Securitization of civil resistance: Thailand's military junta and beyond

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Abstract

On May 22, 2014, Thailand witnessed its twelfth military coup. Despite deficiency in democratic legitimacy, the junta has thus far sustained mass support, while challengers to its rule are denounced as a threat to the restoration of national order. This article seeks to demonstrate the way in which security discourses in Thailand are manufactured and employed to undermine civil resistance to the military junta. It relies on the securitization concept to analyse the discursive depth of repression which potentially undermines the effect of 'Political Jiu-jitsu' and 'Backfire' examined in civil resistance literature. The Thai case shows that four discursive components consolidate the framing of dissidents as a security threat. These are: 1) A security narrative creating fear of national order breakdown due to polarising conflicts caused by representative democracy; 2) A security narrative promising the reintroduction of political stability through military dictatorship; 3) The identification of anti-junta protests as acts that threaten to sabotage this order-restoration process; 4) The portrayal of the army-led junta as the national savior protecting Thailand from internal threats, including protests demanding democracy. The article concludes by suggesting that in order to combat the securitization strategy of the junta, pro-democracy activists need to develop de-securitization strategies in order to enhance the effectiveness of their campaigns.

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Introduction

Subsequent to the 2014 coup in Thailand street protests that had been a common occurrence over past decades were labelled as a threat to peace and order. Coup makers explained that their intervention was legitimate because during the 2013-14 protests by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), Thailand was on the verge of civil war.

They claimed that by their intervention they saved the country from the protracted conflicts that pitted people from different political affiliations against each other. Such protests threatened chaos and national disintegration and hence needed to be eliminated so that peace and order might be restored. Consequently, pro-democracy campaigns and activities came to be identified as acts of sabotage, threatening the junta's project of re-establishing stability in Thailand. These security discourses were generated to ensure public support for a crackdown on dissidents.

In this paper, I seek to examine the nexus between security discourses and repression of nonviolent movements by specifically looking at the way in which nonviolent anti-military government activism in Thailand was framed as a threat to national security in the period from May 2014 to June 2015. I will attempt to demonstrate how the security narratives were developed as part of an effort to suppress dissent and legitimize the junta's repression.. The analysis of the security discourse employed by the junta is based on examination of the weekly broadcasts of the Prime Minister, published official statements, and material derived from interviews with junta leaders reported in the media.. These sources of information were supplemented by material relating to anti-junta activism which came from personal communications with students involved with anti-junta protests, my own experience as an academic being harassed by the authorities, news reports, journalistic and academic articles, and NGO reports. e.

Civil Resistance, Repression and Securitization

Understanding repression through the theoretical lens of securitization has so far attracted little attention in civil resistance literature, although it has informed work in other disciplines such as the study of social movements. Scholars of civil resistance/nonviolent struggle have typically focused on democratization campaigns within authoritarian regimes. Scholars such as Richard Gregg, Gene Sharp and Brian Martin have argued that repression applied by authoritarian regimes can play into the hands of activists who do not resort to retaliation, and carefully plan communications with the wider public regarding the opponent's repression. Concepts such as *moral and political ju-jitsu* and *backfire dynamics* posit that repression can actually enhance a movement's mobilization

capacity mobilization and help them create leverage among domestic and international third parties, and security forces (Gregg 1935, Sharp 1973, 2005, Martin 2007, 2015, Nikolayenko 2007, Sørensen 2008, Roberts and Ash 2009, Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, Erickson Nepstad 2011). Scholars such as Sharon Erickson Nepstad (2015) have analyzed how regimes attempt to undermine nonviolent movements by dividing the opposition, encouraging troop loyalty, and neutralizing international sanctions. However, in her analysis Nepstad failed to explore the manner in which regimes can attempt to sustain domestic popular support through discursive manipulation. Kurt Schock (2015: 118) has addressed this aspect by reference to the practice of counter-framing, whereby "the frames of challengers are critiqued and challengers are delegitimized and deprecated through drawing on hegemonic ideology that supports the elite interests." However, Schock did not identify the specific features of framing and counter-framing activities oriented to mobilizing support for the elites. A key element of such projects has been the portrayal of nonviolent activists as a national security threat, a strategy that has been adopted most recently in Thailand and Egypt (after 2013) where military governments have gained power and sought to engender popular support for the repression of pro-democracy activists.

If we want to understand how authoritarian regimes can legitimize their political repression of nonviolent pro-democracy protestors, it is imperative that we examine the manner in which such regimes can define nonviolent activists as a threat to national security and succeed in getting such a securitized definition (or frame) publicly accepted.

Social Movement scholars have lately drawn attention to the production of security framing in undermining social movements. Framing process can work for the benefit of both social movements and the ruling elites. Movements may make use of existing cultural elements, collective emotion and identity to create an interpretative guideline that influences the general public to join their struggle (Snow et al. 1986, Johnston 1995, Jasper 1997, Steinberg 1998, Benford and Snow 2000, Williams 2004, Johnston and Noakes 2005). At the same time, ruling elites may rely on the same components to uphold their legitimacy (Noakes 2000, Björk 2005, Roscigno et al. 2015). In this regard, Social Movements researchers such as Opp and Roehl (1990), Rasler (1996), and Earl (2004) have point-

ed out that repression can be legitimized if oppositional movements are framed as a threat to the well-being of society and the stability of the existing political order. Examples of such processes include the cases of South Korea under the Park Chung-hee regime (Chang and Kim 2007: 332) and Turkey under the Erdogan administration (Dimirsu 2014).. However, social movement theorists have not explored the manner in which security discourses are framed by authoritarian state agencies to bolster and reproduce public acceptance of repression..

The securitization framework serves as a useful analytical lens through which to explore the relationship between security discourses and repression. Developed in the field of International Relations and Critical Security Studies, securitization refers to the process through which an issue is labelled as a 'security' issue by an elite actor (Buzan et al. 1998: vii). In such a process the issue is removed from the the normal political domain and into the 'security sphere' where policies to tackle issues of national security are put forward and implemented. Once labelled as 'security issues' the process of policy-making and implementation bye-passes normal democratic procedure. (Wæver 1995: 55). Three key conditions facilitate this process: 1) The speech act (such as propagated rhetoric and the borrowing of existing nationalist discourses) following the grammar of security emphasizing priority, urgency, defense, and survival; 2) The securitizing actor being in a 'position of authority to maximize audience acceptance; and 3) The features of the alleged threat(s) (Buzan et al. 1998: 33). The emphasis on existential danger is routinely repeated through different agencies until public opinion is shaped in such a way that it is deemed acceptable and legitimate for such securitized issues to be deliberated outside of the normal political terrain in a sphere where citizens' participation in policy making is not appropriate or necessary.(see Balzacq 2011, McDonald 2008, Taureck 2006). At the core of this securitization process is the creation of a publicly perceived threat, with the associated fear for collective safety and public order. In such circumstances the state can reaffirm its central role in protecting the estabolished order and the safety of its citizens by declaring a state of emergency, claiming . absolute executive power to define potential threats and deal with them (see Agamben 2005).

To be effective the securitization of civil resistance to authoritarian regimes requires the incorporation of existing cultural and historical memories into the security discourse. In this way the public perception of fear and threat can resonate with collective memory and identity. Protesters' demands can be accordingly downplayed, popular agreement with governmental repression induced, and the efficacy of a movement undermined. Vânia Carvalho Pinto (2014) analyses precisely this effect of securitization on the Bahraini protests in 2011 when pro-democracy activists were accused of being the 'fifth column' of Iran, whose influence over the Shi'ite communities in the Gulf States has long been a target of suspicion and fear for the rulers. By spreading this fear related to the historic 'threat' the Bahraini monarchy succeeded in convincing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – consisting of Oman, the Arab Emirates, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar – to deploy troops in Bahrain to crush the opposition. .. Pinto (2014: 265) concludes that securitizing social movements is complete when credible elites and opinion leaders articulate the problem of threats by attributing its origin to a social movement, while basing this association on the value systems, worldview and cultural milieu of the target group. In this manner the securitization of an issue (and an oppositional movement) makes possible the public acceptance of repressive policies, even when targeted against nonviolent movements. The diagram below illustrates this type of process, one which has characterised the the crackdown on anti-junta protesters in Thailand during 2014-15.

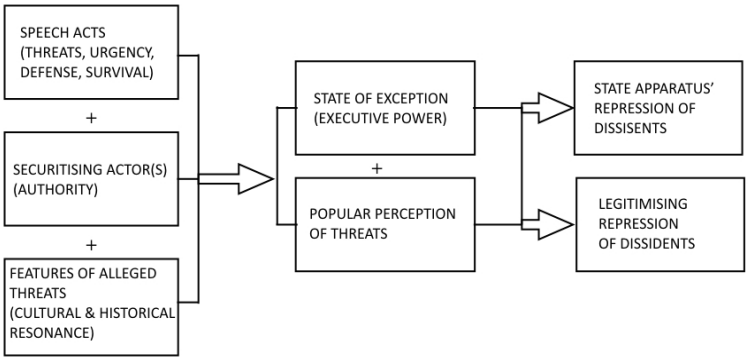

Diagram adapted by the author from Buzan et al. (1998)

Thailand's conflicts and the 2014 military coup

Thailand's 2014 military coup was a symptom of a decade long-governmental crisis, reflecting the fears of traditional elites and Bangkok middle class whose power had been challenged by new political elites and their grassroots mass supporters. Thai traditional elites, comprising the monarchy, army and certain business groups, have upheld their political and economic domination since the early days of Thailand's breakaway from absolutist monarchy. Military coups have often been staged when this network of domination is under threat (McCargo 2005, MacGregor 2014). The 1992 nonviolent uprising overthrew the military dictatorship which many anticipated would be the last one (Callahan 1998, Chaiwat 1999, Kurt 2005: 120-41). The 1997 constitution gave rise to new political elites from the provinces – led by the media tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra – who were elected by their rural constituents, especially in the impoverished North and Northeast of Thailand. Despite some successes in coopting old elites, Thaksin's relationship with them turned sour when there were signs of his creeping monopoly of the media, politics and economy. More importantly, his welfare policies empowering grassroots communities, together with the fast growing economic development in Thailand, began to shift grassroots loyalty away from the establishment elites and toward his party and cronies (Phasuk and Baker 2008, Hewison 2010).

As conflicts between Thaksin and traditional elites deepened, mass demonstrations were orchestrated by the parties to the struggle. In 2005, the threatened elites mobilized supporters mainly from Bangkok in joining anti-Thaksin protests. This paved the way for the 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin's elected government (Pye and Schaffer 2008, Kasian 2006, Connors and Hewison 2008, Chairat 2012). When the old elites managed to restore their power through the manipulation of the 2007 constitution, Thaksin and his allies opted for an electoral strategy, while organizing mass demonstrations to defy the junta (Uchane 2010). This development kicked off the tit-for-tat overthrow of governments representing Thaksin and the old elites through mass mobilizations in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2014 (Hewison 2014). While both new and old elites were struggling to defend their vested interest, Thais found themselves divided into Red (Thaksin supporters together with pro-democ-

racy activists and academics) and Yellow camps (ultra-royalists, technocrats and Bangkok middle class). The 2014 coup reflected the old elites' attempt to restore the Yellow camp's status quo and weaken the Red. . Despite pro-democracy activists' efforts to distance themselves from Thaksin, the junta's actions to weaken the Red camp also encompassed those fighting for democracy. Portraying them as constituting a national security threat was one of their ways of pursuing this goal..

There were three elements to the the junta's claim that Red Shirts and democracy advocates threatened the Thai nation. Firstly, the 2009-10 protests by Red Shirts showed traditional elites that Red Shirts could threaten them physically and symbolically. Using the feudal discourse of *Prai* (commoner) against *Ammat* (aristocrat), Red Shirts took to the street in early 2009 and mid-2010, demanding the resignation of the Yellow camp-backed government. After an exchange of insults by Red Shirts and security forces, and failed negotiations, the army helped the government by clamping down on Red Shirt protesters (Wassana 2010). The crackdown resulted in more than 90 deaths and around 2,000 injuries (Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand 2011, The Center for Information about the Crackdown between April and May 2010 2012). Sporadic attacks by unknown assailants and alleged arson by Red Shirts during the protests convinced the elites that their status quo was threatened by Red Shirts. For Bangkok middle class the rural Red Shirts – derogatorily known as *kwai daeng* ('red buffalo' which conveys the cultural denotation of 'stupidity' and 'backwardness') – represented an intrusion of the uncivilized poor who burned down their highly worshipped shopping malls. Red Shirts were defined as a 'red threat' who were threatening to burn down the city (*phoa barn phao meung)* (Saxer 2014).

Secondly, when Yellow Shirts took to the street in 2013-14, a series of armed assaults on demonstrators generated the fear of Thailand being on the brink of civil war, which convinced the army to step in. The Red Shirts' political party had won the election in 2011, but their government was short-lived. The party's political naivety, alleged corruption and lack of accountability gave ground for Yellow Shirts' protests. The Red Shirts-supported government resorted to forcible dispersion of protesters, but their responses were seen as limited by some Red Shirt extremists who took matter into their own hands. From January 29 to May

11, 2014, there were reportedly 32 bombing attacks in and around the PDRC[1] protest venues, causing 25 deaths and almost 800 injuries (INN News 2014a). It seemed to some observers that civil war threatened. (Bangkokbiz News 2014). Meanwhile, the PDRC leadership sent signals encouraging military intervention (MThai News 2014a). The army was at first reluctant. But as violence escalated, General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, then army chief, declared Martial Law and eventually seized power. He claimed that Thailand was on the brink of civil war (Nation TV 2014).

The third element was the military's long-standing fear of a breakdown of the national order which would threaten its own vested interests and the monopoly of political power enjoyed by its allies. Traditional elites have sustained their domination through the reproduction of a conservative version of national identity. Being a Thai is to be a subject, rather than a citizen, of the Kingdom. A subject has a moral duty to preserve his or her loyalty to the head of the polity, the King. This polity's survival depends on national harmony and as such can harbor no tolerance for disrespect towards higher authority and open disagreement (see, for example, Barmé 1993, Thongchai 1994, Conners 2003, Reynolds 2004). The Thai army has played a pivotal role in safeguarding this national order. (Pavin 2014). Whenever the established order has been challenged, such as by the communists in the 1970s or the contemporary movement for democracy, they have staged a coup in order to 'cleanse' the polity of those elements that would corrupt it. (Streckfuss 2011: 87-122).[2]

The rise of the Red Shirts reflected the changing economic and political landscape in Thailand with the emergence of the rural working class from the feudal yoke (Naruemon and McCargo 2012). It also opened up a space for increased criticisms of the army's and royal family's interventions in politics – something that was unacceptable to the

[1] People's Democratic Reform Committee

[2] It should be noted that factions within the army also have vested interest in preserving the existing order such as prestige and lucrative military expenditure. See The Economist (2014).

military establishment (Uchane 2012, Ünaldi 2014).[3] Right after taking power the junta declared its plan to restore national order.

> It is an extremely important duty of the Government to defend the monarchy. Legal, psychological, and telecommunication measures will be employed to deal with those having malicious intent against the monarchy. The Government will also disseminate accurate information, knowledge, understanding, and facts about the Royal Family and royal duties, with an aim to create awareness and foster humble gratefulness towards the monarchy, the Father and the Mother of the land, and spiritually create unity among the people of Thailand (Thailand Today 2014).

The restoration of order would require sacrifices from all Thai subjects. The army had made its sacrifice by stepping in to de-escalate the conflict and ensure stability for the country. In a similar spirit the Thai people should play their part by not disturbing the process of restoring order. There could be no place for anti-junta protests both on the street and in social media space because Thailand was going through such an abnormal time when national unity was needed more than ever (*Khaosod* 2014a). This was the rhetoric of the juntain its securitization of pro-democracy activists.

Anti-junta activism

Three main groups that have criticized the junta are; 1) Red Shirt politicians and supporters; 2) Pro-democracy students, academics, journalists and other citizens; and 3) Marginalized rural communities.

For the junta, the threat from the Red Shirts was the possible overthrow of their rule by means of a counter-coup. Accordingly, it moved to seize weapons believed to belong to Red Shirt activists, while arresting around 2,000 of them with serious charges (*INN News* 2014b, *Khaosod* 2014b).. In addition, by imposing Martial Law and other draconian mea-

[3] The 2008-2010 uprising perhaps presented an unprecedented open defiance of monarchy that was organized and mobilized by a powerful opposition force. A telling Red Shirt campaign is 'Enlightenment,' (Ta Swang) which indicates their critical awareness of the monarchy's role in shaping Thai politics.

sures , the junta thwarted any attempt by Red Shirt politicians to mobilize their supporters for mass protest.

The junta, however, has found it hard to control symbolic protests by individuals whose democratic stance has driven them to defy its authority, and consequently has relied on security discourses to publicly delegitimize this group of opponents. University students have been amongst the most outspoken. A prominent action has been eating sandwiches. According to Sirawit Serithiwat from Faculty of Political Science, Thammasat University, the initial idea was that he and his friends would disseminate leaflets, but the police prohibited them from doing so due to the imposed Martial Law. They had brought sandwiches with them to snack so, unable to distribute their leaflets, they gave out sandwiches instead (Sirawit Serithiwat, pers. diss. May 6, 2015). Later on, students from Kasetsart University repeated this action by organizing a 'sandwich party' (*BBC News* 2014a).

Another symbolic protest has been the use of a three-finger salute – inspired by the film *The Hunger Games*. A few months after protesters adopted this blockbuster's symbol, the second episode of the film was scheduled for screening in Thai cinemas. Students organized an event distributing free tickets at a cinema in downtown Bangkok. However, on the first screening date the cinema manager denied students entry to the designated venue. A transgender student decided to flash the *Hunger Games* salute in front of a large publicity poster of the film. In Khon Kaen province, northeast of Thailand, five students calling themselves 'Daodin'[4] flashed the three finger salute during a speech by the junta PM (*Aljazeera* 2014, *Prachatai* 2014b).

Other activities have included symbolic use of the arts. When a pro-democracy historian at Thammasat University was forced to resign, eight students distributed leaflets featuring a poem by the late Chit Phumisak, the Thai poet and communist rebel. The poem reads: 'In an era of darkness, rule is by the gun, but people will still be people" (*Prachatai* 2014b). On another occasion students formed a coalition with human rights lawyers, artists and writers, called 'Citizen Resistant' (*Pholameung Toh Glab*). On Valentine's Day they staged a street performance entitled

[4] A student group.

'My Dear/Stolen Election' (*Leunk Tang Tee Rak/Lak*). A performer carried a ballot box, while dancing. He later placed it down on the street. As expected, a secret police unit stationed in that area took it away, thereby highlighting the junta's hyper-anxiety about anything related to democracy (*Siam Intelligence* 2015). After being charged for staging this nonviolent activity, members of 'Citizen Resistant' marched to a police station, giving themselves in, and at the same time filing a lawsuit against the coup-makers for their unconstitutional seizure of power (*Matichon* 2015a). A group of citizens came up with the idea of reading George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984* at monorail stations to demonstrate the current state of censorship and surveillance in Thailand (Bagenal 2014). On other occasions protestors have donned t-shirts emblazoned with the slogan 'Peace Please,' or worn masks printed with the message 'People.' They have also covered their eyes, mouth and ears with their hands, symbolizing the junta censorship (*Prachatai* 2014b

The junta has been particularly wary of journalists and the media, especially those with the temerity to expose military abuses. A prime example was a TV show run by the Thai Public Broadcasting Service, in which activists and villagers were invited to discuss their concerns about the junta's policies that promised to reform Thailand. The government interpreted this show as a form of defiance.

Another source of resistance to the junta stems from ordinary villagers seeking to defend their land and natural resources from encroachment and expropriation by commercial companies. From May to December 2014, villagers in at least 28 localities throughout Thailand were given notice to evacuate. Local military units claimed that they received orders from their commanders to evict those 'illegally' residing in the officially 'preserved' areas. The government denied any involvement in this abuse. And it seems that local military units that have enjoyed increased autonomy since the coup initiated the harassment on their own. Commanders of these units allegedly have close ties with companies grabbing villagers' lands (Chaiwat Satha-Anand, chairperson of Strategic Nonviolence Committee, pers.comm. June 30, 2015). Despite the government's denial, it seems clear that the ongoing imposition of Martial Law and other draconian laws have served to facilitate arbitrary resource grabbing (Human Rights Watch 2014a). Villagers, assisted by NGOs, academics

and student activists, have voiced their grievances. They have held public forums and seminars, while expressing their defiance against military abuses by wearing anti-junta T-shirts, submitting petitions, and rallying to demand the investigation of companies' encroachment (*Prachatai* 2014c).

Crackdown on anti-junta dissidents

Public dissent has been outlawed and punishable by Martial Law, *lèse majesté* (offense against monarchy) law and under section 44 of the interim constitution.[5] This has resulted in the militarization of the judicial process such that individual suspects can be detained arbitrarily, civilians tried in military courts, and a military unit set up to investigate crimes on behalf of the police (*Prachatai* 2015a). Under these circumstances, dissenters can face forms of harassment listed as follows.

Summoning and pressing charges

Between May 2014 and May 2015, 751 individuals were summoned. At least 22 of them were subsequently charged with six of them prosecuted under the *lèse majesté* law (*Prachatai* 2015b).

'Attitude adjustment'

Most of the summoned were detained for about seven days, which helped discourage any attempt to resist the military rule. As the term 'detention' sounds harsh and can give the Thai junta a bad name overseas, they opted for more benevolent terms such 'attitude adjustment' (*prap thassanakati*). Martial Law allows detention of a suspect without warrant for seven days. Most detainees were released on the condition that they signed a document prohibiting their future participation in any political activity and/or requiring them to obtain permission from the army prior

[5] In Thailand, punishment by lèse majesté charge is harsh. A fair trial is rare which results in many innocents being given sentence without being able to defend themselves. The jail sentence for violating the lèse majesté law is between 3 to 15 years. One year after the coup, there are 46 individuals being charged with lèse majesté. Among others, two convicts are young theatre performers alleged of staging a play mocking the monarchy. See Prachatai (2015b) and Campbell (2014).

to making any travel abroad (*Prachatai* 2015b). In 2015, the discourse shifted from 'attitude adjustment' to reconciliation' (prong dong), with the military claiming that its critics were being invited for a discussion on plans for national reconciliation (Suluck 2015).

Outlawing symbolic protests

Martial Law and interim constitution's section 44 bans a gathering of more than five persons, and it is normally stretched to cover other activities such as distributing leaflets. When flashing three finger salute became a popular method of protest, the authorities warned that they would arrest anyone in a large group who gave the salute and refused to lower their arm when ordered whilst the prime minister threatened that anyone flashing it could put their futures at risk (*BBC* 2014b).

Media censorship and ban on academic seminars

The rights to free speech and academic freedom have been curtailed by the junta. . Journalists were summonedfor a lecture on how to produce and report 'reconciliatory' news. Outspoken journalists such as Pravit Rojanapruk and Thanaphol Eawsakul were detained (Reporters Without Borders 2014, Prachatai 2015d). TV programmes have been heavily censored and offending programme makers forced to resign.

Martial Law and section 44 provide grounds for banning academic seminars. Holding a public discussion on issues considered 'political' requires permission from a local military unit. Without this permission events can be cancelled and organizers detained. The Legal Education Centre (known as iLaw) has documented that in the first year of the coup at least 71 public academic events, theatrical performances and movie screenings were subject to intervention and censorhip by the military (Prachatai 2015b).

Arbitrary arrest, 'forced promise' and trial in military courts

Protesters often face arbitrary arrest. Usually they are held at a local police station for hours before any decision is made as to whether or not they should be charged.. Students in particular are released after detention on the condition that they sign a document promising not to participate in any future anti-government protests.

Internet surveillance and harassment

Students, activists and academics have been closely monitored. Upon their seizure of power the, coup makers made it clear that their battlefield would include cyber space. On May 29, 2014, the junta issued the Order Number 26/2014 which outlined measures to prevent 'the dissemination of false information online' (Thaweeporn 2014). In addition, it enables the authorities to trace anti-junta activities in social media, especially Facebook. Many have been sentenced with *lèse majesté* because of their comments interpreted as insults against the royal family, its symbols and its representatives (see *Prachatai* 2015f). In January 2015, the junta approved a proposed bill which allows the authorities to conduct mass surveillance on every means of communication in the name of national security. Moreover the junta cabinet has approved a proposal from the Royal Thai Police to amend the 1934 Criminal Procedure Code which will enable the police to intercept communication devices of criminal suspects (Thaweeporn 2015). This legalisation of communication surveillance facilitates different forms of harassing dissidents, ranging from monitoring their daily routine leading, phone threats and house visits (Kongpob 2015, Levefre 2015), to filing a lawsuit against villagers posting pictures of abusive authorities (Prachatai 2015b).

Thai junta's securitization of dissidents

These forms of crackdown mark a departure from blatantly violent suppression by the 'old school' juntas of the past. The incumbent Thai junta has opted for legal intimidation and bureaucratic hassles obstructing effective pro-democracy protests. Despite international condemnation of these practices (see, for example, U.S. Department of State 2014, *Deutsche Welle* 2014, Federation for Human Rights 2015, Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada and Asia Legal Rights Resource Centre 2015, Lefevre and Aukkarapon 2015), a large number of domestic constituents, especially amongst the urban population and business sectors, maintain their support for the junta (Kapook Poll 2015, *Manager Online* 2015, *MThai news* 2015, *Thairath* 2015). A major reason has to do with the ruling elites' manipulation of rhetoric that feeds the public fear of political instability caused by a decade-long conflict. The junta has depicted itself as the most capable agent in dealing with this crisis.

Defining Threats and Dangerous Time

Linking a national threat to the undermining of established order has historically been a common discourse among coup-makers (Streckfuss 2011). However, the current junta's security discourse is different from earlier versions in that the presumed threat of 'civil war' precipitated by disruptive mass demonstrations demonstrates the existence of a physical threat to the wellbeing of the Thai nation. Since the very first days in power, the leader of the junta declared his mission to tackle the problem of street clashes through the imposition of draconian laws and introduction of returning happiness to the people scheme.

> Our priority is to safeguard peace and security of the Kingdom [of Thailand]. Therefore, the enforcement of Martial Law is essential because it enables the authorities to terminate violence immediately. Over the past months, normal law could not achieve this.. Our mission is to return this country to normalcy, so that everyone is happy. We want to return happiness to the people in this nation… (Prayuth 2014a).

With this theme as a backdrop, the junta has identified three elemental threats to national order. These are the risk of civil war, a dangerous and destabilizing democracy, and national disunity caused by prolonged political conflict and associated tensions. These threats are, of course, interlinked. The threat of of civil war is presented as the reason why representative democracy – the core feature of which is free and fair elections – is not the most suitable option for Thailand in crisis. Democracy brings conflicts to the fore, it thereby heightens the risk of violence, and as such is a danger.As the head of the junta explained:

> If there is still an election in this country, it will create conflicts, and the country will, again, experience the endless circle of conflicts, violence, politicians' corruption, terrorism and the use of war weaponry… This is very dangerous, I have realized… you can see what we (the government) have been trying to do here. Without our intervention, people would have used these weapons to kill one another (Prayuth 2014b).

The fundamental threat to the well-being of the Thai people is their disunity. The answer to this is the acknowledgement that there can be

only one source of 'true' information about the country – the junta. The Prime Minister's rant at a journalist reflects this conviction:

> Why do you always have to argue with me? The only person who deserves to say anything at all is me" (*Matichon* 2015b). When in a good mood, he welcomes questions, but not disagreement: "If you have any questions, come and ask me. All countries can ask me directly what the truth is ...Watching people voice disagreement, that I hate" (Hui Yee 2015). Sometimes silent dissent might be tolerated, but saying it out loud is unacceptable. As General Prawit Wongsuwan, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister affirmed: 'If anyone disagrees with us, they have the right to think that way. But they cannot express that [disagreement] publicly (*Khaosod* 2014c).

Defining ways to bring about unity and security

Overcoming this dangerous time requires a project to consolidate national unity in which citizens are re-educated about how to be subservient Thai subjects. Unlike the past when the juntas labelling dissidents 'un-Thai', the current elites consider critics and protesters as not being Thai enough. Their rebellious attitude is not be dismissed, but adjusted (hence the 'attitude adjustment' programme) so they better comprehend the ongoing crisis of national unity, and the junta's efforts to resolve this (see, for example, Pravit 2014, 2015). Meanwhile, Thai values such as patriotism, loyalty and Buddhism have been reinforced among school children and villagers in Red Shirt strongholds (Saksith and Siam Voices 2014, *The Isaan Record* 2015). As mentioned earlier, the military regime diagnosed that disunity caused by democracy and Red-Yellow conflicts have challenged the existing order. The term reconciliation serves as a discursive instrument to facilitate order redemption, and at the same time to put down potential challengers. The establishment of reconciliation centers across provinces epitomize this. Run by the army's Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), these centers aim at 'teaching people to live together harmoniously' (Lefevre 2014) and about the importance of monarchy (*The Isaan Record* 2015). Despite the junta's claim to have resolved the Red-Yellow antagonism, only Red Shirts in Thailand's north and northeast are key targets. Moreover, they are prohibited

from expressing their political view during and after the training sessions. In this sense, as junta leaders have reiterated, the success of the reconciliation project depends on people's complete cooperation with the government (Prayuth 2014e, The Royal Thai Government 2015). The end result of the reconciliation process is to bring 'happiness' tothe Thai people, which entails the forgetting of the army's past human rights abuse and Red Shirt identity (Siwach 2015). This Thai sense of happiness – implying stability, social harmony and the elites' monopoly of power and resources – constitutes an ideology used to induce public acceptance of the junta crackdown on dissidents (Bandow 2015).

Defining spoilers/threats to the junta's efforts to bring unity and security

Unlike Red Shirt politicians identified as a direct threat to the junta's rule, nonviolent dissidents are publicly framed as spoilers who are sabotaging the government's reconciliation plan. In response to protesters' criticism regarding its unconstitutional and undemocratic seizure of power, junta leaders often denounce this claim as 'lacking an understanding' and 'not true.' For example, General Prawit once commented that the government cannot continue working if people always protest. "All hell will break loose again, and there will be no reconciliation. If we upset you, you should tell us directly. You shouldn't have said something untrue publicly." (*Bangkokbiz News* 2015). When Daodin activists flashed the three finger salute during Prayuth's speech, he kept his cool and even invited more protesters to come forward so they all could listen to him at once. Afterwards, he stated, "If these protests go on, we cannot move forward. There will be no change for a better future. I think the majority of people understand what we are trying to achieve" (*Manager Online* 2014).

The government and army leadership have routinely repeated similar statements in order to dissuade citizens from participating in anti-regime protests. For instance, Colonel Winthai Suwaree, army spokesperson, repeatedly reminded Thais that the army has sacrificed greatly. The coup was a good thing because it de-escalated the ongoing conflict so that Thailand can move forward. Protests and criticism against the authorities will surely be counterproductive to this effort (*Khaosod* 2014a).

Such a rhetoric is used time and again to warn against protests by groups addressing different grievances, ranging from Buddhist monks and factory works to farmers and fishermen (*Now 26 Channel* 2015, *Bangkokbiz News* 2015, *Daily News* 2015). One year after the coup, with resistance to military government still manifest, the Prime Minister has repeated the claim that the coup would not have been necessary of democracy had worked in the first place: Prime Minister"[Staging a coup] is actually a waste of my time and the loss of my credibility, but I do care about this nation…it would be my utter failure if disharmony among the people remains" (*Post Today* 2015).

This is a recurring theme in the rhetoric of the junta, that the Prime Minister and his military entourage have made a great sacrifice taking power from a corrupt government and saving Thailand from the brink of civil war. An anti-government protest implies terrible ingratitude and disregard for this sacrifice. Something which the junta members find difficult to comprehend, as the Prime Minister explained:

> The call for democracy is not strange. But what is strange is our past version of democracy creating all kinds of problems…I don't understand why protesters don't care that these problems [of democracy] exist, especially the insecurity of citizens' lives and property…We're working hard to solve these problems, but [instead of thanking us] you are blaming us [for curbing freedom of expression]. This is not fair! (Prayuth 2014f).

Professing incomprehension that anyone might be critical of such a necessary and benevolent coup, the junta consider any dissidence to originate in the extreme margins of society or be politically driven by evil (Red Shirt) politicians. The 'fringe' frame aims to belittle protesters, making it difficult for them to gain any political momentum, whilst the the 'evil Red Shirt' frame aims at demonizing protesters in a context where the junta feel that a crackdown could backfire on them, generating public sympathy for the protesters. The Prime Minister's and Defense Minister's comparative responses to arrests of student activists in November 2014 and June 2015 illustrate this discursive development. In his November 2014 interview, the Defence Minister stated;

> All the polls obviously show that the public don't want any open defiance against the government and security forces. We deserve more time to prove ourselves. I can tell you that the number of resisting groups is not increasing. [Subversive acts] are rather a lone wolf action. But we need to investigate whether or not there is a mastermind (*Reung Lao Chao Nee* 2014).

In a similar vein, General Udomdej Sitabutr, then army chief, asserted that the majority of people want peace and order to return to Thailand. That is why 'troublemakers' constitute only the minority who do not care about the well-being of their country at all (*Thairath* 2014b).

However, later in 2015, the discourse changed when it became apparent that the protests were not subsiding. The junta attributed the reason for this trend to a possible mastermind who must be financing protesters, particularly students. For instance, when students were arrested due to their pro-democracy activism in June 2015, the Prime Minister explained that the authorities had tried 'inviting' students for a talk several times, but to no avail. Students still disobey the junta's order by continuing to criticize the government and defame him. The failed attempts to 'make peace' with students reflected the fact that "there must be someone backing the students" (*Post Today* 2015). The Prime Minister further pointed out that Daodin students look like 'gangsters,' rather than genuine students (*Matichon* 2015d). Likewise, the army chief made it clear that political groups were supporting the student activism. "We are aware of that, but [we] don't want to name names." Infusing this analysis with the 'majority/minority' and 'civil war' frames, he added that "the majority of Thai people disapprove [of student protests] because they are afraid that the country will descend into chaos again. There will be another round of conflict and clashes among groups who use heavy weapons and plot bombing attacks…I'd like to ask [student activists] if they want their family members to go through these [terrible things] again?" (*Matichon* 2015c).

It is worth noting that the representation of the students as being manipulated by political forces carry with it the implication that the students themselves are not seeking to threaten the well-being of Thais directly because, unlike the Red Shirts, there was no historical evidence of

the use of violence by the students. Accordingly, in order to undermine the salience of their protest whilst avoiding the risk of any crackdown on them 'backfiring' on the junta itself the dissidents are presented as 'innocent saboteurs' who do not realize the damage they are causing to national unity and reconstruction by their protests.

The Thai junta's security narrative – that now is the time to come to the defense of the nation from the threats of civil war precipitated by Red-Yellow conflicts through the preservation of the established moral order and commitment to national reconciliation – remains credible for the Thai public, especially the Bangkok middle class. As a result, the securitization of dissidents has proven an effective means of limiting the leverage exercised by the activists. At least three factors have strengthened the significance of the junta's securitization project..

Firstly, the army-dominated junta is a powerful securitizing actor. The junta and the Thai army are two sides of the same coin, and the latter has historically been portrayed as the defender of national order. The army's image as sacrificing, courageous, decisive and uncorrupt has captured the Thai populace's hearts and minds. Over the past forty years this image has been reproduced in school text books, news, songs, films and soap operas (Esri 2015, Talcoth 2015). However, one should not be mistaken that the Thai military's authority has never been contested. In fact, the contestations – evident in the 1992 uprising, corruption allegations and rising military budget (see *ThaiPublica* 2013, *Prachachart* 2015) reached the zenith in the 2010 Red Shirts-led protests in which the army felt obliged to crack down on the protests to prevent a potential revolution. In this sense, the 2014 coup can be read as the army's reaction to the perceived threat to its traditional status as the national guardian. Because the color-coded conflicts had polarized and weakened civil society, the army was able to present itself as the most organized and effective body of governance in a time of crisis. In this sense, the Thai army continues to act as a powerful securitizing actor which has the authority to define threats and the capacity to stretch this definition to cover perceived challenges to its traditional position. (see also Huntington 1981, Barany 2012).

Secondly, the members of the Bangkok middle class that joined the 2013-14 demonstrations that led to the toppling of the Red Shirt govern-

ment has by and large supported the coup. The junta's security narrative resonates with their contempt for what they consider to have been corrupt politicians who came to power through elections. From their point of view the populist Red Shirt government spent all the taxes that they, the urban middle class, had paid in order to gather the vote of the rural poor and be returned to power.. By contrast, from their perspective, the military government embodies stability in a time of social, political and economic transformation. These changes have introduced a new social equation in which the rural populace has more say and demands more from the center. As a consequence large numbers of the Bangkok middle class feel that their relatively privileged position is under threat Holding on to conservative values and elitist institutions helps reassure them that their status can be protected (for further discussion on the middle class retreat from democracy see Kurlantzick 2013, Saxer 2014: 162-73, Fukuyama 2014: 406-51). As with the junta, members of the middle class perceive pro-democracy protesters as a threat to the preservation of the status quo and accordingly support the crackdown on dissidents, rather than sympathizing with them as victims of an authoritarian regime. (see, for example, *MThai News* 2014b).

Finally, the salience of the junta's security discourse rests on a deep rooted political culture in Thailand which valorizes social hierarchy and collective harmony. As mentioned earlier, this political culture is intertwined with the role of monarchy and army in Thai politics, whose legitimacy in modern time requires the reproduction of a 'submissive ideology' among the populace. The official framing of protests as perpetrated by activists that have been deluded and misled by power-hungry politicians fits quite comfortably within such a world-view, particularly insofar as Thai political culture has tended to demonize those disagreeing with the authorities.. Within this framework the junta's repression of the Red Shirts has been necessary to protect the established moral and social order, but the pro-democracy protesters are disrupting this honest endeavor. The implication of such a representation is that it is the patriotic duty of the Thai people to support the junta's good work for the nation by denouncing and delegitimizing pro-democracy demonstrations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, civil resistance against Thailand's junta has struggled to attract third party support, especially from the middle class, despite being cracked down on time and again. This is largely due to the junta's employment of security discourses that capture the public fear of protesters as a disruptive threat to the national order. Four discursive elements strengthen the securitization process, making it difficult for pro-democracy activists to gain any significant leverage, even when they have faced repression that might have been expected to backfire on the junta and generate support for the protesters from sympathetic third parties.

1) The existence of a threat stemming from Red-Yellow conflicts which brought Thailand to the brink of civil war. This threat was a by-product of representative democracy allowing groups to openly express their disagreement and antagonism. In Thai political culture, this characteristic is framed as disharmony which is believed to threaten national order. This discourse is particularly popular among Bangkok middle class who associate the junta with stability.

2) The way to eliminate this threat to national order is to restore the traditional order which has been eroded due to Red-Yellow conflicts. This can be achieved through reconciliation projects, activities to return happiness to the Thai people, and moral policing. Turning Thailand back to 'normalcy' in the future necessitates the collective devotion of all Thais.

3) Accordingly, anti-junta protests are identified as an attempt to sabotage this order restoration process. Good things are happening, but these people are making a fuss. They are 'trouble makers, and they are not being Thai (patriotic) enough.

4) Security discourses gain credibility because of the historical image of the army as being at the service of the nation, uncorrupt and benign. The junta always claims that it saved Thailand from the brink of civil war. In addition, the middle class fear of losing status quo and the Thai political culture that stigmatizes open protests against authority also contribute to the salience of the securitization discourse

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Civil resistance to securitization: The challenge

This article showed the way in which the incumbent Thai junta has securitized pro-democracy groups by generating the fear of a breakdown of social order and the risk of violent political conflict. Although the case elaborated in this paper is limited to Thailand, similarities in tactics of securitization can be detected in other countries where the state is deemed to be facing some kind of existential threat. The definition of what constitutes a threat can often be extended to encompass those opposed to the regime's stance, thereby undermining the capacity of protest movements to generate political momentum. One way in which nonviolent movements can respond to being targeted in such a manner is to explore means of de-securitizing the issue, attempting to deconstruct the regime's security discourse. The means by which this might be achieved will vary from one context to the other. But there are certain methods that would appear relevant to undermining attempts to label nonviolent protest as a security threat. These include:

Humor: The Serbian resistance movements Otpor opted for satire to show the incongruence between the regime's portrayal of them as terrorists and the reality. Admitting that they were terrorists as accused, Otpor activists emphasized that they were also nerds ('good kid' discourse), and their weapon was just pens and textbooks. By doing this Otpor aimed to reveal themselves as fundamentally non-threatening whilst highlighting the nonsensical nature of the regime's accusation. (see Janjira 2015).

Start a public conversation and debate about securitization: social media can serve as a platform facilitating political debates on security issues – as exemplified in the latest cyber movement in Thailand called 'F5'. The junta is imposing the new cyber law to curb freedom of expression, which will result in restricting the internet speed. The youngsters, especially 'video gamers,' saw this policy as an impingement on their lifestyle because they rely on fast internet to access information online for 24/7 and to participates in virtual online games. More than 100,000 people signed a petition demanding the government abolish this policy. The cyber campaign opened up a political space for public discussion about the junta's authoritarianism.

Making the link between securitization strategies and material well-being: De-securitization campaigns can attempt to highlight the manner in which the economic costs of securitization can impact on the living standards of the population as a whole. 'Security is bad for economy' can be a slogan that resonates with large sections of the population.

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