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# Thailand's 'managed democracy' is under pressure

## In the shadow of Covid-19, authoritarians seize the opportunity to concentrate power – also in Thailand's fragile democracy

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, when China closed its field hospitals in Wuhan and declared victory over the new coronavirus, Vietnam and Singapore seemed to have the outbreak under control. At the same time, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom and the United States recorded shockingly high infection and death rates day after day. Back then, some posed the question whether authoritarian regimes and deficient democracies are coping with the virus crisis better than countries with a healthy democratic system?

But as Covid-19 swept throughout every continent, more evidence revealed that there was no strong correlation between political systems and their efficiency in battling the virus. Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Korea and Taiwan were among the democratic countries that performed remarkably well, whereas Iran, Brazil, and Russia largely failed at their responses to the pandemic.

So far, three factors seem to have contributed to the success in mitigating the outbreak.

First, timely and proactive leadership responses. The swift recognition of the pandemic's danger by South Korea's President Moon Jae-in and New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern offer good examples. Based on an analysis from Columbia University, the US could have prevented roughly 36,000 deaths and avoided at least 700,000 infections if social distancing measures had been implemented just one week earlier.

Second, strong, functioning institutions of governance. Public healthcare systems and available hospital facilities surely are significant factors but, when compared, rich economies don't seem to perform better than poorer ones. The crucial difference seems to be the ability to mobilise state resources and support mechanisms fast and to ensure a consistent

and transparent flow of information. In Germany, Taiwan and Finland, the political leadership managed to communicate unpopular measures with empathy and signalled that they were in control.

Third, the public acceptance of government interventions. Countries where people are more willing to comply with government recommendations of social distancing and wearing protective masks have managed to contain the new virus, even without lockdowns, such as South Korea and Japan.

## Thailand's achievements

Despite these developments, supporters of authoritarian rule are trying to advertise for a more autocratic political model in the shadow of Covid-19. Autocracies are using this crisis to exercise a political agenda to their advantages, while defective democracies are trying to extend executive powers: China aggressively moves to take away Hong Kong's autonomy; Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan threaten people who disobey with prosecution, enforce strict obedience and strengthen its grip; Mexico places the administration of Covid-19 hospitals under the control of the military; El Salvador, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala exploit the predicament to put down hunger protests; Honduras suppresses political expression and imprisons dissidents; Chile uses emergency power to delay the April referendum for a new constitution.

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In Asia, Thailand is a remarkable example of a 'managed democracy' (read: deficient) coping with the pandemic. The military-backed government has been praised for its achievements in fencing off the spread of the virus, thanks mostly to the large numbers of health volunteers and healthcare providers, and more or less, people's compliance with all disease control measures. At the same time however, the former members of the military regime (2014-2019), who now sit in the cabinet, have used the pandemic to further consolidate their power.

A "Centre for Covid-19 Situation Administration" (CCSA) was established after the state of emergency was declared at the end of March. The Centre is led by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha, who also headed the military regime until elections were held in 2019. He now has the power to issue directives without having to seek cabinet approval and

thus supersedes elected politicians. Since the current government was formed by a 19-parties-coalition and crucial ministries are headed by coalition partners, critics claim that the pandemic crisis has been used to stage a silent coup d'état.

## How will the money be spent?

While many countries gradually ease their lockdowns and plan to end state of emergency, Thailand with a notably low number of infections and death cases opted to prolong it until the end of June. This may well be interpreted as the attempt to have people remain at home as much as possible under the slogan that 'health is more important than freedom.' At the same time, important reforms towards more rights and liberties are put on hold: Thailand's Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA), intended to protect the citizens from unauthorized and unlawful disclosure of their personal data, is being postponed for another year, presumably to allow the government's virus transmission tracking system to operate.

Such strict measures and excessive use of power, understandably, result in skepticism that the government has a hidden agenda and that the control monopoly aims at other targets beyond securing the health and lives of citizens.

As it is shown in the case of Thailand, a global plague can play into the hands of leaders with an authoritarian mindset, but it can leave them exposed as well. In the coming months, the democratic camp and observers will keep an eye on three major political developments: How will the one trillion Baht bailout package (USD 31,419,860,000), which accounts for approximately 11 per cent of Thailand's GDP, be spent? The stimulus measures are authorised by three executive decrees and aim to help the people affected by the pandemic, to support the financial system and to restore economic security. But the distrust over financial transparency and efficient implementation is widespread.

## Thailand's youth

First, more than half of the Thai population has registered for the various government's aid mechanisms and cash handouts. Among them are 22.3 million people who qualify for the 'nobody will be left behind scheme', 10 million farming households, and 2.5 million persons with disabilities. Yet there are still millions, the poorest of the poor, who cannot access government assistance.

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Thailand's economy depends largely on exports of goods and services. In 2018 its share in the GDP was 66.82 per cent, compared to 44.7 per cent of the global average. Thus, the world's economic downturn will severely hit the Thai economy. The rescue package must be wisely managed, so that the Thai economy does not end up favouring only big businesses and wealthy conglomerates. Since the country is ranking among the top five unequal societies in global comparisons, this could well happen.Equally important is the need to safeguard Thailand's biggest public loans against foreseeable corruption. Although the economic stimulus decree installs a committee to scrutinise and monitor the budget, the fact that the committee is composed mainly of high ranked bureaucrats who are already sitting in many other committees casts doubt on their independence and impartiality.

Second, in terms of Thailand's political landscape, the fact that the ruling Palang Pracharath Party's unity seems to have been fractured might be another source of instability. It is possible that the deputy Prime Minister and the party's respected chief strategist, General Prawit Wongsuwan, will replace the current leader Uttama Savanayana. If this happens, a government reshuffle is likely to follow. The potential changes in ministerial posts could aim at re-balancing the access of cabinet members to the recovery stimulus package.

Third, the main opposition party, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), is also facing an internal crisis. Some of the party's most important members are contemplating whether it is a right time to set up a new party,  a common feature of Thai politics. This would seriously weaken a prime political force in the country, which has managed to challenge the traditional establishment in the past 20 years: Despite several court verdicts and military interventions, and due to it re-branded several times, it became so popular that it has never lost an election until 2019.

But a split in the PTP would also weaken the opposition coalition in the lower house of Parliament, since another important player, the new, progressive Future Forward Party, was recently dissolved following a court judgement. Its substitute, renamed as Move Forward Party, is still struggling to take its place as a relevant opposition force. In the long run, Thailand's political party system will profit from a politically more

experienced party committed to progressive values.

For the moment, the opposition fatigue in Parliament might result in more anti-government activities outside the House. It is to be seen if the university and high school student flash mobs, which were put to sleep by the coronavirus in March, will regain traction. Thailand's youth burst into protest not only over the dissolution of the Future Forward Party, but to demand more economic security and social justice. At the end of the state of emergency, political activities which were swept under the rug, are expected to resurface. The rescue package spending will be scrutinised by the youth movement because of the gigantic debt that will burden the young generation.

To sum up, Thailand's current political situation indicates how, in a deficient democracy, the corona crisis might well be used by the supporters of authoritarian rule to advertise for their political model. All over the world, the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed governments to limit rights and liberties and to prioritise public health and safety. Many countries have proven that they can alleviate the crisis with respect for democratic principles, human rights and equity. The challenge for Thailand will be how to balance between health and economy and how to reinstate hope, rather than despair, for its people.

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