

# Thailand in Crisis

*Scenarios and Policy Responses*



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### Background

Thailand's army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha carried out the country's 12th successful coup d'état on May 22, 2014, two days after declaring martial law. This was a culmination of popular protests, counter-protests, and legal maneuverings against the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra that began in November 2013, but whose roots extend back decades.

Amid this chaos, CSIS undertook a study to identify likely scenarios that will face Thailand when its decades-long cycle of political unrest hits its most critical moment—the royal succession that will replace ailing King Bhumibol Adulyadej. It looked particularly at U.S. policy options for each of the three scenarios identified—the rise of a moderate middle, military intervention, and widespread partisan violence. The study was also informed by a public conference held at CSIS just a week before the coup that focused on the current episode of political unrest.

The recent military coup has understandably drawn attention almost exclusively toward the immediate crisis, and the U.S. response, which has included slashing military aid and canceling joint exercises. But the military does not have the power to rewrite Thailand's political destiny, and the coup, no matter what course it takes, will not let the country avoid the long-term challenges it will face in attempting to consolidate democratic civilian rule in the face of the impending succession.

Leading up to the coup, tensions were running extremely high between the antigovernment protest movement—the latest incarnation of the “Yellow Shirts” who have opposed Yingluck's brother, populist former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, and his successors—and the pro-government, or “Red Shirt” faction. An estimated 28 people were killed in clashes between November and May,<sup>1</sup> and protest camps in Bangkok were becoming increasingly well-armed. The coup may have reduced chaos and violence in the capital in the short term, but it will not solve this crisis, nor Thailand's core problems.

Thailand in the last century has undergone increasing democratization, with periods of political instability often resolved through coups, followed by a new constitution. This, coupled with dramatic economic growth, has allowed for advances in technology, greater access to education and information, and more open financial markets and access. As Thailand's overall population becomes more empowered, the traditional

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<sup>1</sup> “In for the long haul,” *The Economist*, May 31, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21603033-crackdown-follows-coup-generals-may-stick-around-long-they-think-it-takes>.

power structures are becoming less and less viable as a means of political control. The turmoil of the past year is a reflection of the political turmoil of the two decades, as traditional elites compete for power with a newly enfranchised, largely populist rural electorate.

Thailand's earlier periods of political upheaval most often resulted in a strong man rising to power, frequently with the support of the United States, given the Cold War politics at the time. Sarit Thanarat came to power through a successful coup and consolidation of power in 1957–1958, overthrowing Plaek Phibunsongkhram, better known as Phibun, whose government was seen as increasingly corrupt. Protests and poor economic performance opened the door for Sarit to gain power, which he held until his death in 1963.

A similar pattern emerged in the 1970s. Effective economic management under Sarit and successive military regimes empowered a new middle class, leading to a student uprising in 1973 that ousted the ruling junta, led by Thanom Kittikachorn. The movement hoped to establish democratic norms, but the next three years saw violent protests and chaotic elections. This period culminated in the Thammasat University massacre, in which police and vigilante groups attacked student protestors on the university's campus, resulting in mob violence and at least 46 official deaths, though the actual toll could be more than double that amount. Then prime minister Seni Pramroj was overthrown in a coup, leading to a series of appointed prime ministers, ending with General Prem Tinsulanonda, who served as prime minister from 1980–1988, when he stepped down.

Elections were held in 1988 and General Chatichai Choonhaven became head of government. He was the first elected prime minister since Seni in 1976, and sought to consolidate democracy and elections in Thailand. Chatichai was also very corrupt and was overthrown in a 1991 coup, led by army commander General Suchinda Kraprayoon. As in the 1970s, the public responded with protests, which culminated in the 1992 incident known as Black May that left at least 52 people dead.<sup>2</sup>

In the following years, there was a serious effort to rewrite Thailand's constitution, which eventually resulted in a new document in 1997. This brought sweeping changes to Thailand's electoral process, and was considered highly democratic and widely praised. It paved the way for the election of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2001. In fact, some experts have noted a continuity between the rise of Chatichai and Thaksin, both of whom sought to position Thailand as a leading country in Southeast Asia and were elected on populist platforms. Both were also ousted in military coups in response to regimes that were seen, often accurately, as widely corrupt.

Unlike the 1991 coup, however, Thaksin did not withdraw from politics when he was overthrown by the military in 2006. This marked the beginning of Thailand's current political crisis, though its roots extend back throughout the twentieth century. In the years following the 2006 coup, judicial intervention and appointed governments resulted in growing conflict between Thailand's two main political factions, broadly described as the pro-Thaksin, populist movement Red Shirts and the urban, middle class Yellow Shirts, though the political views and motivations within each group are varied and many key players on either side of the spectrum do not identify directly with either.

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<sup>2</sup> Achara Ashayagachat, "Black May group calls for poll," *Bangkok Post*, May 18, 2014, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/politics/410351/black-may-group-calls-for-poll>.

Thaksin, though he resides outside of Thailand to avoid 2008 charges on corruption, still plays a significant role in directing the Red Shirt movement and the decisions of the Pheu Thai government that brought his sister Yingluck to power.

The 2006 coup makers threw out the constitution and formed a Constitutional Convention tasked with creating a new document that was promulgated in 2007. That constitution gave strong political advantages to the traditional centers of power, especially through an increased role for non-elected bodies, largely to limit the ability of Thaksin-aligned parties, who were set to continue dominating at the polls, to regain control. Despite these efforts, however, these parties continue to win elections by increasingly wider margins. This led to repeating rounds of political protests, counter-protests, and violence in 2008, 2010, and 2013.

Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's younger sister, was elected prime minister under the Pheu Thai Party in 2011, and many hoped that she would be able to better manage the competing interests of Bangkok's elites than her predecessors, including Thaksin. After two years of relative stability, Suthep Thaugsuban, a former deputy prime minister under the Democrat Party, mounted antigovernment protests beginning in November 2013. As the momentum for the protests, and ensuing counter-protests, continued, it became apparent that the government would not be able to hold on to power. However, the May 2014 coup occurred in a very different political climate than the previous 11 successful coups.

Thailand's general populous has come to accept democracy as the primary means for selecting leaders, and an increasingly educated and upwardly mobile population limits the ability for elites to rule and maintain power without electoral precedent. In short, they cannot get away with much these days. Greater international attention and awareness, both within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which as a whole is increasingly democratic, and beyond, also means that Thailand's current political crisis, and how it is inevitably resolved, is under the spotlight. There is less tolerance for harsh or violent crackdowns in response to political maneuverings, and there is less willingness by the international community to support a regime that is not democratically elected.

All of these factors mean that the current coup will not resolve the process, and it is unclear that recent actions by General Prayuth and the ruling junta will benefit Thailand in the long run as it moves through this process.

At the heart of the issue remains the shape and scope of democracy in Thailand as it gets closer to the inevitable royal succession, and the role of the monarchy in an increasingly democratic country. These questions will not be resolved by military fiat. Thailand has come too far in the democratic process for it to revert entirely without intense conflict, but how the nation will move forward, and how the United States and other countries can support stability and good governance in the long run, remains to be seen.

As such, it is critical to look beyond the current crisis, at the three likely scenarios that Thailand could face in years to come. These scenarios will serve as a guide for policymakers to respond to a political crisis that likely will not crest for another 5 to 10 years.

## Scenario One: Rise of a Moderate Middle

The best-case scenario when Thailand's royal succession arrives would be the rise of a moderate middle in Thai politics that would be able to forge a new equilibrium. In many ways, the behind-the-scenes deal-making that allowed the administration of former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra to function offered a model for what this equilibrium could look like. But the debate over the amnesty bill and subsequent political crisis showed just how precarious it was.

That deal essentially required Yingluck and her Pheu Thai government to weaken itself—to refrain from using its sweeping electoral mandate to steamroll opponents, as her brother had done—and in exchange they were allowed to rule. One problem with that deal was that it was never explained to constituents, who grew angry on both sides of the political divide.

According to the University of Leeds's Duncan McCargo, forging a more stable, long-term political equilibrium would be largely predicated on the successful inclusion of a new class, what he calls “urbanized villagers,” into Thailand's structures of political, economic, and social power. This will be an arduous task, and the only way it is likely to be possible before the storm of the royal succession is if that event does not happen for another decade or more.

Urbanized villagers are those rural Thais who have emigrated in large numbers to Bangkok, its suburbs, and other urban areas throughout Thailand, or even gone abroad. They are more cosmopolitan and economically empowered than ever, in many cases approaching the affluence of the lower-middle classes in the cities. But they remain deeply connected to their provincial roots and are politically marginalized by the urban middle and upper classes.

This demographic has a schizophrenic identity, stuck between the city and the countryside. But its numbers mean that its members ultimately determine the outcomes of Thai elections. The last decade and a half of dominance by pro-Thaksin parties was made possible by the former prime minister's ability to appeal to these Thais—to empower them economically and speak to them as a fellow outsider with the same aspirations. Meanwhile the traditional elites, especially the Democrats, have treated these newly empowered provincial citizens with condescension if not outright derision.

In order to find a new political accommodation to help Thailand weather the storm of succession, McCargo offers three suggestions:

1. The entire notion of the urbanized villager must be undermined. It rests upon forces that keep these citizens politically tied to their home provinces. As a first step to breaking this cycle, Thailand's electoral registration system should be liberalized so that emigrants to the cities can vote where they live, instead of being forced to trek back to their home districts.
2. The Democratic Party must reform from within, forging new policies aimed at appealing to and further empowering these voters, rather than denigrating them as the party has in recent years. If the Democrats fail to do this, breakaway parties might be needed to take up its baton.



3. In the long term, Thailand's elites must work to shift away from the false dichotomy of city versus countryside that has dominated national discourse. By recognizing urbanized villagers, and those who remain in the provinces, as equal partners in the national project, with the same aspirations and increasing levels of political and economic empowerment, Thaksin's hold over these citizens can be broken. That is necessary for a return to real electoral competition, rather than a continuous cycle of dominance by pro-Thaksin parties.

Another factor that must be overcome if Thailand is to find a moderate middle to steer the country through the succession is the citizenry's admitted proclivity to solve problems through violence. In polling, Thais show a high acceptance of violence as a means to resolve disputes—higher even than their neighbors in Indonesia or the Philippines. The country's murder rate is shockingly high, especially for an upper-middle-income nation, and violence is pervasive nationwide, with the exception of the capital. Delegitimizing violence as a means of resolving disputes, including political contestation, is critical if Thailand is to peacefully weather the succession.

Unfortunately, the recent military coup has set back the project of establishing a moderate middle. Growing rural frustration with the Yingluck administration, and especially with its failure to pay rice farmers as promised from its costly subsidy scheme, made the party vulnerable. Had the Democrats competed in the February elections, or in the redo elections planned for July, they likely could have narrowed the gap on Pheu Thai. An electoral victory might not have been in the cards, but the party could have started on the road to real political competition. Now, through its perceived support of the coup, the Democratic Party has been utterly delegitimized in the eyes of many voters, especially in the north and northeast.

In addition, the room for civil discussion and space at the middle of the political spectrum, which were already extremely narrow in the final days of the Yingluck administration, have been completely eliminated by the junta. When the dust settles and new elections finally are held, the effort to build a moderate middle will be starting largely from scratch.

## Scenario Two: The Military Intervenes

Many experts believe Thailand's military will play an "enforcer" role in the power contest leading up to the royal succession. If the coup launched by General Prayuth Chan-ocha is any indicator, the military will have a critical role to play in the years ahead.

On one hand, military leaders want to prevent Thailand from descending into chaos as a result of political deadlock—the latest coup was justified as the only means to return peace and order to the country. On the other hand, given the highly contested nature of the succession as well as the growing fault lines within its own ranks, the military will need to appear as neutral as possible even as it may continue to intervene in politics.

The junta's actions since taking power show it has no intention of withdrawing from the scene until it can establish control of the political situation. Prayuth made clear that elections would not take place until August 2015 at the earliest, assuming the military succeeds in its plan to force reconciliation and political reform from above. This will

include, among other things, engineering a new constitution and electoral system that will attempt to bolster the traditional elites' hold on power with an eye toward the royal transition and try to limit the pro-Thaksin vote.

For the past decade at least, different factions across Thailand's establishment have been planning for the royal handover in hopes of securing their places in what will be a new political order. The military, which has become more factionalized over the years, increasingly mirrors the schisms in the wider political establishment.

Since Yingluck's 2011 victory, royalists have used the annual military reshuffle to consolidate control. These reshuffles first took on added importance following the 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin, who had sought during his tenure to fill the military's ranks with his supporters and was seen by many as disrespectful to the throne. Under Yingluck, the military was also left to make its own decisions, largely free of government meddling, on issues such as budgets and promotions. Prayuth, known as a fierce royalist, was able to promote many of his classmates. In addition, serious efforts have gone into filtering out anyone of questionable loyalty from the ranks of key combat units that are responsible for protecting the royal family in case of a national crisis.

While the United States does not want to see Thailand go into a spiral of instability, its response to the current coup has been a textbook example of what it will need to do if the military steps in post-royal succession. Washington swiftly cut approximately \$4.7 million in foreign military financing assistance and suspended the International Military Education and Training program provided to Thailand, followed by the suspension of several military-to-military and law enforcement engagements. The Department of State said it is reviewing all assistance to and engagement with Thailand, and U.S. officials have issued numerous calls for a quick return to democracy.

While the U.S. response has prompted some in Bangkok to perceive Washington as being supportive of pro-Thaksin forces, the majority of experts believe adopting a strong stance in favor of democracy will serve U.S. long-term interests in Thailand. Military intervention may be able to stem violence in the short term, but will not address the root causes of Thailand's political crisis, which will likely rear its head again following the succession.

## Scenario Three: Violent Competition Leads to Instability

This is the worst-case scenario for Thailand. Chronic instability could arise through factionalism in the military, or through a large portion of the population refusing to support a regime or its decisions. In either case, ongoing, violent conflict would severely limit Thailand's economic growth, and its ability to act on the world stage as a leading country in ASEAN.

Throughout modern Thailand's history, the military has positioned itself as the protector of the kingdom and the monarchy, and used this status to justify coups and other actions intervening in political processes. But the Royal Thai Army and other security forces are increasingly factionalized, and the military may no longer act as a single actor. If the succession is contested, it is hard to know what the military will decide to do or to whom it will choose to pledge its allegiance.

The division between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions will also complicate the military's future role and options. Royalists have long questioned the loyalty of army units made up of mostly draftees hailing from Thailand's north and northeast, and fear they may not obey orders to suppress future protests by Red Shirts or those who support popular elections. The army did not deploy some of its Bangkok units to crack down on protests led by the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship in opposition to the Democrat-led government of Abhisit Vejjajiva in 2010 because of this fear. Meanwhile, important military figures are believed to have played a role in supporting the antigovernment protests that started in November 2013 aimed at toppling Yingluck's government.

If there is any effort to question or derail the succession as it currently stands, it remains unclear how the army will respond. Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn is the successor to his father, King Bhumibol. Some elites, however, believe Crown Princess Sirindhorn would be preferable to her brother. Vajiralongkorn reportedly also has links to Thaksin, who many believe was disrespectful to the king and attempted to weaken the monarchy during his time in office.

Both Vajiralongkorn and Sirindhorn have ties to the military—the former, now a general, is a career officer, while the latter teaches at Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy. If the succession process becomes factionalized, whomever the military backs will likely succeed. But if the military splits its allegiance, Thailand could devolve into fighting that could last years.

Thailand's strict *lèse-majesté* laws make it impossible to publicly discuss this possibility within the country. Many Thailand scholars have said that it is unlikely the military would act against the wishes of King Bhumibol to prevent the crown prince from gaining the throne, but rumors persist and are impossible to quash when no one can publicly state their views or discuss the issue.

Thailand's general population is now more educated and politically aware than it has ever been, and social and new media formats have increased access to information and the ability to scrutinize the political elites, including to some extent the royal family and its inner circle. Even if the military does not fracture, any sort of question around the succession process could create ripe moments for spoilers, and lead to ongoing and violent instability.

Prayuth has argued that the recent coup was necessary to prevent outbreaks of violence in Bangkok and other provinces. We do not know what the junta will do in the long run, or if the proposed August 2015 election timeline will hold, but it is unlikely that the populist movements dissatisfied with the current status of politics will be mollified. The next succession could easily reignite political violence. The junta on June 10 declared it illegal to possess "weapons of war" and began a campaign to seize arms in private hands.<sup>3</sup> But thanks to criminal networks and the prevalence of police and military weapons stores throughout the country, Thailand's factions could quickly rearm.

If the succession causes Thailand's cyclical political instability to escalate to violence, there will be little recourse for the United States and other regional actors to respond

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<sup>3</sup> "Disarming the warring parties," *Nation* (Bangkok), June 12, 2014, <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/opinion/Disarming-the-warring-parties-30236040.html>.

aside from providing humanitarian assistance to those affected. This scenario, whether it involves military factionalism or popular reaction to politics, could reduce Thailand to a state of civil war, causing a humanitarian crisis and economic disaster.

In order to prevent this scenario, communication channels among political leaders, the military, and other actors must remain open and robust. As of now, there is not a clear mechanism for talks between the leaders of factions. The United States and other concerned partners should support the establishment of a third-party mechanism to enhance lines of communication among all sides involved in the crisis. This could be in the form of an eminent persons group or mediating organization that would provide space for communication, such as through organized meetings, back channels, or other means.

## Recommendations

U.S. options, both in response to the recent coup and ahead of the future royal transition, are constrained, but there are some things the United States can do to help urge Thailand toward a moderate middle before the succession:

- *Stress, mostly in private meetings with Thai leaders across the political spectrum, the unacceptability of another coup* during the succession and the critical importance of maintaining democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, and avoiding bloodshed.
- *Send a group of either prominent Americans or an international delegation including senior political figures* such as former senator Richard Lugar to have quiet conversations with leaders on both sides of the political divide about ways to manage the succession via democratic means.
- *Offer to bring small groups of Thai protagonists together for meals and quiet conversations in an effort to recapture the middle ground.* Any such initiative must originate from Washington because the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok is now seen by many elites as having sided with the Yingluck government.
- *Form an eminent persons group of private Thais and Americans* who could meet and make suggestions to the U.S. government and the Thai protagonists about steps to address the crisis.
- *Urge U.S. business groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the US-ASEAN Business Council to use their connections with Thai political leaders* to emphasize that violence surrounding the succession could undermine Thai competitiveness in the region and prompt companies to look to neighbors for investment alternatives.
- *Quickly confirm a new U.S. ambassador once he or she is nominated* to ensure there is no gap in Bangkok at this sensitive time.

If Thais fail to reach a political accommodation and the succession leads to yet another military takeover or, even worse, widespread violence, the United States will have very limited options. In the case of a military coup:

- *Do not hesitate to call a coup what it is and cut that military and other assistance that is required by law.* The U.S. response to Prayuth's recent coup should serve as a model for this response. Thais must solve this crisis themselves, but when they do, the democracy that eventually emerges will appreciate a U.S. ally that stuck to its principles more than one that cozied up to a junta.
- *Remain sensitive and ensure that necessary sanctions and aid cut-offs have a minimal impact on the general population.* The United States should treat another military-ruled Thailand as a friend that has lost its way, not as a pariah.

If the succession results in widespread factional violence:

- *Offer humanitarian aid and assistance to affected populations.* This might also include training and equipment for any neutral security forces, but identifying police units remaining above the fray will likely prove impossible.
- *Use every available diplomatic and business channel to urge factional leaders to avoid escalation and seek a negotiated settlement.* This will be an arduous process, and the United States will have limited influence, but it will need to try to convince each side that no one will win in a zero-sum struggle surrounding the succession.

## Major Players in Thai Politics

- *King Bhumibol Adulyadej.* King Bhumibol Adulyadej, 86, is the king of Thailand and the longest-reigning monarch in the world. He is revered throughout the country and is seen as a stabilizing force, remaining above the partisan fray and intervening in past conflicts to bring the country back to a political balance. King Bhumibol has been in poor health for years, sharpening concerns over the succession. He spent September 2009 to August 2013 in the hospital, and has remained cloistered at his palace at Hua Hin, south of Bangkok, for most of the time since. The king has not appeared in public since the May 22 coup, but issued a royal decree legitimizing it.
- *Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha.* General Prayuth Chan-ocha, 60, is the commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army and acting prime minister of Thailand. Prayuth staged Thailand's 12th successful coup on May 22, ousting the Pheu Thai-led government of caretaker prime minister Niwatthamrong Boonsongpaisan, who briefly filled the post after the removal of Yingluck Shinawatra from office. Prayuth is a member of the Eastern Tigers, an elite military organization made up of those who served in Thailand's prestigious Second Infantry Division. Prayuth, who was slated to retire in September 2014, took most analysts by surprise with his decision to launch a coup. He has announced plans to return Thailand to a caretaker civilian government in August or September 2014 and hold elections about a year later, after a period of unspecified reforms and reconciliation.
- *Queen Sirikit Kitiyakara.* Queen Sirikit Kitiyakara, 81, is the wife of King Bhumibol and the daughter of Nakkhatra Mangala, former prince of Chanthaburi and ambassador to the United Kingdom and France. She is just the second queen regent in Thailand's history, having served as regent in 1956 when her husband served for a



period as a Buddhist monk. Queen Sirikit has generally avoided public partisanship, but is considered a strong opponent of Thaksin and the Red Shirts behind the scenes. Like King Bhumibol, Queen Sirikit is in poor health and has avoided public appearances since 2012, when she suffered a stroke.

- *Jatuporn Prompan.* Jatuporn Prompan, 48, is a former member of parliament and chairman of the pro-Thaksin National United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, whose members and supporters are widely known as Red Shirts. They were the most fervent supporters of Yingluck Shinawatra, and staged counter-protests in support of the Pheu Thai-led government. The military dispersed Red Shirts from their main protest site on the outskirts of Bangkok within hours of launching the May 22 coup. Red Shirts have since made up a disproportionate number of those detained for questioning by the junta. Jatuporn led the 2010 protests that took over downtown Bangkok and resulted in 91 deaths.
- *Thaksin Shinawatra.* Thaksin Shinawatra, 64, served as prime minister of Thailand from 2001 until 2006. He was ousted by a military coup due to allegations of corruption, abuse of power, and disrespect for the monarchy. Thaksin was convicted of corruption and fled into exile in 2008. He maintains a strong hand in the operations of the Pheu Thai Party, the successor to Thaksin's own Thai Rak Thai, which was banned following his ouster. A billionaire telecommunications tycoon, Thaksin was the first prime minister in Thai history to serve a full term, and appealed to rural voters, especially in the north and northeast, with his populist policies and anti-elite rhetoric. Thaksin is rumored to have close relations with Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn.
- *Yingluck Shinawatra.* Yingluck Shinawatra, 46, served as Thailand's first female prime minister from 2011 until her ouster by Thailand's Constitutional Court in May 2014 over charges of abuse of power. She is the leader of the Pheu Thai Party. Yingluck had never held public office before running for prime minister. Her lack of political experience led many to see her as a proxy for her exiled brother, Thaksin. Yingluck lost favor in late 2013 when a failed attempt to pass an amnesty bill that would have pardoned Thaksin and scores of others caused widespread antigovernment protests. Those demonstrations, led by People's Democratic Reform Committee chairman Suthep Thaugsuban, continued for seven months until the military staged a coup on May 22 to restore order.
- *Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.* Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, 59, is the second daughter of King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit, and eldest female member of the royal family eligible for the throne. Her elder sister Ubolratana Rajakanya relinquished her royal title in 1972 to marry a U.S. citizen. Princess Sirindhorn is very popular among the Thai populace and well-respected by both military and civilian elites. Because the Thai constitution was amended in 1974 to include female succession, she is considered a possible alternative to her brother Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. Princess Sirindhorn teaches at Chulachomklao Royal Military Academy, further strengthening her ties to the military. She has publicly denied any interest in the crown, but that has not quashed rumors that the Privy Council would prefer to place her on the throne over her brother and his children.

- *Suthep Thaugsuban.* Suthep Thaugsuban, 64, is a former deputy prime minister from the Democrat Party and is currently the chairman of the People's Democratic Reform Committee. Suthep was a leading proponent of an appointed government to replace the democratically elected Pheu Thai administration led by former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Suthep faces outstanding murder charges for his role as deputy prime minister in a 2010 crackdown on pro-Thaksin protestors in Bangkok that left nearly 100 dead.
- *Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda.* General Prem Tinsulanonda, 93, is one of the most prominent figures in Thailand, arguably second only to King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Prem led Thailand as prime minister in three successive administrations, from 1980 to 1988. He has also served as commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army, minister of defense, and currently as the head of the Privy Council, a board of appointed advisers to the king. Prem is widely believed to have been behind the 2006 coup that removed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra from power. As head of the Privy Council, Prem will play a key role in the royal succession, and will serve as regent during the interregnum.
- *Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn.* Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, 61, is the only son of King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit and heir apparent. He is a career military officer in the Royal Thai Army and former head of the King's Own Bodyguard Battalion. Criticism of the royal family is strictly prohibited under Thailand's *lèse majesté* laws, but this has not prevented private criticism of and rumors about Prince Vajiralongkorn's private life, sometimes erratic behavior, and alleged ties to former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. This last point has caused persistent rumors that Thailand's political elites, including the Privy Council, are uncomfortable with Vajiralongkorn as the next king. The crown prince appeared in public in London two days after the May 22 military coup and as of mid-June, had yet to return to Thailand.
- *Abhisit Vejjajiva.* Abhisit Vejjajiva, 49, served as prime minister of Thailand from 2008 until his 2011 electoral defeat by Pheu Thai Party leader Yingluck Shinawatra. He has served in the Thai House of Representatives since 1992 and has been the leader of the opposition Democrat Party since 2005. Abhisit was an early supporter of the military's decision to declare martial law on May 20 and continues to support the junta's ongoing efforts at reconciliation. He led the Democrats in a controversial boycott of elections on February 2, 2014—a decision many saw as contributing to the months-long crisis and eventual coup. He and his party were largely sidelined during the demonstrations by Suthep Thaugsuban and other leaders of the street protests, leading to significant criticism from within the Democrat Party.

## About the Authors

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