

Mapping The 2020 Thai Political Crisis

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After a brief description of the contemporary political and economic situation, this article forecasts four potential scenarios for the 2020 Thai political crisis in the short-to-medium term (risk horizon under one year). It also offers an analysis of the strategic implications of the most likely scenario for the medium-to-long term (risk horizon beyond one year). The article concludes that in the short-to-medium term, the Thai Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-o-Cha, will stay into power even in the face of a Hong Kong-style protest movement intermittently active on the streets that endures unceasingly throughout the parliamentary debates on constitutional reforms. The demands for monarchical and constitutional reforms will only be answered with marginal changes, albeit no monarchy reforms succeed. The article also finds that the quasi-democratization process that occurs between the central authority and urbanite protesters will increase the number of roadside bombs laid across the five southern provinces in the Deep South of Thailand, as some insurgent groups feel frustrated with the hypocrisy in their own lethargic negotiation process. The heavy-handed, politico-military reaction to the roadside bombs by Thai paramilitary group leads to western government publically criticizing and imposing an informal arms embargo, which reinforces the Sino-Thai rapprochement already noted by scholars today.

On the 4th of April 2018, Thanatorn Juangroongruangkit, founder and charismatic young leader of the Future Forward Party, spoke at the Foreign Correspondence Club of Thailand.¹ This lecture can be considered as the coming out event for his political party to the western world. While having watched from afar in an overcrowded meeting room, it is evident now that the four democratic pledges taken at the onset of the lecture would not merely impact the then existing Thai political landscape but would unleash forces arduous to manage subsequently. Fast forward two and half years later, the Royal Thai Government under direction of the Thai Prime Minister, former General Prayut Chan-o-Cha, declared a state of emergency “to ensure peace and order and to prevent further incidents,”² as stated by Anucha Burapachaisri, the government spokesperson.³ This announcement followed a small band of protesters heckling the royal motorcade that transported Queen Consort Suthida, fourth wife to King Maha Vajiralongkorn,⁴ and Crown Prince Dipangkorn, heir apparent to the throne with high-level functioning autism from a previous marriage, and violating the lèse-majesté law through the use

¹ Thanatorn Juangroongruangkit, “Young Politicians,” *Foreign Correspondence Club of Thailand*, Apr. 4, 2018.

² Reuters, “Thai protesters defy government’s emergency decree banning large gatherings, demanding police ‘release our friends,’” *South China Morning Post*, Oct. 15, 2020.

³ Online Reporters, “Ex-Democrat MP named new government spokesman,” *Bangkok Post*, Aug. 18, 2020.

⁴ Dan Williams, “4 things you should know about Thailand’s Queen Suthida,” *South China Morning Post*, Nov. 15, 2019.

of provocative language.⁵ The images of Thai protestors assailing a royal motorcade and asserting a list of ten demands,⁶ along with subsequent extend of the security measures taken by the government, were arduous to fathom at the time of the coming out party for Thanatorn considering that the political landscape was then nearly comatose, as stated by Johnathan Head, renowned BCC correspondent on Southeast Asia. However, as forecasted by an insurance-political risk firm three months prior to the aforesaid lecture, some underlying trends that would led to the current present state of affairs were already present.⁷ After a brief description of the contemporary political and economic situation, this article forecasts four potential scenarios for the 2020 Thai political crisis in the short-to-medium term (risk horizon under one year) and offers an analysis of the strategic implications of the most likely scenario for the medium-to-long term (risk horizon beyond one year).

Enduring Somber Thailand

The state of emergency decree prohibits sets of activities from the 15th of October to the 13th of November 2020. More than anything else, the decree shows two failures by the National Council for Peace and Order in 2014. First, the organisation was unable to establish a “lasting political quiescence” and, second, to create a smooth transition from the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) to King Vajiralongkorn Bodindradebayavarangkun (Rama X).⁸ Although western media outlets have correctly characterized that the decree gives the executive branch sweeping new legal powers, some of the details of these newfound powers have been absent. For starters in the realm of media, the decree now makes it illegal for citizens to take and post selfies of the protests on their personal social media; the police can confiscate any private communication tool, including smartphones or products that support actions in violation of the emergency orders; and, news outlets can be temporarily shut down under the pretext that it produces fake news or information that leads to conflict. These sections of the emergency decree were recently put into practice when the government announced the

⁵ Hannah Beech and Muktika Suhartono, “As Motorcade Rolls By, Thai Royal Family Glimpses the People’s Discontent,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 14, 2020.

⁶ Prachathai Staff, “[Full statement] The demonstration at Thammasat proposes monarchy reform,” *Prachathai English*, Aug. 11, 2020. List of the ten demands: (1) Revoke Article 6 of the 2017 Constitution that does not allow anyone to make any accusation against the king. And add an article to allow parliament to examine the wrongdoing of the king, as had been stipulated in the constitution promulgated by the People’s Party; (2) Revoke Article 112 of the Criminal Code, as well as allowing the people to exercise freedom of expression about the monarchy and giving an amnesty to all those prosecuted for criticizing the monarchy; (3) Revoke the Crown Property Act of 2018 and make a clear division between the assets of the king under the control of the Ministry of Finance and his personal assets; (4) Reduce the amount of the national budget allocated to the king to be in line with the economic conditions of the country; (5) Abolish the Royal Offices. Units with a clear duty, for example, the Royal Security Command, should be transferred and placed under other agencies. Unnecessary units, such as the Privy Council, should be disbanded; (6) Cease all giving and receiving of donations by royal charity funds in order for the all of the assets of the monarchy to be auditable; (7) Cease the exercise of royal prerogative over expression of political opinions in public; (8) Cease all public relations and education that excessively and one-sidedly glorify the monarchy; (9) Search for the facts about the murder of those who criticized or had some kind of relation with the monarchy; (10) The king must not endorse any further coups. However, over the course of the protest movement three of the ten demands seem to have garnered most of the attention: (1) The prime minister must step down; (2) The parliament must enact constitutional amendments; and, (3) The monarchical reforms must happen.

⁷ Staff, “Thailand: On a Buoyant Economic and Political Wave,” *Credendo*, Jan. 25, 2018; Staff, “Covid-19 and a Possible Political Reckoning in Thailand,” *Crisis Group* no. 309, Aug. 4, 2020. On January 2018, Credendo argued that renewed instability was already visible for the medium-to-long term, though still underestimated the risk by giving a 3/7 classification. Closer in time on August 2020, Crisis Group forecasted that the Thai government would be unable to respond to the growing demand for fairness and equality by the slowly burgeoning number of student protestors.

⁸ Michael Montesano, “Student Protests in Thailand: The End of Political Quiescence,” *ISEAS Yusof-Ishak Institute*, Oct. 19, 2020.

shutdown of four pro-democracy news outlets linked to the exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra: Voice TV, Prachathai, The Reporter, and The Standard.⁹ Worse yet, soldiers are allowed to be mobilized in quelling dissent and military camps can serve as makeshift prisons.¹⁰

In defiance of the draconian emergency decree over ten thousand pro-democracy protestors¹¹ took to the streets in the capital and twelve other provincial cities in a single, large national protest on the 16th of October¹² and, later, multiple, mobile leaderless protests on the 17th of October 2020.¹³ The shift occurred owing to the arrest of numerous democracy protest organizers,¹⁴ forcing the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, a student group protest organization at Thammasat University, to publish on their Facebook account that “everyone is a leader.”¹⁵ In an effort to enforce the decree, the riot police (a special division inside the Royal Thai Police organization structure),¹⁶ numbering over 14,000 individuals on the day, discharged blue-colored water laced with irritants through high-powered water cannons to disperse thousands of protesters from the streets.¹⁷ Some of the protesters included high school students and young intellectual urbanites, while others were out-of-state farmers from the northern Thai provinces and former “red shirt” protestors during the 2010 Thai political crisis.¹⁸ At the latest protests the riot police was not physically present to enforce the decree. Yet, the spokesperson for the Royal Thai Police, Yingyot Thepampong, threatened prior to each manifestation that “whether the gatherings are peaceful or not, they are illegal” and, therefore, the protestors would be arrested, in an effort to induce enough fear so that many would not venture onto the streets.¹⁹ These threats may be placed under the same strategic narrative umbrella devised by Prime Minister Prayuth, who, in reference to Gautama Buddha, stated a few days earlier that protestors should “not trifle with the powerful Grim Reaper... [as] death may come today, or another day... [for] everyone can die at any moment.”²⁰ In the face of governmental threats protestors remain undeterred still trying to circumvent the police crackdowns through use of flash mob tactics, coordinated hand gestures, encrypted messaging platforms, like in the Hong Kong protests from several months ago.²¹

Even prior to the implications of the pandemic and protests, the World Bank had released a report on the 5th of March showing concern over the surging economic inequality and increasing poverty in Thailand.²² Now in the post-pandemic crisis period, these protests come at a time when an illegitimate “military-backed Thai government [is] hard pressed to meet the needs of a population facing massive unemployment, loss of income and rising debt.”²³ On the 14th October 2020, the Bank of Thailand stated that, unless the central government took effective measures, economic activity would not even

⁹ AFP, “Thailand shuts down news sites linked to ex-PM as protests pause,” *France24*, Oct. 20, 2020.

¹⁰ Eric Parpart, “The rule of state of emergency decree and the new selfie rule,” *Thai Enquirer*, Oct. 18, 2020.

¹¹ Jeremy Harmer, “Thai PM Refuses to Resign, Police Crack Down on Protesters,” *The Diplomat*, Oct. 16, 2020.

¹² Rebecca Ratcliffe, “Thousands of Thais defy crackdown on protests in Bangkok,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 17, 2020.

¹³ Tony Cheng, “Thailand: Protesters take to Bangkok streets despite warning,” *Al Jazeera English*, Oct. 18, 2020.

¹⁴ Staff, “Thailand: Water Cannon Used Against Peaceful Activists,” *Human Rights Watch*, Oct. 17, 2020.

¹⁵ Staff, “Defying Crackdown, ‘The People’ occupy Bangkok’s streets,” *Prachathai English*, Oct. 18, 2020.

¹⁶ Paul Chambers, *Knights of the Realm: Thailand’s Military and Police Then and Now*, (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Rebecca Ratcliffe, “Thai Police fire water cannon at Bangkok monarchy protesters,” *The Guardian*, Oct. 16, 2020.

¹⁸ Bruno Philip, “Thaïlande: le pouvoir choisit la répression, les manifestations continuent,” *Le Monde*, Oct. 19, 2020.

¹⁹ Tony Cheng, “Thailand: Protesters take to Bangkok streets despite warning,” *Al Jazeera English*, Oct. 18, 2020.

²⁰ Staff, “‘Everyone Can Die Any Moment,’ Outrage at Prayuth’s Protest Remark,” *Khaosod English*, Oct. 16, 2020.

²¹ South China Morning Post Staff, “How demonstrators in Thailand marshal anti-government protests with hand signs,” *South China Morning Post*, Oct. 20, 2020.

²² The World Bank, “Publication: Taking the Pulse of Poverty and Inequality in Thailand,” Mar. 05, 2020.

²³ Staff, “Covid-19 and a Possible Political Reckoning in Thailand,” *Crisis Group* no. 309, Aug. 4, 2020.

return to the already unattractive pre-Covid-19 figures until the second half of the 2022 fiscal year.²⁴ The current precarity in the national Thai economy was a result of an unsuccessful attempt at the onslaught of the first wave in the Covid-19 crisis period to balance a public health management policy whilst preserving the economy's twin drivers – tourism and exports – in having mandated a national quarantine policy on the 26th of March.²⁵

In an endeavour to reverse the ninety percent collapse of the national tourism industry, the government's recent efforts have been disappointing at best and ruinous at worst. The first group of Chinese travelers set to arrive last week in Phuket were delayed by a Thai security chief citing the annual Nine Emperor Gods (also called, Vegetarian) Festival.²⁶ Towards preventing such future mishaps and revitalizing the local tourist industry, the Minister of Tourism, Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn, proposed a plethora of schemes. The favoured method is a "city-to-city travel bubble" scheme, where the current mandatory two-week quarantine would be replaced by coronavirus testing and a mobile tracking application.²⁷ As one of its largest market, cities with no Covid-19 related cases in China are assertively being forwarded for approval. Additionally, the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Defense freshly sanctioned the "alternate state quarantine" (ASQ) scheme that would allow tourists to quarantine for a two-week period at government-approved hotels and hospitals across Thailand at their own expense ranging from 27,000 THB (about 900 USD) to 220,000 THB (about 7,000 USD).²⁸ In case of surging Covid-19 cases, the ministries also proposed a variant to the ASQ scheme. Close observers have dubbed the last scheme the "North Korean model of leisure travel," as it targets not long-term but "short-term international tourists," whom would be able to travel in supervised groups during their fourteen day quarantine on entry.²⁹

The export numbers are likewise poor. In a report that came out on the 6th of October, estimates show that Thai exports will drop between eight to ten percent in 2020. Although there has been a steady month-to-month growth since the start of the pandemic in part due to certain segments of the economy expanding favourably, such as palm oil (+600%), chilled and frozen pork (+962%), pet food (+22.3%) and cassava products (+15.6%), the month of August still showed a -7.9% loss across the board.³⁰ The economic downturn accorded room for a further Sino-Thai economic rapprochement. On the 16th of October, amid the violent protests, Wang Yi became the first Foreign Minister to visit Thailand since the Covid-19 outbreak began. He pledged that the Chinese government will enable an expansion of investments in Thailand and connect its Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macau Greater Bay Area (GBA) with the Thai government's flagship Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC).³¹ Furthermore, the Chinese Foreign Minister "pressed for progress on the construction of the China-Thailand high-speed railway running from Bangkok to the northeastern city of Nakhon Ratchasima, [which] has been plagued by delays over design, financing and technical assistance."³² These announcements astutely precede the attendance via teleconference of the Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Commerce Minister,

²⁴ Reuters, "Economic risks tilted to downside, says Bank of Thailand," *Bangkok Post*, Oct. 14, 2020.

²⁵ Michael Montesano, "Thailand: Time to Acknowledge Precarity?," *ISEAS Perspective*, Oct. 19, 2020.

²⁶ Murray Hunter, "Thailand's Tourism Sector Struggles to Rebound – Analysis," *Eurasia Review*, Oct. 16, 2020. The global average is between 60-80 percent collapse. So, Thailand is notably more affected by a lack of tourism than other states around the world.

²⁷ Natnicha Chuwiruch, "Thailand Chases Travel Bubble Pact with China to Boost Tourism," *Bloomberg News*, Oct. 15, 2020.

²⁸ CTN News, "Thailand Records its First Local Covid-19 Case in Over a Month," *Chiang Rai News*, Oct. 18, 2020.

²⁹ Barry Kenyon, "Latest effort to revive Thai tourism reflects the 'North Korean' model," *Pattaya Mail*, Oct. 13, 2020.

³⁰ Phusadee Arunmas, "Shippers predict 8% export plunge," *Bangkok Post*, Oct. 07, 2020.

³¹ Mongkol Bangprapa, "Thailand Warms to China's Ventures," *Bangkok Post*, Oct. 16, 2020.

³² Sebastian Strangio, "What Did the Chinese FM's Tour of Southeast Asia Achieve," *The Diplomat*, Oct. 15, 2020.

Jurin Laksanawisit, at the upcoming 11th Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation Forum to be held in Nanning, China. In attendance, he will take the opportunity to promote the export of Thai agricultural products and hopes to capture the Chinese enthusiasm to enhance the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (2019), a trade and logistics passage with an operational hub centered on Chongqing, by buying Thai farm products.³³

The political and economic situation is also partly exasperated by a series of corruption scandals that have arisen over the last few weeks on the Thai political landscape through the Royal Thai Navy's procurement process of Chinese naval equipment. In a recent article, the corruption scandals were analysed concluding that at least fifteen naval projects and procurements, including the infamous submarines, violated government regulations and should be classified as corrupt.³⁴ It remains to be seen whether the National Anti-Corruption Commission indicts any government officers involved in this scandal. Although studies have yet to measure the direct impact on the economy, it is clear enough to the general public that the mismanagement of public funds comes at the expense of public works projects that could assist the most helpless in Thai society.

In spite of the political friction, economic hardships and corruption scandals, the Thai government garnered praise from various international governmental organisations, including the United Nations, for its public health management response to the Covid-19 crisis.³⁵ The success was resounding enough that the Thai Ministry of Public Health signed a Letter of Intent with a British biopharmaceutical company allowing the vaccine research team at Oxford University to place its production base in-country to deliver the Covid-19 vaccine in the Association Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) market.³⁶ Nevertheless, there remains much fear in the medias that the second wave of Covid-19 related cases may regrettably have finally arrived.³⁷ In the northern Thai province on the border with Myanmar, the authorities have recorded their first two locally transmitted cases of the coronavirus in more than one month.³⁸ Additionally, the Centre for Covid-19 Situation Analysis (CCSA) on the 19th of October reported five new imported Covid-19 cases from Thais who returned from overseas.³⁹

For his part, King Maha Vajiralongkorn recently returned to Thailand for several weeks from either a villa in the picturesque lakeside town of Tutzing in the Bavarian Alps or penthouse suite at the Sonnenbichl Hotel in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany,⁴⁰ where he has spent most of his time since 2007.⁴¹ This corporeal distance from the Thai mainland allows the monarch to continue his “playboy” lifestyle away from prying eyes, like wearing a small white crop-top, faded slim-fit jeans and a fake tattoo sleeve or awarding his pet poodle the rank of Air Chief Marshal in the Royal Thai Air Force.⁴²

³³ Staff, “Thai minister says to promote agricultural exports at forum to be held in China,” *Xinhua*, Oct. 12, 2020.

³⁴ Hadrien T. Saperstein, “Corruption and power plays in the Royal Thai Navy’s new leadership,” *New Mandala*, Oct. 20, 2020.

³⁵ Staff, “Thailand’s Covid-19 response an example of resilience and solidarity: a UN Resident Coordinator blog,” *UN News*, Aug. 04, 2020.

³⁶ Staff, “Oxford picks Thailand as production base for COVID-19 vaccine,” *Inquirer*, Oct. 19, 2020.

³⁷ Staff, “Can Thailand escape a second wave of COVID-19?,” *Thai PBS World*, Aug. 17, 2020.

³⁸ Staff, “Thailand reports first local Covid-19 cases in over a month,” *CNA*, Oct. 17, 2020.

³⁹ Online Reporters, “Thailand adds 5 imported Covid cases Monday,” *Bangkok Post*, Oct. 19, 2020.

⁴⁰ Rodion Ebbighausen, “Thailand’s king living in luxury quarantine while his country suffers,” *DW*, Jan. 05, 2020.

⁴¹ Shashank Bengali and Erik Kirschbaum, “A Royal Bubble Bursts: Thailand’s king faces trouble on two continents,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 16, 2020.

⁴² Benjamin Kentish, “Crop-tops, mistresses and flying poodles: Meet the next King of Thailand,” *Independent*, Oct. 17, 2016.

King Maha Vajiralongkorn's misbehaviour and long duration stays in Germany are thanks to a fortune estimated at \$30 billion with the majority of the wealth held in the Crown Property Bureau (CPB); which, according to a 2011 biography on Vajiralongkorn's father, "holds title to 6,560 hectares (16,210 acres) of land in Thailand, with 40,000 rental contracts nationwide, including 17,000 in the capital."⁴³ In 2017, the King positioned the CPB under direct control with his private secretary replacing the Minister of Finance as the new Chairman, and, in 2018, the CPB declared that its assets would be considered the King's personal property.⁴⁴ His recent return to Thailand is often attributed on one hand towards curtailing the mounting negative press received on social media, especially Facebook and Twitter, since the start of the protests⁴⁵ or, on the other hand, towards appeasing the frustration from the Bundestag over the King's unremitting attempts to rule Thailand from German soil.⁴⁶ However, the likely reason for the return is a concerted attempt by the Privy Council⁴⁷ to ensure the monarch retains personal control over the 1st and 11th infantry regiments, the King's Guard, in case a coup d'état against the proto-civilian government is needed. The two regiments are strategically located in Bangkok with around two to three thousand men combined. They previously stood in the military chain of command under the Royal Thai Army and Ministry of Defence until an Emergency Decree following the 2017 Royal Service Administration Act transferred the monetary and operational responsibility to the King's Royal Security Command.⁴⁸

Short-to-Medium Term: Four Scenarios

The article offers four scenarios for the 2020 Thai political crisis taking into consideration technological, economic, social, political, and public health management factors. The scenarios are listed in terms of their probability of occurrence.

Scenario 1: The Failed October Revolution (55%)

The demands for debate on constitutional reforms are agreed by Prime Minister Prayuth and deliberated in a special legislative session led by twice former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai (1992-1995 and 1997-2001), current President of the National Assembly of Thailand. The parliamentary

⁴³ Reuters Staff, "Factbox: Thailand's new king among world's wealthiest monarchs," *Reuters*, May 03, 2020; Nicholas Grossman and Dominic Faulner, *King Bhumibol Adulyadej: A Life's Work*, (Kuala Lumpur: Editions Didier Millet, 2012). The edited biography is flawed in many respects, as Michael J. Montesano shows, excepting for its analysis of the lèse-majesté law and Crown Property Bureau figures.

⁴⁴ Economist Staff, "Battle Royal: Thailand's king seeks to bring back absolute monarchy," *The Economist*, Oct. 14, 2020.

⁴⁵ Sandali Handagama, "How the Battle for Thailand is Being Fought on Twitter," *Coindesk*, Aug. 27, 2020. In the month of August 2020, the six most popular hashtags related to the movement include: #FreeYOUTH, #SaveParit, #SavePanusaya, #หยุดคุกคามประชาชน (stop oppressing people), and #ขีดเส้นตายไล่เผด็จการ (Draw the line here, the Junta has to go). Altogether they amassed over 10 million tweets.

⁴⁶ Giulia Saudelli, "Thailand's king should no reign from German soil, Berlin says," *DW*, Oct. 16, 2020.

⁴⁷ Paul Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Pavin Chachavalponpun, "Beware the Thailand King's New Power Play," *The Diplomat*, Oct. 12, 2018. The Thai Privy Council is characterized by Pavin as the "key body serving the monarchy in Thailand... an advisory and implementing body serving the king [... that] at a deeper level, however, represents a dominant power function in politics," or, as Paul Handley argued, "The Privy Council in the modern era is more of a Royal Interests Section, which not only collects information for the King, but also works actively to defend the monarchy and propagate its message."

⁴⁸ Prachathai Staff, "King Vajiralongkorn gains two infantry regiments by Emergency Decree," *Prachathai English*, Oct. 03, 2019.

debates are used by Prayuth to delay and outlast the protesters feeling assured that he remains the only individual that can link together the various political parties in the ruling coalition. There are marginal constitution amendments that are agreed upon by the end of the session, arriving after members of both Houses squabbled ad nauseam between each other. However, no consequential monarchy reforms are accepted throughout the constitutional amendment process, especially with regards to the control of finances and operational control of the King's Guard Regiment. Official results from the Bundestag investigations on the King's inheritance tax debts are not on the scene during the constitutional amendments debate. The leaderless protesters are intermittently active on the streets without any strategic coordination though endure unceasingly throughout the parliamentary debates on constitutional reforms. As the protesters do not resort to non-retaliatory violence, the prime minister never sends in the Royal Thai Army avoiding the mistake committed by his predecessors in the 1973 and 1976 student protests. Many protestors are fatigued and the numbers dwindle noticeably. The approved amendments to the constitution saps most of the remaining energy from non-hardline protesters and the general population, both wanting to return to the pre-protest peaceful environment; neither believing that any other demand including removal of the Prime Minister can be achieved. Even in the face of slumping protester numbers, Thanatorn, leader of the Future Forward Party, avoids taking the mantle of leadership in an effort to preserve the uncorrupted image of the protesters. The parliamentarian members from the Move Forward party are simultaneously too preoccupied by police harassment coming from raids and law suits, leading many to change parties and creating a weakened minority in the Assembly. The Covid-19 cases climb steadily due to mass gatherings, but are managed properly by the central authorities without having to resort to another national quarantine. As a result of enduring protests that slow the return of tourists to Thailand, the economic recovery lags behind other neighboring countries. Specifically, re-employment is a lengthy, slow process and the income inequality between rich and poor keeps widening steadily. With two back-to-back disappointing economic quarters private investors and foreign direct investment numbers stagnate, albeit still hold firm seeing that both are ultimately hopeful that the government and palace can successfully manage the political crisis.

Scenario 2: The Iron Fist (35%)

Already having shown a signal of diminishing negotiating power after failing to get the Senate to vote on six proposed amendments to the constitution and poor showing in the most recent cabinet reshuffle, the non-moderate, ultra-royalists parliamentarians scattered across the ruling coalition interpret the enduring leaderless Hong Kong-style protests as a prime opportunity to replace the prime minister in a soft, internal coup. It is naturally approved by the palace, who has disliked General Prayuth for some time, using him as a concession to the protesters. He is replaced with a non-moderate, ultra-royalist beholden to the interest of the Privy Council and leading members of the ruling coalition in the parliament. The breathing room offered by the brief leadership squabble inside the government is mishandled by protestors due to a lack of organised leadership. The lack of response from the protest movement provides momentum for the new prime minister to enforce his ultra-royalist projects amid an endless parliamentary debate over constitutional reforms. The new prime minister holds as first directive taking a tougher stance against the continuous protesting and runaway anti-monarchy Thai media outlets. The new government leadership adopts a new strategic narrative that characterizes the protesters in the Red vs. Yellow shirts in order to tarnish their public image that was previously seen as innocent students. The successful defamation campaign allows the Royal Thai Police to adopt a more aggressive posture with the pro-democratic movement, like protesters, media outlets and the Move Forward party – similar to with the Future Forward party previously –, in the aim to remove any remaining coordinated opposition. The change in national leader saps energy from

the non-hardline protestors from coming onto the streets. While some believe that they have at least achieved their first demand (removal of Prayuth) with no other demand achievable, others fear hard crackdowns will follow as the new leader is a strongman figure with no leaders left to guide the direction of the protests. A small, visible minority nonetheless escalate their intensity in the face of increasing aggressive strongman tactics. With the new governmental leadership primarily focused on the mass gatherings, the Covid-19 related cases climb faster than originally projected though still managed accordingly. As a result of the escalating tensions and surging cases the already sluggish economic recovery slackens further with investors weary of the fluctuating market.

Scenario 3: From the Pan into the Fire (5%)

In breaking news, the Bundestag announces that King Maha Vajiralongkorn must pay back the exorbitant inherent taxes owed to the German national state, totaling \$3.5 billion. The Thai government indicates it will pay the taxes to avoid a high-profile squabble with Germany, like freezing talks on a free trade agreement between the EU and Thailand. Shortly thereafter the National Anti-Corruption Commission announces that all indicted governmental officers are acquitted of any corruption charges. These renewed cases of corruption and divesting of billions of dollars of Thai public funds towards settling a German inheritance tax are coupled with squabbling ad infinitum in the parliament with only marginal changes to the constitution now being considered. As there are no mechanisms left for resolving the political crisis, whether in terms of compromise or dialogue, some protesters escalate both the intensity and frequency of the protests, like in the 2010 Thai political crisis between Red and Yellow shirts. Several rounds of violent repression ordered by Prayut follow in a Cold War-era mentality to quell the dissent. The need for violence is taken as a justification for a coup d'état by the Royal Thai Army naturally supported by the Privy Council at the palace, who both quickly re-establish control over the country. The Army institutes the National Council for Peace and Democracy, which ratifies a new interim constitution within weeks. This new political environment holds no space for opposition parties, annulled through a rushed governmental decree. Certain members of the Move Forward party along with notorious public figures, like Thanatorn, stay in the shadows in fear of repercussions or leave in self-exile. In response to human rights violations appeals are made to western governments to respond accordingly by enacting arms embargo and/or economic sanctions. The Covid-19 related cases climb much more quickly than original projections as the government remains disorganized and mostly preoccupied with violent protests. The total number of daily cases gives the government leeway to adopt a Vietnam-like militarized public health management approach, which forcefully confines people, especially protesters, onto army bases. As a result of the violent protests, military approach to public health management, arms embargo and threat of sanctions, the Stock Exchange of Thailand plummets fast with foreign direct investments stopping cold and investors pulling their money out of the country at least momentarily.

Scenario 4: The Utopian State Under King Elizabeth III (5%)

In a national televised speech, a new prime minister announces that the government reached a soft agreement between designated protest leaders, the palace and ultra-royalists in the ruling coalition on the demands for monarchical and constitutional reforms. The central government works toward the formation of a new constitution drafting committee and accepts a limited set of monarchical reforms after the death of the current king. These reform efforts are led by an independent leader and recognized personality, who announces that the people will be able to directly submit suggestions to the monarchical and constitutional drafting committees. The Move Forward party and other small progressive parties that surface in this new political climate suddenly receive sweeping political and

monetary support for their success in changing the structure of Thai governance. The Senate returns to a direct election model, like in the 1997 constitution. The former leader of the Future Forward party, Thanatorn Juangroongruangkit, is pardoned and allowed to once again stand as a member of parliament. With the Covid-19 related cases managed appropriately, the government tackles the growing income inequality between the rich and the poor and combats automatization in the manufacturing industry by introducing the Thailand 5.0 project, which adopts South Korea's Universal Basic Income scheme. This announcement lays the foundation for investor confidence, accelerating the national and local economic recovery.

Medium-to-Long Term: Strategic Implications

Although the protestors fail in their October Revolution, as show in the most likely scenario, they have nevertheless gained a perpetual place in Thai political history by forcing the government's hand to amend the constitution, allowing open discussion to transpire on monarchical reforms, and laying the ground work for an ensuing sporadic socio-political movement on authority relations. This last movement opens the door to a whole wide variety of public debates on authority relations in Thailand, like between student-teacher in schools, men and woman in the workplace, or over gender reassignment laws, etc.

Furthermore, the legacy victory of the 2020 Thai protest movement materializes much antagonism already bubbling under the surface across the Southeast Asia sub-region. The western media outlets dub the sum of the protest movements that ascend from the antagonism as an "ASEAN spring." There are small-to-medium size protests organized in Laos for civil rights protections, in West Papua for independence calls, in Malaysia for broadening polygamy rights, and in Cambodia and Indonesia for labor laws reforms. The ethnic Malay Muslim-majority insurgents in the Deep South of Thailand are energized by the ascension of socio-political movements across Southeast Asia. Already feeling left out of the quasi-democratization process between the central authorities and urbanite protesters, and frustrated with their own lethargic and hypocritical negotiation process, some insurgent groups increase the number of roadside bombs laid across the five southern provinces.

In fear of looking weak in an already tense political crisis, the government responds bellicously to the roadside bombings. Some human rights violations are made by the Thai paramilitary forces patrolling in the Deep South. Human rights organisations call upon the United Nations to investigate the reported extrajudicial killings and for western governments to sanction the Thai state. A set of lesser measures are adopted: public criticism and temporary informal arms embargo until the investigations are completed. In contestation the Royal Thai Armed Forces redirects its military purchases from Australia, Europe and the United States, towards other arms sales markets closer to home, notably China and India, both having refused to publically criticize the Thai security response and sanction an informal arms embargo.

Seeing an opportunity, the Chinese government reinforces its abiding economic charm offensive to consolidate Thailand's standing in its political orbit through renegotiation of the payment deadlines for the second and third submarines, and sell of further military-naval hardware at reduced price, like space satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles, and frigates. Thailand agrees to the new deadlines and reduced prices. Even at the expense of possibility being trapped in the Chinese's political orbit, the Thai government is less concerned with strategic considerations than with operational ones. This is seen as a win by the Chinese government considering it was initially concerned that the preexisting

naval contracts would be cancelled due to pressure from the general population over a domestic corruption scandal and democratization efforts.