review, Huawei was developing 5G hospitals, 5G ambulances and 5G medical applications, the pilot project being launched at Siriraj Hospital, a public hospital in Bangkok linked to the

83. Sebastian Strangio, 'Sino-Thai High-Speed Rail Project Takes Another Step Forward', *The Diplomat*, 21 December 2021.

84. 'ค่าสัมพันธ์ 'ซีพี-ผู้ถือหุ้นซิโนแวค' (Investigating the Relations between CP and the Sinovac Shareholders)', กรุงเทพมหานคร, 28 May 2021 (<https://www.bangkokbiznews.com/business/940515>).

85. Jitsiree Thongnoi, 'How China's Sinovac vaccine got caught in the crossfire of Thailand's anti-government protests', *South China Morning Post*, 12 September 2021.

86. Sebastian Strangio, 'Thailand to Cease Using Sinovac Vaccines After Supplies Are Exhausted', *The Diplomat*, 20 October 2021.

87. Elizabeth Cheung, 'Wuhan pneumonia: Thailand confirms first case of virus outside China', *South China Morning Post*, 13 January 2020.

88. Jitsiree Thongnoi, 'How China's Sinovac vaccine got caught in the crossfire of Thailand's anti-government protests'.

89. Peter Janssen, 'Huawei on a 5G roll in US ally Thailand', *Asia Times*, 7 January 2022.

Monarchy.⁹⁰ Critics have responded with harsh words.⁹¹ Young protesters in particular have drawn links between Thailand's Computer Crimes Act, a notorious instrument of digital surveillance, and China's «Great Firewall».⁹² Thailand's increased proximity to China, they fear, hinders the Kingdom's democratic transition.

Thailand's relationship with China was also strained by disputes over the management of water resources from the Mekong River. Tensions arose when, in early 2020, Thailand, along with other countries in Southeast Asia, experienced an unprecedented draught, allegedly caused by China's withholding of water upriver.⁹³ One year later, in early 2021, Thailand challenged the construction of a Chinese-backed dam on the Mekong in Laos, citing environmental concerns.⁹⁴ In the same period, the Kingdom was apparently able to use the rivalry between China and the US as an instrument to check the expansionist tendencies of the former. Based on the data provided by a satellite-based monitoring system that is supported by the US, China found itself forced to be more transparent with regards to the control of water resources.⁹⁵

These uncertainties, fallbacks and frictions aside, the influence of China was felt throughout society. As noted by Benjamin Zawacki of the Asia Foundation:

throughout the kingdom, Thailand hosts the most Confucius Institutes of any country in Asia and more than in the rest of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) combined. (...) In 2019 in Bangkok's prestigious Thammasat University, a new Pridi Phanomyong Learning Centre was opened, devoted exclusively to China and featuring an initial collection of over two thousand books. Alongside the thousands of Thais who study in these institutions were, in 2018, some 8,400 students from China – double the number from the previous year. Enabling the Chinese' studies has been an explosion in recent years of Mandarin language courses throughout Thailand at all levels, as well as a rise in non-language courses taught in Mandarin itself.⁹⁶

90. *Ibid.*

91. Suchit Leesak-Gnuansuk, 'Huawei upbeat on Thai 5G development', *Bangkok Post*, 9 November 2021.

92. Benjamin Zawacki, 'Of Questionable Connectivity: China's BRI and Thai Civil Society'.

93. 'Thailand to File Complaint Over China's Dams Choking the Mekong', *Chiang Rai Times*, 16 January 2020.

94. Marwaan Macan-Markar, 'Thailand challenges Laos dam building spree on Mekong River', *Nikkei Asia*, 30 January 2021.

95. Panu Wongcha-um & Kay Johnson, 'China notifies Mekong River neighbours it is holding back waters', *Reuters*, 6 January 2021.

96. Benjamin Zawacki, 'Of Questionable Connectivity: China's BRI and Thai Civil Society'.

Finally, the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a trade agreement between countries of the Asia-Pacific region, may represent another site of contested diplomacy between China and the US. While the Trump administration's decision to withdraw in 2017 caused some stir, Thailand's plans to join have been delayed.⁹⁷ Membership to the CPTPP is opposed by some politicians and business groups, who argue that the lifting of tariffs would damage the local agricultural and healthcare industries.⁹⁸ In September 2021, China applied to join, putting pressure on the Biden administration.⁹⁹ In addition, in October 2021, Thailand officially joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an ASEAN-conceived free trade agreement that includes China, but not the US.¹⁰⁰

3.2. *Thailand's relationship with Myanmar: From trade partner to accomplice*

Thailand's relationship with Myanmar has transformed greatly over the past few decades. In the early 2000s, the climate was tense, with ethnic groups engaging in armed resistance against the Tatmadaw, the Burmese Army, from the Thai border. A flourishing cross-border trade has recently contributed to the development of a solid relationship:¹⁰¹ when General Prayuth became premier in 2014, Myanmar was the first foreign country he visited. In 2018, in the midst of the Rohingya genocide, Thailand also awarded Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, leader of the Tatmadaw, one of its most prestigious orders: the Knight Grand Cross First Class of the Most Exalted Order of the White Elephant.¹⁰² The Burmese coup d'état of 2021 intensified the exchanges between the Militaries of both countries, turning Thailand from trade partner to accomplice.

On 1 February 2021, while Thailand was busy dealing with its own internal unrest, the Myanmar generals staged a coup aimed to limit the growing political influence of Aung San Suu Kyi. Brutal repression ensued: according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, approximately 1,400 died by mid-January 2022.¹⁰³ In March, the Prayuth Government

97. 'Thailand plans to join talks on trans-Pacific trade pact membership', *Reuters*, 22 November 2021.

98. *Ibid.*

99. Carla Freeman, 'How Will China's Bid to Join a Trans-Pacific Trade Pact Affect Regional Stability?', *United States Institute of Peace*, 7 October 2021.

100. 'Thailand completes Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership ratification', *Business Standard*, 2 November 2021.

101. Marwaan Macan-Markar, 'Thai PM and Myanmar junta chief stay engaged via back channels', *Nikkei Asia*, 12 May 2021.

102. 'Thailand decorates Myanmar's army chief amid Rohingya crisis', *Reuters*, 16 February 2018.

103. *Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)*. The data are those of 14 January 2022.

was accused of forcing thousands of ethnic Karen refugees back into Myanmar: a breach of their human rights.¹⁰⁴ A local provincial governor denied the accusation, but was contradicted by a district chief, declaring that «All agencies should follow the policy of the National Security Council which is we need to block those that fled and maintain them along the border».¹⁰⁵ Prayut himself spoke about Thailand's readiness to accept refugees.¹⁰⁶ The Premier also denied sending food supplies to the Tatmadaw, contradicting evidence that was shared on social media and published by Reuters.¹⁰⁷ In May, Thai authorities arrested three Burmese journalists from the media network *Democratic Voice of Burma*, accusing them of entering the country illegally.¹⁰⁸

In December 2021, as the Tatmadaw engaged in warfare against rebels in an area deemed too close to the Thai border, the Thai Military traded artillery fire with Myanmar. A Thai diplomat explained that Thailand fired «two smoke shells, [which are in] accordance with international regulation and for warning [the] Myanmar side to avoid and stop shelling into Thailand's territory».¹⁰⁹ Speaking about the incident, the foreign ministry spokesman expressed concern about Thai people living along the border.¹¹⁰

Analysts believe that Thailand only pays lip service to human rights. They also point out that the Government's words of condemnation of the Tatmadaw have been «much milder than that of ASEAN democracies Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore».¹¹¹ Prayuth managed not to take a direct stance vis-à-vis Myanmar by foregoing, on 24 April 2021, the ASEAN summit in Jakarta, in which the Burmese Junta was compelled to sign a five-point consensus including an the end to violence.¹¹² By refusing to attend, Prayuth simultaneously avoided being seen with Burmese General Min Aung Hlaing, who, following the coup d'état, had become the de facto ruler of Myanmar.¹¹³ According to multiple sources, however, con-

104. Panu Wongcha-um & Panarat Thep gumpanat, 'Thailand denies forcing back Myanmar refugees blocked at border', *Reuters*, 19 March 2021.

105. *Ibid.*

106. *Ibid.*

107. Wassana Nanuam, 'Prayut denies helping Tatmadaw', *Bangkok Post*, 23 March 2021.

108. Sebastian Strangio, 'Thailand Arrests Three Journalists Fleeing Junta Crackdown in Myanmar', *The Diplomat*, 11 May 2021.

109. Gwen Robinson, 'Myanmar clashes fuel Thai border tensions, trading of artillery fire', *Nikkei Asia*, 17 December 2021.

110. 'Myanmar airstrikes displace more people along Thai-Myanmar border', *Reuters*, 24 December 2021.

111. Kay Johnson & Panarat Thep gumpanat, 'Analysis: Myanmar's neighbour Thailand unlikely to toughen stance on coup', *Reuters*, 2 April 2020.

112. Kavi Chongkittavorn, 'Understanding the 5-point consensus on Myanmar', *National News Bureau of Thailand*, 19 May 2021.

113. Marwaan Macan-Markar, 'Thai PM and Myanmar junta chief stay engaged via back channels', *Nikkei Asia*, 12 May 2020.

tacts between the Thai and the Burmese Premiers continue behind closed doors.¹¹⁴ A former Thai ambassador, explains that the «Thai and Myanmar Militaries have a lot of contact at many levels -- local commanders, border commanders, regional commanders and even at the highest level, the central command.»¹¹⁵ Aware of the political implications of the (overt and covert) cordiality between the two, Thai protesters have suggested continuities between their cause and that of their Burmese counterpart.¹¹⁶

4. *The economy*

4.1. *Great disparities: the economy prior to COVID-19*

Economic disparities remain high in the kingdom. In a 2018 report, the *Credit Suisse Global Wealth Databook 2018* identified Thailand as the most unequal country in the world, with the 1% of the population controlling the 66.9% of the country's wealth.¹¹⁷ While the report is deemed controversial, media outlets suggested links between this ratio and the performance of the Prayuth Government.¹¹⁸ Economic grievances were exacerbated throughout 2019, as Thailand recorded the slowest growth in five years.¹¹⁹ In February 2020, Reuters reported that «the economy grew 2.4%, the slowest rate since 2014. It was in line with analysts' forecast, but was sharply down from upwardly revised 4.2% growth the previous year».¹²⁰ At the end of the first quarter, household debts rose to 78.8% of the GDP, among the highest figures in Asia.¹²¹ The Government responded, in October, with stimulus measures worth 114 billion baht, comprising of incentives and moratoriums for farmers, villagers and house buyers.¹²²

Thailand's slow economic growth prior to the *COVID-19* crisis is often explained with reference to the «middle-income trap» and the loss of export competitiveness. Contributing to this stagnancy, the national currency, the

114. *Ibid.*

115. *Ibid.*

116. 'Thai marchers link their democracy cause to Myanmar protests', *ABC News*, 1 March 2021.

117. 'Report: Thailand most unequal country in 2018', *Bangkok Post*, 6 December 2018.

118. Marwaan Macan-Markar, 'The 99% Election: Thais Are Worse Off after Five Years of Military Rule', *Nikkei Asia*, 6 March 2019.

119. International Monetary Fund, *Thailand: 2021 Article IV Consultation-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Thailand*, 3 June 2021.

120. Orathai Sriring & Kitiphong Thaichareon, 'Thai economic growth slips to five-year low, rate cuts likely', *Reuters*, 17 February 2020.

121. Somruedi Bangchongduang, 'BoT blames easy loans for household debt woes', *Bangkok Post*, 16 September 2019.

122. Chatrudee Theparat & Lamonphet Apisitniran, 'Govt rolls out B144bn stimulus', *Bangkok Post*, 27 November 2019.

Thai Baht (THB), was unusually strong, the governor of the Bank of Thailand citing a «high current-account surplus».¹²³ In 2019, as the Baht settled to THB 30 to the dollar, the preferred value for exports being THB 32, Thailand resorted to unprecedented measures to encourage the outflow of capital.¹²⁴

4.2. Greater disparities: the COVID-19 crisis

While the COVID-19 crisis in Thailand was, in 2020 at least, comparatively mild as a health emergency, global factors compounded to worsen an already sluggish economy. Among these factors was the declining demand in trade, which affected exports of manufactures including automobiles, automotive parts, electric appliances and electric components. The worldwide limitations to international travel, to which Thailand itself concurred by imposing quarantines to incoming visitors, penalized the tourism industry, normally 7% of the economy. In addition, throughout 2020 and 2021 the Prayuth Government limited mobility and social gatherings via intermittent lockdowns. The Government additionally prescribed the closing, if often partial, of markets, shopping malls, eateries, bars, entertainment venues, sports venues, and transportation hubs such as bus terminals, train stations and airports.¹²⁵ These measures caused supply chain disruptions and impacted consumption. Qualitative data shows that, even in periods when lockdown measures were eased or lifted, consumers refused to resume their spending habits because of anxieties related to the transmission of the virus.¹²⁶

In September 2020, the Bank of Thailand predicted that the year would close with a GDP contraction of 7.8%,¹²⁷ while the World Bank advanced a less optimistic 8.9%.¹²⁸ 2020 was in fact the worst year for the national economy since the Financial Crisis of 1997:¹²⁹ for sake of compari-

123. Wichit Chaitrong, 'Central bank takes extraordinary steps to cool off baht', *The Nation*, 6 November 2019.

124. *Ibid.*

125. Thomas Parks, Matthew Chatsawan, & Sunil Pillai, *Enduring the Pandemic: Surveys of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Livelihoods of Thai People*, Bangkok: The Asia Foundation, September 2020.

126. *Ibid.*

127. 'โควิด-19: ธนาคารโลกคาดสิ้นปีเศรษฐกิจไทยติดลบอย่างน้อย 8.3% ต่ำสุดในภูมิภาคอาเซียน ด้าน ครม.มีมติต่อ พ.ร.ก.ฉุกเฉินออกไปอีกหนึ่งเดือน (COVID-19: World Banks Believes that by End of Year Thai Economy Will Contract at Least by 8.3%, the Worst in ASEAN, while Cabinet Allows Extension of Emergency Decree for Another Month), *BBC Thai*, 29 September 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-54338090>).

128. Bank of Thailand, 'Forecast Summary in Monetary Policy Report - December 2021' (<https://www.bot.or.th/English/MonetaryPolicy/MonetPolicyCommittee/MPR/Pages/default.aspx>).

129. International Monetary Fund, *Thailand: 2021 Article IV Consultation-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Thailand*.

son, in 1998, the year worst affected by the said crisis, Thailand recorded a negative growth of 10.5%.¹³⁰

The crisis of 2020 hit middle-class households and even more the less privileged.¹³¹ Spelling out what its impact meant for the population, the IMF highlighted the rise of unemployment, especially among low-skilled workers, informal and migrant workers.¹³² The IMF further emphasized that «particularly women and the youth (...) have suffered disproportionately from diminished employment opportunities in contact-intensive sectors».¹³³ The Government responded to the crisis with a stimulus package that amounted to approximately 10% of the GDP, supporting health-related expenditures and offering other forms of financial assistance to affected households.¹³⁴ While praising the effectiveness of such measures, the IMF stressed that «the fiscal deficit widened to 4.8 percent of GDP in 2020 and public debt-to-GDP ratio increased to 49.6 percent of GDP in 2020 from 41 percent in 2019».¹³⁵

The economic outlook displayed modest improvements in 2021. This is due to global progresses in vaccination programs, a recovery in the international demand for export goods,¹³⁶ and the effectiveness of the relief packages offered by the Government. Additionally, the Thai Baht depreciated to as much as THB 33 to the dollar, providing a boost to exports and tourism. The revival experienced by the latter was also made possible by the Government's decision to lift curtails on international travelling in late 2021.¹³⁷ In November 2021, Reuters wrote that the «government upgraded its economic growth outlook to 1.2% this year, compared with a previous forecast of 0.7%-1.2% expansion, and projected 3.5%-4.5% growth in 2022».¹³⁸

In September 2021, nonetheless, the World Bank warned that the crisis continued to impact the country's unemployment rate, explaining that by «the first quarter of 2021, there were 710,000 fewer jobs compared to the previous year».¹³⁹ In November of the same year, the International Labour

130. Thomas Parks, Matthew Chatsuwan, & Sunil Pillai, *Enduring the Pandemic: Surveys of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Livelihoods of Thai People*.

131. *Ibid.*

132. Stella Kaendera & Lamin Leigh, 'Five Things to Know About Thailand's Economy and COVID-19', International Monetary Fund, 23 June 2021.

133. *Ibid.*

134. *Ibid.*

135. *Ibid.*

136. World Bank, *Thailand Economic Monitor: July 2021: The Road to Recovery*, July 2021 (<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35945>).

137. Kitiphong Thaichareon, 'UPDATE 2-Thai economy shrinks less than expected, 2021 outlook raised as tourism revival eyed', *Reuters*, 15 November 2021.

138. *Ibid.*

139. The World Bank, 'The World Bank in Thailand: Overview', updated on September 2021 (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/overview#1>).

Organization (ILO) insisted that youth joblessness remained a worrying trend, with youth employment falling by 7% in the first quarter of 2021, and interesting especially women and business of less than 50 employees.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, while Thailand re-opened to vaccinated foreign tourists, and the Government conceded a 95% tax cut on jet fuel in February to support the aviation industry,¹⁴¹ in late December, worldwide anxieties related to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant prompted the reinstatement of a mandatory quarantine of international travellers.¹⁴²

In late 2021, the Government also devised investment stimulus measures to boost recovery in the ECC.¹⁴³ The ECC Office expected that the area would attract an average of 500 billion baht annually between 2022 and 2026, contributing to the Kingdom's economic growth by 1.5% a year.¹⁴⁴ Commenting on the project, Prayuth Chan-ocha stressed that the new high-speed rail connecting the ECC to the North-east of Thailand (Isan) prospects plentiful job opportunities.¹⁴⁵ Unimpressed, activists and residents responded that the project will only aggravate existing problems, from environmental degradation to land dispossession.¹⁴⁶

5. Conclusion

Altogether, 2019-21 had a profound impact on the ways in which ordinary people interacted with ideology and state agents. The protests in particular brought about a cultural shift whereby the youth felt empowered to challenge inherited norms and authorities. Practices once ubiquitous such as standing for the King in cinemas became neglected,¹⁴⁷ while outrageous expressions of dissent such as burning royal icons crystallized as part of a

140. International Labour Organization, 'Youth unemployment in Thailand hits new highs due to COVID-19', 23 November 2021.

141. Pranjal Pande, 'Thailand Won't Tax Jet Fuel Until 2022', *Simple Flying*, 22 April 2021, available at: <https://simpleflying.com/thailand-jet-fuel-tax/>

142. Sebastian Strangio, 'Thailand Suspends Quarantine-Free Travel Policy Due to Omicron Fears', *The Diplomat*, 22 December 2021.

143. 'Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor gets expansion investment stimulus', *Pattaya Mail*, 22 December 2021.

144. Chatrudee Theparat, 'EEC expects investment average of B500bn a year' *Bangkok Post*, 23 December 2021.

145. 'Thailand signs \$7.4bn high-speed train project agreement', *Railway Technology*, 25 October 2019, updated on 31 August 2021.

146. 'Thai farmers fear loss of land to industrial zone linked to China's belt and road', *South China Morning Post*, 31 December 2021.

147. 'เพลงสรรเสริญพระบารมี: ย้อนเหตุการณ์ยืน-ไม่ยืนในโรงหนัง หลังนายกฯ ปลุกใจให้ "กล้าหาญที่จะยืน" (The Royal Anthem: Looking Back at the Issue of Standing/Not Standing in Cinemas after Premier Encourages People to «Dare to Stand Up»)', *BBC Thai*, 27 August September 2019, updated on 12 November 2021 (<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-49470465>).

shared repertoire of resistance.¹⁴⁸ These important novelties aside, the protests did not transform into a large mass movement, failing to achieve their goals in the realm of *realpolitik*.

As of December 2021, key protest leaders remained in jail, the Prayuth Government refusing them bail. Despite its reassurances to the pleas of human rights groups and the international community, the Government also continued sending refugees back to Myanmar.¹⁴⁹ Last but not least, the spread of the Omicron variant caused much anxiety, feeding the existing climate of distrust toward the Government in a population of 66 million, among whom approximately 46 million have received two doses of vaccine, and 7 million three.¹⁵⁰

148. 'กลัวคนร้ายเผาซ้ำ ม.ขอนแก่นหรือเก็บพระบรมฉายาลักษณ์ไม่เหลือสักจุด (Out of Fear that Ill-intentioned Individuals will Burn Them Again, Khon Kaen University Remove Royal Icons from All Areas)', ผู้จัดการออนไลน์, 22 September 2021 (<https://mgronline.com/local/detail/9640000094041>).

149. 'Thailand sends refugees back to Myanmar as clashes continue', *Reuters*, 19 December 2021.

150. ศูนย์ข้อมูลโควิด19กรมประชาสัมพันธ์ (Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration), 1 January 2022 (<https://www.facebook.com/informationcovid19/>).

