CHAPTER 15

Defensive Populism in Tutelary Democracies: The Case of Thaksin Shinawatra vs the Deep State in Thailand

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According to Cas Mudde, citing Pierre-André Taguieff, "populism is understood as a pathological form, pseudo- and post-democratic, produced by the corruption of democratic ideals" (Mudde 2004). Beyond the semantic difficulties raised by the notion of "corruption of democratic ideals," this definition calls up a temporal sequence according to which populism can only appear following the advent of democracy. This sequence poses the question of the effect of populism on democracy. There are various conflicting approaches in this regard, which nevertheless tend to converge. Indeed, while the liberal approach to populism, following Seymour Martin Lipset, for instance, considers the phenomenon as a threat to democracy, in light of the experience of fascism and Nazism, (Lipset 1960, 169–173) and while the proponents

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of "radical democracy"—such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Mouffe 2018; Laclau 2005)—identify populism as the purest form of democracy, advocates of the "third-way" view, such as Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, consider it at once a threat and a necessary corrective to the proper functioning of liberal democracy. Ultimately, a consensus seems to have emerged around the idea that populism is simply a "normal" phenomenon in any democracy (Mudde 2004, 541).

If these were true, then a rise in populism could paradoxically serve as an indicator of democratization. In the case of Thailand, the emergence of populism in Thaksin Shinawatra, who was first elected prime minister in 2001, does indeed correspond to a period of democratization when his overthrow, in the coup d'état of 2006, hailed the return of military dictatorship. Since 1932, the date of the transition to a constitutional monarchy, Thailand has experienced nearly a half-century of military dictatorship altogether. The democratization process had begun in the late 1990s with the adoption of the Constitution of 1997, under which auspices Thaksin was elected in 2001 and then in 2005 with an absolute majority of seats. The political party that brought Thaksin to power was dissolved three times: the Thai Rak Thai, which Thaksin founded in 1998, was dissolved by a military-established ad hoc Constitutional Tribunal in May 2007, the Phalang Prachachon, the successor party to Thai Rak Thai, was dissolved by the Constitutional Court in December 2008, and lastly, the Thai Raksa Chat party, which grew out of Pheua Thai, successor to Phalang Prachachon, was also dissolved by the Constitutional Court in March 2019 (Mérieau 2021b). All the same, the elections of December 2007, July 2011, and March 2019 were all won by the political group that backed Thaksin. In particular, the 2011 elections put his youngest sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, in power (Mérieau 2016a). She, too, was ousted by a military coup in 2014.

The present chapter seeks to analyze Thaksin's populism as a defensive form of populism in the framework of a tutelary democracy. It therefore suggests a shift in perspective: the aim is less to comprehend populism through the personal trajectory of a politician than it is to focus the analysis on the legal and political structures it proceeds from.

Populism is often defined as the political practice of a leader who claims to come from the people and sets out to challenge a corrupt elite (Müller 2016); its primary feature is direct mobilization of the masses (Jansen 2011, 75). In this perspective, Thaksin only *became* a populist in the course of his second term, in 2005–2006, in reaction to rejection from the so-called traditional elite—a term which in this case refers to the monarchy, the judiciary, and the military, by opposition to the new economic elite that Thaksin himself belonged to—, and under the threat of a military coup, which ultimately took place in September 2006. The following pages will analyze the development of Thaksin's populism in chronological order, examining, first, the institutional framework within which Thaksin's populism was deployed. It will then be seen how, in the process of rising to power, the hallmark of Thaksin's style was a certain rejection of populism; it was mainly during his second term that he espoused a number of elements of the populist style. Finally, it was shortly before his overthrow, knowing he was in jeopardy, that Thaksin adopted a clearly populist discourse, which he subsequently cultivated once in exile with the help of his supporters. The conclusion will examine the links between populism and tutelary democracy.

The Institutional Framework of Thaksin's Populism: Tutelary Democracy and "Deep State"

The institutional framework within which Thaksin's populism was deployed can be described as a tutelary democracy, in other words, according to Adam Przeworski, "a regime which has competitive, formally democratic institutions, but in which the power apparatus, typically reduced … to the armed forces, retains the capacity to intervene to correct undesirable states of affairs" (Przeworski 1988, 60–61). This institutional framework has been defined successively as a "bureaucratic polity" (Riggs 1966) and as a "deep state" (Mérieau 2016b, 445–466): the two concepts highlight the administration's lack of subordination to the government. The notion of "Deep State" is comparable to that of "state within a state." "dual state" (Fraenkel 1941) or "parallel state" (Paxton 2004): it is composed of state agents over which civilian governments have little or no control (Tunander 2009, 66). Like the "regular" state, it is not monolithic; various actors and networks engage in power struggles within its framework. However, the fundamental difference between the regular state and the Deep State is that the former is accountable for its action through democratic channels, whereas the latter escapes democratic control and circumvents the requirement of transparency (Ahmed 2012, 79).

It is often described as an institutional framework within which a powerful and essentially antidemocratic alliance composed of security forces in the broad sense, including the military, the police, and the judiciary, are involved in regular aspects of administration, but also in a number of shadow activities. Above all, the Deep State retains a veto power over the regular state (Tunander 2012). Its agents are able to create "situations" intended to destabilize or overthrow legal governments, stage coups or back them. In times of crisis, they can thus take or retake control of the country's legal administration. The concept of Deep State has been applied in particular to Turkey, where it is defined as "networks which operate under official cover, without any accountability and mobilized by top military commanders in order to organize rebellion and public mobilization against particular goals" (Unver 2009, 3). In Turkey, the command structures of the military have long been the main operational unit of the Deep State—which has also relied on the judiciary and on legal elites to maintain its control and its veto power over the regular state (Soyler 2012).

In the case of Thailand, the Deep State also relies on sections of the military and the judiciary that oppose the country's democratization and spurn the electoral process. When elections do take place and give rise to the formation of a civilian government, these agents refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the new government and refuse to obey government orders, believing they are issued by an authority that has "usurped" power which is rightfully theirs and is moreover unfit to exercise it. They seek to maintain a political order based on a symbiotic relationship between the bureaucracy and the monarchy, running parallel to that of elected politicians, by staging judicial-military coups if necessary. As the bureaucracy's role is to protect an inviolable and sacred monarchy, most of the coups it has accomplished have been justified by the need to safeguard the royal institution.

Since 1932, date of the transition from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, Thailand has experienced 13 coups d'état, in other words a coup approximately every six or seven years. In the wake of each coup, an interim constitution is drafted that devolves all powers to the military; such interim constitution then gives way to a "permanent" democratic constitution that sets up a tutelary democracy, in which the military sees its veto power over the regular government's decisions constitutionalized within a "defense council" or a "national security council" given broad powers in times of crisis, and, since 2006, has also given major veto power to the judiciary. The serial nature of these coups has been theorized as "the vicious cycle of Thai politics," (Samudavanija

1982) bringing in not only the army and the courts but the King as well, who tends to "ratify" the various coups by providing royal sanction for them (Mérieau 2021b).

In the 1960s and especially in the 1970s–1980s, the military managed to base its legitimacy on the need to shield the country from the communist threat. But after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the army underwent a serious legitimacy crisis. In 1992, the middle classes staged massive demonstrations again the army's role in Thai politics and demanded that the military government resign. In the wake of these demonstrations, harshly put down by the military, the King sided with the demonstrators and, in a royal address broadcast on television, ordered prime minister General Suchinda Kraprayoon, to step down (Yoshifumi 2008, 72–74). The King then appointed a civilian government until new elections could be held. The King's democratic legitimacy reached new heights as a result, making him a father figure to be revered—a reverence that was moreover protected by the drastic lèse-majesté law-making criticism of the King liable for a prison term from three to 15 years.[1] The reform movement that began in the early 1990s resulted in the Constitution of 1997, seen as the start of a new democratic era for Thailand.

The Constitution of 1997 was generally heralded as one of the most democratic constitutions in South East Asia, even in the "Global South" (Kuhonta 2008, 373). On paper, it set up a functional and representative Westminster-style bicameral parliamentary system. To ensure a strong and stable government, it adopted mechanisms of "rationalized parliamentarism." This constitutional design was rounded out by the creation of a wide set of independent constitutional bodies, such as the National Anti-Corruption Commission, the Electoral Commission, and the Parliamentary Ombudsmen, as well as a powerful Constitutional Court, to check possible abuses of power by elected politicians. Innovative participatory democracy mechanisms aimed to ensure meaningful popular participation. The traditional elites (army, judiciary, and monarchy) nevertheless retained considerable influence over political decisions, particularly through the King's Privy Council, which, although a mere advisory institution on paper, in fact controlled appointments within the civilian and military bureaucracy, set priorities in terms of public policy, and reviewed the budget, among others (Mérieau 2017). The Constitution defined the Thai political system as a "Democracy with the King as Head of State,"[2] referring to the Kingdom's long adherence to a form of tutelary democracy known as "Thai-style democracy" (Hewison and Kitirianglarp 2010).

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[1] On the lèse-majesté law, see David Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse-Majesté* (Routledge, 2011); see also Eugénie Mérieau, "A History of the Thai lèse-majesté Law," in *Thai Legal History: From Traditional to Modern Law*, ed. Andrew Harding and Munin Pongsapan (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

The Kingdom of Thailand never came under colonial rule. In 1932, it transitioned from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy through a coup without a change in dynasty. Even in times of regency (on and off from 1935 to 1950), the Kingdom retained a traditional elitist structure centered around the royal family and the palace, located in the center of Bangkok. The socioeconomic organization of the Kingdom also remained deeply biased in favor of the traditional elites: most of the country's wealth is still concentrated in Bangkok, though some of it is redistributed to the poorest provinces in the form of "royal projects"—the King of Thailand being one of the richest monarchs in the world, the very richest according to *Time* magazine.[3] This spatially structured socioeconomic inequality is reflected in the Bangkok middle classes' disdain for the majority of the population, the "rural masses," considered poor, uneducated, and spatially distant from the monarch, the symbolic and economic center of the Thai nation. These two structural characteristics, namely a constitutional structure putting the King at its apex and a pyramidal system of extensive social and economic inequality once again putting the King at its apex, created the conditions of Thaksin's populism.

History of a Word: Populism as a Category of Performative Discourse

As Pasuk Phongpaichit and Mizuno Kosuke have pointed out, "The appearance of the term 'populism' in Asia over the past decade is both a political event and an academic event, and these two aspects cannot be neatly separated" (Phongpaichit and Kosuke 2009, 4). In the case of Thailand, Thaksin was accused of being a populist well before adopting populist practices. Populism here is essentially a category of performative discourse. The Thai term for "populism" was especially coined for Thaksin during the 2001 election campaign. In January 2001, a few weeks prior to Thaksin's victory, Thai political scientist Kasien Tejapira used the term in English in a column written for *Matichon*, one of the most widely-read weekly publications in the country.[4] That same week, during a seminar at Thammasat University, other academics picked up on the concept and translated it as "prachaniyom" (literally, preference for the people, from *pracha*—the people, and *niyom*—preference) (Laothamatas 2006, 79). The epithet then referred primarily to redistributive policies for the poor, highlighted in Thaksin's campaign platform (moratory on debt, 30-baht social security scheme, microcredit, and special development funds allocated to villages). These grants to villages, mainly in rural areas, were viewed as outrageous "gifts" to the poor with the aim of buying the votes of the rural masses, which make up the vast majority of the Thai electorate. Such "populism" was thus defined as a new, more sophisticated type of "vote-buying" than the candidates' traditional door-to-door cash handouts to potential voters: Thaksin had become the first "populist politician" in Thailand's history.

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[2] Article 2, 1997 Constitution.

[3] Jack Linshi, "These Are the 10 Richest Royals in the World," *Time Magazine*, June 1, 2015.

In the 1990s, the widespread practice of vote-buying, an undeniable phenomenon in rural areas, had crystallized the resentment of urban elites toward the rural population. The application of "populist" as a label to describe Thaksin was part of an established urban discourse that was critical of rural areas and their electoral sway (Mérieau 2016a). This discourse, which pit a rural and ignorant Thailand subject to vote-buying against an urban and educated Thailand immune to electoral manipulation, came to be theorized in the late 1990s as the "tale of two democracies" (Laothamatas 1996). By virtue of the performative nature of this discourse, electoral choices made by rural dwellers, in other words the majority of the Thai population, were held in contempt by the elite, and then by the middle class, which ended up supporting military interventions to overturn governments elected by the rural vote. The attribution of the epithet "populist" to Thaksin, by actualizing the tale of "two democracies," would likewise provide elements of justification for the coup d'état of 2006. Within this collective imaginary, populism was understood as a 2.0 form of vote-buying—both cast illegitimacy on the election outcome. It is no coincidence that the major analyses of these two phenomena—vote-buying and populism—are the work of the same academics.[5] Political and media personalities also picked up on the term: the ultra-royalist and fervent Buddhist Sonthi Limthongkul, a former Thaksin ally and one of the leaders of the anti-Thaksin protests that would end up in the 2006 coup, was one of the major actors in establishing a parallel between Thaksin's "populism" and "vote-buying" by former *chao pho* (a term referring to crooked politicians in rural areas). Espousing the rhetoric of "two democracies," he declared,

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[4] Kasien Tejapira, *Matichon,* January 20, 2001, January 27, 2001.

> There cannot be electoral democracy in Thailand such as is found in the West because most people [here] outside the middle class lack sufficient knowledge to understand how power can be abused. The rural people only vote for those who pay them either directly through party organizers or indirectly through populist programs.[6]

Rejection of vote-buying/populism was a strong inter-class (elite/middle class) mobilizing factor against Thaksin. Most academics, NGOs, urban middle classes, and the monarchy's entourage threw their support behind the 2006 coup in the name of the fight against Thaksin's populism and corruption. The context thus outlined, the present study will now plot the gradual development of Thaksin's populism, from his rise to power to his downfall.

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[5] Pasuk Phongpaichit published "Corruption and Democracy" in 1994 and "Thaksin's Populism" in 2011; Anek Laothamatas published "A Tale of Two Democracies" in 1996 and "Thaksin's Populism" in 2006. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Sangsit Phiriyarangsan, *Corruption and Democracy in Thailand* (Silkworm Books, 1994). Pasuk Phongpaichit, and Chris Baker, "Thaksin's populism," in *Populism in Asia*, ed. Kozuke Mizuno and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009). Anek Laothamatas, *ทักษิณา-ประชานิยม: ความหมายปัญหาและทางออก* [Thaksin—Populism: Meaning, Problems, and Solutions] (King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2006).

[6] Sonthi Limthongkul, speech in the United States following the coup, cited in Pasuk Pongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Thaksin's Populism," in *Populism and Democracy in Asia*, 85.

The Power Bid: Electoral Marketing Tailored to the Elite

Thaksin Shinawatra, who hails from a wealthy provincial family, began his career in the police force before making a fortune in telecommunications.[7] In the early 1990s, he went into politics under the banner of a religious party, Phalang Dharma ("the power of Dharma"), and in this capacity participated in several coalition governments, as foreign affairs minister in 1994, then as deputy prime minister the following year. In 1998, he formed his own party, Thai Rak Thai ("Thais like Thais"), casting himself as the providential leader the financial elites needed to get the economy back on its feet and create a healthier financial sector following the 1997 Asian financial crisis. At the time, he represented the interests of business elites, and his main concern as a politician was to restore economic growth and investor confidence after the crisis. He thus initially positioned himself as a modernist, reform-minded neoliberal, and supporter of globalization, despite being attached to the social status quo. In that regard, he was rather aligned with the Democrat Party, the oldest party in Thailand close to the military, judiciary, and monarchy.

During his campaign, Thaksin had nothing of a populist leader figure, seemingly not wanting to "antagonize" the modern traditional elite but be assimilated into it. Thaksin's references at the time were Bill Gates and American billionaires. His first slogan, "Think new, act new," reflected this dynamic image of a young technocrat. The makeup of Thai Rak Thai initially manifested only a minimal connection with the rural world. It relied on the contrary on young dynamic bureaucrats who had studied abroad as well as veteran urban intellectuals and former politicians. Thaksin's political platform at the time was mainly economic, promising instant profits for the wealthiest investors as well as for the impoverished classes in rural areas (a dual strategy that was later named "Thaksinomics"), while asserting his intention to repay the IMF loan as quickly as possible through steady growth.[8] Thaksin was thus able to form a broad consensus around his person by drawing on anti-Western nationalism fueled by the 1997 economic crisis, directed in particular against the World Bank and the IMF, and called for a return to agrarian localism. In 2001, on the strength of this platform and owing to the majority premium of the voting system, he won a near-absolute majority in the lower house (248 seats out of 500) with 41% of the vote, for the first time in the history of Thailand, against a Democrat Party that had been discredited for what was deemed its overly mollifying cooperation with the IMF.

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[7] For an excellent biography of Thaksin Shinawatra, see Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin* (Silkworm Books, 2009). See also Duncan McCargo and Ukrist Pathmanand, *The Thaksinization of Thailand* (NIAS, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies: NIAS Press, 2005).

[8] Ibid. During his first term, Thaksin published a book entitled *Thaksinomics* outlining his economic vision. Thaksin Shinawatra, *Thaksinomics: The Thai Government's Economic*

The Exercise of Power: The Gradual Development of a Populist Style

Thaksin mobilized his supporters for the first time only months after being elected, when he was being tried by the Constitutional Court on charges brought by the National Anti-Corruption Commission that he had concealed his true wealth upon taking office as foreign affairs minister in 1994. He called on his electorate—those who would become the Red Shirts—to demonstrate in front of the courthouse, a call that was answered in droves. During the mobilization, which was more a gut reaction than a carefully thought-out strategy, Thaksin for the first time contrasted the people with the elite—represented by the Constitutional Court. On the eve of the verdict, he declared, “The people want me to remain in power because the people know what is good. And to whom do I owe my loyalty? To the people? Or to the [Constitutional] Court? I love the people. I work for the people.”[9] Thaksin, ultimately acquitted,[10] often resorted to the opposition between the people and unelected bodies as soon as the Constitutional Court or the constitutional authorities seemed about to interfere with his action, repeating that he was backed by 16 million voters—and that the “interests of the people” should always prevail.

Paradigm Offers a New Role for Thailand in the Global Economy (Royal Thai Government, 2003).

[9] *Time,* Asia Edition, August 13, 2001, p. 19, quoted in Pasuk and Baker, *Thaksin’s Populism*, p. 71.

[10] Constitutional Court, Decision 20/2001, August 3, 2001.

In 2003, in what was perhaps his most outright venture into populism, Thaksin embarked on a "war on drugs," focusing particularly on methamphetamines (*yaa baa*), thereby delivering on one of his campaign promises. This war on drugs was extremely brutal: in three months of the campaign, there were more than 2500 extrajudicial killings.[11] The polls nevertheless indicated that the campaign was highly popular; as for Thaksin, at the end of the three months, he claimed that the war had been "won" and the drug problem "finally resolved."[12] In 2004, fortified by the spectacular achievements in poverty reduction as well as by the triumphant repayment of the IMF loan well ahead of schedule, his popularity continued to grow among the rural population. Thaksin could boast of having lifted millions of people out of poverty, mainly in the country's northeast, traditionally neglected by previous governments.

At the same time, his martial approach to combating the separatist insurgency in the Thai Deep South led to large-scale human rights violations, drawing criticism from human rights advocates (McCargo 2006, 39). Thaksin then indulged in populist rhetoric, using "bad manners" in his speeches to answer his detractors. When the United Nations criticized his handling of violence in the South, he replied with a now-famous retort: "The UN isn't my father."[13] Showing himself to be extremely arrogant toward opposition MPs (telling them in one instance, "if you want me to loan you some of my MPs to help you file a vote of no confidence, no problem, I'll loan them to you"[14]), he undertook to take control of the press by buying out the major media groups, among other moves. Criticism from urban circles, especially journalists, academics, and human rights advocates, was unanimous. His antiliberal outbursts grew increasingly frequent: "What do intellectuals know about life? They spend all their time in the library: they can just go back to them!" or else "What good are NGOs? They've made a business out of poverty." These "bad manners"[15] made him even more popular among the rural populations, who viewed such language as a form of authenticity. Thus, as he gradually began to lose a degree of support from the urban middle classes, feeling increasingly threatened by the elites and the institutions they belonged to, he decided to mobilize the rural masses, which further alienated the middle classes and the elites as a consequence.

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[11] Human Rights Watch, *Thailand: Not Enough Graves: The War on Drugs, HIV/AIDS, and Violations of Human Rights*, July 2004.

[12] Ibid.

[13] 'PM shoots mouth off over UN query', *Bangkok Post*, March 4, 2003.

[14] Thaksin spoke this sentence in 2005, when the opposition was criticizing the impossibility of filing a no-confidence vote against the government.

In 2004–2005, he chose as his campaign slogan "the heart of Thai Rak Thai is the people," marking a clear change of political strategy with respect to his "Think New, Act New" in 2001. He discarded his neoliberal American style for local Thai dialects and traded his dress shirt for more casual clothing. He went out to rural villages, followed by television crews, to stroll through marketplaces and live like the locals, driving over bumpy dirt roads on a moped (Pasuk and Baker). His government did not for all that repeal any of the reforms imposed by the IMF after the 1997 crisis. Thaksin increased his media presence and gradually cultivated a personality cult. It was also during this period that he stepped up his verbal attacks on former establishment intellectuals close to the King, such as Thirayuth Boonmi, Prawase Wasi, and Anand Panyarachun.[16] As he was gradually deserted by urban circles, he realized that by posing as an enemy of the political elite he could marshal support from the masses. In 2005, he won three-quarters of the seats in parliament with 56% of the vote (roughly 19 million votes), an unmatched victory in the history of Thailand. From that victory onwards, when attacked, he would invoke the overwhelming legitimacy of his "19 million votes" (Phongpaichit & Baker 2009b, 76).

THAKSIN'S DOWNFALL: POPULISM AS A LAST RESORT

In 2005, a few months after he was reelected, he was accused of tax evasion and disloyalty to the King by his former ally Sonthi Limthongkul. Mass demonstrations broke out in Bangkok, with protesters calling for him to step down. Thaksin rallied his backers, discovering a new and powerful base of support in the increasingly fired-up rural masses. He gradually ended up casting himself as an enemy of the establishment—bureaucrats, the military, journalists, and academics that made up the closed circles of the Bangkok smart set (Funston 2009). He then chose to dissolve the House of Representatives to bring about early elections, calling on the people to decide. These were held on April 2, 2006. The elections were boycotted by the opposition, and invalidated by the Constitutional Court on those grounds.[17] The Electoral Commission scheduled new elections for October 2006. It was truly at this point that Thaksin adopted a conspiracy discourse: the army, the judiciary, and the monarchy were out to topple him.

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[15] This metaphor is borrowed from Benjamin Arditi, "Populism as an Internal Periphery of Democratic Politics," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy,* ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 72–98.

[16] Duncan Mc Cargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crisis in Thailand," *Pacific Review*, 18(4), 2005, 499–519.

And indeed they were: Thaksin was ousted by a coup d'état on September 19, 2006 while he was attending the United Nations General Assembly meeting in New York (Tejapira 2006, 11; Winichakul 2008). A few months later, the Constitutional Tribunal appointed by the military dissolved his party and declared him ineligible for five years; in 2008, he was sentenced in abstentia to two years in prison, and he went into self-imposed exile in Dubai. Since then, he has continued to hold sway over Thai politics from the shadows. After the coup, his partisans mobilized by the hundreds of thousands every weekend, going so far as to occupy downtown Bangkok in 2010 (Mérieau 2013; Sopranzetti 2012). A brutal crackdown ensued, in which about 100 people lost their lives. The Red Shirts movement did not die down for all that; following a massacre of Red Shirts, they continued to mobilize. In 2011, they participated in Yingluck's campaign and are largely responsible for getting her elected to the premiership. Once in power, Yingluck applied Thaksin's platform and most likely governed under his direct orders, but that did not earn her the accusation of being a "populist."

Similarly, the military, after launching a coup against Yingluck in 2014, had no qualms about replicating Thaksin's policies in terms of social security, grants to villages, farm subsidies, and so on, without these policies ever being labeled "populist." The term "populist" continued to be applied to Thaksin alone, showing that it referred more to a style of leadership (in particular, its relation to rural masses) than a public policy

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[17] Constitutional Court Decision 9/2549, May 8, 2006. See Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang, "Thailand: An Abuse of Judicial Review," in *Judicial Review of Elections in Asia*, ed. Po Jen Yap (Routledge, 2016). Björn Dressel, "Judicialization of Politics or Politicization of the Judiciary? Considerations from Recent Events in Thailand," *The Pacific Review*, 23, 2010, 671.

agenda. The aim of the 2014 coup that ousted Yingluck was to "de-Thaksinize" the country; in other words, the goal was to undo the loyalty that bound Thaksin and his supporters, the Red Shirts. For a long time, the Red Shirts had waged internecine battles over the issue of their relationship to the figure of Thaksin: the most radical segment believed they had to move beyond Thaksin as a tutelary figure, and even emancipate themselves from him so as to express substantive demands rather than merely calling for his return to Thai politics (Mérieau 2013; Sopranzetti 2012). This yoke was finally shed during demonstrations in the fall of 2020 calling for a reform of the monarchy and the military, which on September 19, 2020, the anniversary of the 2006 coup, saw Red Shirts and revolutionary students unite in their criticism of the traditional elites and the Thai "Deep State."[18]

Concluding Remarks: Populism, Popularity, and Tutelary Democracy

Thaksin remains the most popular politician Thailand has ever known. However, popularity is not the same as populism. The reference to Thaksin and his politics as "populist" in 2001 pertained solely to his social agenda. This was indeed an attempt on the part of urban circles to delegitimize the politician and his social policies. The redistributive policies he implemented were labeled "backward," viewed as merely another form of vote-buying. This discourse served to cement coalitions of elites whose coordinated actions (demonstrations, invalidation of elections by the Constitutional Court and military coups) brought an end to the democratic experiment in Thailand by confirming its tutelary nature.

In Mark Thompson's words, Thaksin's "main 'crime' seems to have been to have challenged the elite conception of the democratic good with his direct appeals to poor voters" (Thompson 2016, 256) Thaksin, at first aligned with urban interests, had betrayed his initial backers by turning to the rural masses. Thaksin's populism, by lending cohesion to the tutelary authorities, created favorable conditions for a judicial-military coup supported by the urban middle class. The threat of a coup, which is permanent in a tutelary democracy, was actually the source of a variety of populism fueled by real or fantasized conspiracies. The case of Thailand shows that in unconsolidated democracies, defensive populism, as a reaction to threats from the traditional elites or tutelary powers, can in turn induce the middle classes to turn against democracy and foster an even more authoritarian reaction on the part of the traditional elites: in this case, a military dictatorship.

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[18] Eugénie Mérieau, "Désirs de révolution à Bangkok: En Thaïlande, les jeunes face à la monarchie et à l'armée," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January, 2021.

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