

# CONVERSATIONS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH

## **Royalism and the Crisis of Elite Governance in Thailand**

An Interview with Thongchai Winichakul  
and Pavin Chachavalpongpun

*In May 2014, the Royal Thai Armed Forces launched a coup to establish a junta called the National Council for Peace and Order. In this interview, Social Transformations editor Lisandro Claudio (LC) speaks to historian Thongchai Winichakul (TW) of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Political Scientist Pavin Chachavalpongpun (PC) of Kyoto University to examine the simmering tensions the undergird the military take over.*

**LC:** In our journal, we think of the “Global South” in very general terms, as a symbol for global marginality. What lens is it that Thai scholars use to reflect on the notion of global marginality?

**PC:** In terms of political development, yes, maybe you can say that this part of the world, Southeast Asia, including Thailand, can still catch up with the Global North when it comes to issues such as democratization. I don’t have a problem with the Global South defined that way.

But to say that Thailand is marginal in other respects, I think I have a lot of problems with that. Because this is, for one thing—apart from political development in Thailand—I think Thailand has been one of the leading players in the international community. For another thing also, Thailand is an important part of the global supply chain. But I don’t want to get into that. So I think it’s still quite confusing to talk about marginality.

**TW:** In terms of the consciousness, people who are involved in all kinds of political operations—to what extent do they consider themselves part of global marginalization? I'm not sure. Because I think they don't think much about the globe. Maybe those few people who know Walden Bello, who know Focus on the Global South. Maybe some people who participate in international meetings, from time to time. But even when it comes to the larger body of NGO activists, I'm not sure. I'm not sure because I'm quite distant from them.

**LC:** So how about NGOs right now? What do you think are the main foci of action for NGOs these days?

**TW:** Nationalism. Anti-capitalism. At least what they call “vulgar capitalism” to be precise. Do they think of their agenda as part of the Global South? I doubt it. Because they can't be anti-vulgar nationalism for the sake of nationhood.

**LC:** Do you agree?

**PC:** I really have an opinion on this because I have not really looked into NGOs that much. I just realized that a lot of NGOs in Thailand have become so politicized. The dream of having independent NGOs in Thailand has remained a dream, right?

**LC:** Speaking of NGOs, how has recent military junta altered the complexion of the NGO movement in Thailand?

**TW:** NGOs are not monolithic. NGO is a generic term for so many things, right?

**LC:** Let's say grassroots movements then.

**TW:** That's it. That, too, is a generic term. In Thailand, I would say, in general, a huge section of the NGO sector is part of the rightwing anti-democratic movement. Only a small section—maybe smallest section among the NGOs—is pro-democracy, trying defend democracy from the start. So that's why I said that they don't think much in terms of Global South. They think in more nationalistic terms. Not in the sense of strong nationalism. But still, nationalism, maybe similar to the Philippines. It is just accepted and people are not aware of its downside.

**LC:** So let's move on with the gist of what I want to talk about, which is the junta. I'll start with a very open question. Can you just describe the political situation in Thailand?

**PC:** Well, we seem to have another deadlock. After the coup, Thailand is now back to where it was many years ago. We are in the process of writing up a constitution. This writing of a new constitution is a part of the political elite in Thailand trying to maintain its position of power. They want to do it through this new constitution, which will pave the way for an election.

But what I find—and people might disagree with me—is that the coup this time is quite unique, since we are approaching the end of the era of King Bumipon. This is making people anxious, because we cannot predict what would happen when the King passes. Because the King has been with us for a long time. He has been on the throne since 1946. Anyone who is 60 or 70 years old wouldn't be able to imagine Thailand without King Bumipon.

So that alone has raised the level of anxiety not only among the Thai public, but also among the political elite who have been exploiting the royal institution for their own political benefit over the past three or four decades.

I'm not saying that royal succession is the only factor that's behind the current political turmoil in Thailand. But it is one of the biggest factors. So, for me, if you want to look at what will happen to Thailand, if you also want to look at what is happening, you cannot deny the fact that royal succession plays an important part.

**TW:** Had the monarchy as an institution, as a network, not been involved in politics, the succession wouldn't have been an issue. Or maybe it wouldn't have had as big an impact.

I agree with Pavin entirely. I would put it this way: At least since 1992 (perhaps it started to build up in 1973), Thailand has been under a political system that I would call "royalist guided democracy." People misunderstand our system when they say it is a democracy.

I don't mean that guided democracy and what we have in Thailand are exactly the same. And it's not totalitarian like Suharto's New Order. I use the term guided democracy a bit vaguely to suggest the kind of democracy which is dominated by a certain political elite, or certain cliques. For the past 30 or 40 years, it's been under the dominance of the royalists. I don't mean the King. I mean the royalists, who have

benefitted politically and economically by deriving legitimacy from the royal institution.

**PC:** I have had this conversation with Ajarn Thongchai for many times so I obviously agree with this idea of royalist guided democracy. I think the Thai public has invested too much consciously or otherwise in the royal institution at the expense of electoral system. That has been the problem in Thailand; supporters of the King want to place him at the center of the Thai political structure.

That's why when we have a crisis, the King would be perceived as a stabilizing force, which is indispensable in Thai politics. Instead of trying to find a way through democratic systems, you rely on the dominant position of the King, of the royal institution.

Theoretically speaking, this is a competition between elective and non-elective institutions. When, on the one hand, you have non-elective institutions like the monarchy, going against elected governments.

In the past 30 or 40 years, I think the non-elective institution has been the winner. But there are times when it has been seriously challenged by political forces emerging from electoral institutions.

**LC:** Are you talking about Thaksin?

**PC:** Exactly. Frankly, this has been the Thaksin force. But it could have been someone else. Thaksin just came at the right time in 2001. So the position of the non-elective institution has become quite shaky because of the emergence of these new political forces. And in particular, right now, it has become even more complicated towards the end of the current reign.

**LC:** What's the complication?

**TW:** The royalists have been in a dominant position until they got challenged by Thaksin. So, good or bad, he came through the electoral process. If, let's say—and this is a big if—if somebody like Thaksin happened to be at that time when royal succession was not an issue, or if the success issue were transpiring at a time when there were no challenges, things would be different, right?

The challenge from elected authority is happening in this period of Royalist Guided Democracy. Without the current King, the whole

system could collapse. So that's why the royalists feel challenged by elected authority.

**PC:** In other words, time isn't on the side of the royalists. The monarchy has reached its peak. And with every peak, you get a decline, right? Nothing stays the same. It just so happens that the decline of the royal institution in Thailand coincided with other changes in the political and economical landscape: With the economic booms, with the expansion of middle class, with the marginalized regions now become urbanized. And then Thaksin came along. So if Thaksin had occurred at another time, this would not have happened.

**TW:** And they should realize this. They can't see the big picture. Let's say 50 years from now we look back—we might look at this as a time of desperation for royalists. But as we are still in this time ourselves, what that desperation means—it means a lot of people put in jail. A lot of people get killed. A lot of instability.

**PC:** On top of what Ajarn Thongchai says, I also want to talk about the global context as well. More and more countries are walking away from monarchy-led political systems. And I think Thailand is a part of that trend too. Sooner or later, especially if the Thai royal institution fails to prove that it can be compatible with democracy, the only way is the way out. It depends on how soon they realize it. If they can make a U-turn and work with democracy, then there might be a chance to survive. But based on global trends, and also if you look at how people use the monarchy to justify illegal actions, this is not likely.

**LC:** Just another update I'd like to get: How are the pro-Thaksin forces these days? What are they up to?

**PC:** These days, you cannot be pro-Thaksin in Thailand.

**LC:** Outwardly.

**PC:** You cannot outwardly support Thaksin. But you cannot deny the fact that Thaksin is still an important figure in Thai politics. The more they try to eliminate support for him, the more they make him important.

Thaksin is a boon and a liability for a lot of Thai people. People are still looking for a role model. And somehow Thaksin can still serve as this role model, for good or bad. Thaksin can rally people.

But at the same time, Thaksin is a liability as well. It's still so convenient for the royalists to place everyone into one, pro-Thaksin basket, which has allowed them to discredit the entire opposition. Yet, in reality, there are many kinds of people in this movement. They are not necessarily pro-Thaksin.

But this has become a problem. I think even ordinary pro-democracy Thais are stuck with Thaksin too. I don't know what to do with Thaksin. Frankly speaking, just when you think you can drop him, he comes back. Even after nine years, Thaksin is still around.

**TW:** There are a lot of people who are against the coup regime right now, who are not and have never been pro-Thaksin, like those students who were arrested a few weeks ago.

This morning they put up a video. Its title is simple—I can't remember the exact wording— but it was something like “Ending Thaksin Must be Done Through Democratic Means.” So that obviously says something about those who made the video. They're not pro-Thaksin. They're just pro-democracy. They never had any illusions about Thaksin.

**LC:** You mentioned university students. I now want to talk about the Thai intelligentsia and people in universities. How have they responded to the coup? I assume it's diverse obviously, but any comment on how intellectuals in Thailand are grappling with contemporary politics?

**TW:** I think this time everyone is polarized.

**PC:** Yeah, they are like in any social unit in Thailand. Every social unit has become politicized. I'm not just talking about the academic community. For example, within the foreign ministry—I used to work there, so I still have a lot of friends. These days you cannot talk politics with them, just like with the academic community. It's almost impossible for any academic to come out and say “I am neutral.” There might be some, but I can't find them.

There are some who continue to speak for what they believe in, especially concerning democracy.

But there are a lot of academics out there who have political interests because they want to advance their career. I mean this happens everywhere in the world. But in Thailand right now it's just too obvious. Let's just look at Thammasat University. I didn't graduate from Thammasat, but in Thailand—Ajarn would agree with me—Thammasat had a reputation in the past. But I'm not sure right now. I mean, the director obviously is someone who was handpicked.

**LC:** You mean Thammasat has a radical tradition?

**PC:** Yeah. Especially compared with where I graduated from, Chulalongkorn. It is another world. We were known to be elitist.

**LC:** So what happened to the radical tradition in Thammasat?

**PC:** Politics.

**LC:** And I guess a broader question, what's up with the Thai Left? Any updates on the Thai Left? Or what you might define as the Thai Left.

**TW:** I don't know who the Left is.

Those who support the military still believe they are the Left. I don't mean to say that the Left is nonsense. But what is Left, what is not Left—I'm not sure.

**LC:** So it's no longer a relevant category?

**TW:** That's right.

**LC:** So what became of Thammasat actually? Do you agree with Pavin? What happened there?

**TW:** Yeah. What has happened is that most people who ask the question assume that things are not changing.

**LC:** So what has changed?

**TW:** All kinds of things. Like everything in society, like the middle class, like the Left. People are stuck with an image of the past. But in fact everything changes; it's not too difficult to understand. Just accept

that things have changed and then look for the reasons. It doesn't mean that things will be the same forever. They might change again. Even the reputation of Thammasat as radical—I think people tend to look at it statically. No, that reputation was always changing.

**LC:** I wanted to push you both a little bit to discuss the academic freedom angle. I mean definitely there's been an attempt to chill academic voices and, Ajar Pavin, you are one example of that; your passport was revoked by the junta and I'm sure you're not the only one whom they've attempted to chill. Can you speak about similar incidents?

**PC:** I don't know whether I have the correct information, but I'll share with you anyway. When the coup took place last year, I made jokes about it. Even when I was asked to report to Bangkok, I thought what can they do? I'm not going to go home, what can happen to me?

Maybe I was a bit naïve then but, as I remember, this kind of repression never happened in after the coup in 1991 or 2006. And before that, I was a bit too young to remember. So I thought what could they do to me? But then they turned life upside down. The arrest warrant, the revocation of the passport—these came as a shock. I did not believe they could go to that extent to silence an academic.

But there are a lot of people in my situation, and there are a number of categories here. One category are those people on the list, people like me. Some are running away. Others are in Thailand, and they are banned from engaging in political activities, and need to ask permission before going abroad.

Another category includes those names who aren't on the list. You don't know what happens to them. A lot of academics in the North, Chiang Mai, for example, were called in despite their names not being on the list. So we don't know what happened to them, how long they have been under detention. We don't even know their whereabouts. There is no protection for academics.

**LC:** And certainly not just for academics, right?

**PC:** Oh, sure. But what happened in the academic community, I just find unacceptable. We are not politicians. Okay, if you are a politician, then, you can expect political consequences. If you are a political activist, then you can also expect consequences. But as an academic, I



have always believed that we have some sort of immunity to a certain extent because we are entitled to say what we're supposed to say. But we no longer have that immunity right now.

**TW:** I don't have the actual statistics, maybe because there aren't any. The biggest group that was called in for interrogation were the leaders of the Red Shirt network.

The second largest group of people, who were called in, interrogated, invited for coffee, or whatever, were academics. More than politicians. Even though the pronounced target of the coup is to solve the problem of corruption of politics.

So what does this mean? Think about it. This is not a coup to get rid of corruption in politics only. Like Pavin said, it's much larger than that. Don't be fooled by what the coup regime says.

I just heard two weeks ago of an academic who was called in, he went in, and then he finally went abroad. And then his house was raided. He spent almost 200,000 baht to repair the house. But this does not become the news, because it happens in provincial universities.

**LC:** So Ajarn Pavin said he was surprised by the degree of animus directed towards academics. Were you equally surprised?

**TW:** For me, no. Since December last year, there were already signs. I don't mean that I knew exactly what was going to happen. I just knew there was going to be a nasty coup and it would be much more serious than 2006. I mentioned this to friends as early as December 2013.

**LC:** So in what way is it nastier than 2006?

**TW:** Second only to 1957, or maybe the same as 1957.

**LC:** Why?

**TW:** Back to the answer Pavin and I gave and you before: This is not a conflict among the elite only. If this were a conflict among the elite, it would not be violent because they would just fight amongst themselves. Most coups are like that.

This coup is based on a deeper conflict: an issue of succession, which much be understood alongside deeper changes in the political economic structure. So it involves a lot more people.

When the coup happened, they had to ensure everything was under control, which meant repression. It is pointless to compare this coup with previous ones, but this one is pretty serious.

**PC:** Yes, I think the stakes are much higher this time. Again, because of the royal succession issue. And then looking at those who have been harassed, as Ajarn Thongchai said, they have not been politicians, but mostly people like us who happen to be critics of the monarchy. So this says something about the “war” right? It is about eliminating those who pose a challenge to the regime.

Also, remember that there was already political violence in 2010. I cannot separate that incident from the events that would lead to the coup of 2014. It was a prelude to something bigger, to the coup. And who knows if something bigger will happen after the coup?

**LC:** The coup has promised elections, right? What do you think is going to happen when the elections are held? When did they promise it would be held again?

**TW:** They keep changing.

**LC:** They keep changing the date? What is the date now?

**PC:** I think as of now, it could be August next year.

**TW:** But there’s talk of the constitution being disapproved, which means August next year is impossible.

**PC:** I think there could be two strategies for the military. One, if we stick to our argument that this coup is about royal succession, I will not be surprised if they tried to stay as long as possible, in order to manage the succession. But there is a dilemma here: They want to stay long. But at the same time, they want to prolong the life of the King for their own political benefit.

But if you prolong the life of the King for, say, another five years, they would be subject to domestic and international pressure.

The second option is they get forced to step down. In which case, they have to put in place some sort of infrastructure. And as I said, this is about a constitutional drafting. So this means there shouldn’t be an election.

So in other words, I'm not excited about elections.

**TW:** Put it this way: The ultimate goal is to make sure that the situation is under their control during the succession, whatever under control means. If under control means they gain legitimacy through elections, they will have elections. If the constitution allows them to stay under control, it will be approved. If it doesn't, it won't be approved. So it's really not about elections.

**PC:** Believe me, if an election would be in their benefit, they would kind of switch their position and say, "Yeah. Well, if you want us to stick to the electoral system, we are sticking to the electoral system."

**TW:** Keep in mind how they've been trying to design the constitution and potential elections. One, design the election in such a way that reduces the electorate's power by increasing unelected authority. Limit the authority of those elected into parliament, while, on the other hand, delegating more power to unelected authorities: Independent bodies, a majority appointed senate, et cetera.

Second, they have turned many martial law provisions into regular laws. So nobody needs to impose martial law anymore.

Third, they have reduced and changed many laws about decentralization. They changed these laws in a way that, even if the country had elections, Thailand wouldn't go back to democracy as it used to be. They're smarter than you think. This is one thing I wanted to say, just to go back to the issue of foreign journalists. I hope foreign journalists catch up with the junta. They need to know that this is not just about elections.

**PC:** This is frightening. Even if international power demands a roadmap to democracy and elections happened today, it wouldn't change anything. Foreign countries would easily give recognition to the new government despite the fact that elections might not mean anything. Because, as Ajarn Thongchai said, there has been a systematic structural change during this period.