Waiting in political limbo in Bangkok

Lives in the meantime and modes of political action

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List of Acronyms

RAD	Rap Against Dictatorship
NCPO*	National Council for Peace and Order
PPRP	Pralang Pratcharat Party
PTP	Pheu Thai Party
FFP	Future Forward Party
DMP	Democrat Party
BTP	Bhumjaithai Party
PDRC	People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State or People's Democratic Reform Committee

***** In this document, NCPO is used interchangeably with military regime, military dictatorship, authoritarian regime and junta. All of them refer to the self-appointed military government after the military coup. This has been done to follow the interchangeability of the terminology as has been used in a multitude of academic works and news sources, and to avoid repetition.

Abstract

Since 2014, Thailand has been governed by a military regime. Although the nation has gone through cycles of democracy and authoritarian rule, this has been one of the longest periods that citizens have faced without popular elections. During this period, rampant suppression of political dissent and an indefinite phase of waiting for polls has left citizens who oppose the regime speechless and trapped. In this research, an ethnography of waiting offers a deeper look into the understanding of political stuckedness under authoritative rule as it is experienced by those living in it. In such controlled situations, accounts of urban middle class youth perceptions serve to further understanding into how citizens can enact practices of political participation and contestation while continuing to live their lives under the regime. With the announcement of elections set for early 2019, the focus shifts to a turning point, however, waiting for results and changes would take some time longer.

Keywords: *waiting; stuckedness; temporality; patience; hope; political participation; contestation; democracy; dictatorship; Thailand.*

Introduction

Frozen in time

''It's like we've been frozen in time for five fucking years,'' my friend Rick said to me on our first rendezvous in 2019. I've known Rick for over four years, since the most recent military coup in May 2014. We met by chance in a quiet beach town south of Bangkok. From the outset he was outspoken about his political stance against the current military dictatorship. We maintained a quiet rapport, meeting up sporadically and following each other's lives on Facebook. Our first reunion proved a bit difficult, having to use an encrypted messaging application and eventually meeting up in the outskirts of Bangkok. We sat down in a small park next to a temple and he caught me up on the ever-shifting and confusing political situation in Thailand. He spoke with excitement and nervousness, looking over his shoulders every so often to see if anybody was listening in on us.

Rick has been involved at the frontlines of pro-democracy protests and movements since the coup in 2014 and considers himself an activist. However, having a political voice in Thailand poses many risks and can result in various repercussions. From pro-democracy activists becoming refugees (Rojanaphruk 2018), others facing violence on the streets of Bangkok for their activism and seeking protection (Charuvastra 2019a) to more chilling accounts of activists' bodies being found on the bank of the Mekong river (Sopranzetti 2019a), I started to realize that my vocal friend had reasons to be looking over his shoulders. He was catching me up with caution. If he was being careful, how did these repressive measures affect everyday citizens? It appeared that crackdowns, missing persons, and fear of the unknown had pushed many Thais into a spiral of silence. Since mid-2015 many of the activist groups Rick was involved with shifted their tactics from the streets to more covert methods and spaces of contestation after many of the young activists' families received visits from the military while others

were summoned for 'attitude adjustment'[1]. According to an article by the Washington Post, reporters have also been restricted and detained, some only being released after "signing a commitment not to criticize the military's political moves" (Editorial Board 2015). Front Line Defenders[2], a foundation which aims to protect at-risk human rights defenders, has also publicized the risks involved for people speaking out against the military government on their website (Front Line Defenders 2019). A stagnant economy, an absence of democratic elections and the immobilization of dissent has led some citizens like Rick to feel like both their country and their own abilities as citizens have been 'frozen in time'.

Another Thai person that I spoke with, a professor at a renowned Thai University who asked to remain anonymous, explained the last five years as *''an intense period of self-reflection''*. Thai citizens have had the time to examine what citizenship, country and government mean to them and what responsibilities each hold. People have reacted in their own ways, pushing their own boundaries, or internalizing them. Beyond the silenced citizens, are the ones passionate to make noise; but what length would one go to have their voices heard while threatened by the risk of disappearance, imprisonment or death? While fear has caused some citizens to retreat in their use of outspoken dissent (or even political conversation in general), it has also influenced others to raise the bar or find alternative forms of contestation.

In October 2018, a newly formed hip hop group, Rap Against Dictatorship (RAD), released the song Prathet Ku Mee (What My Country's Got)[3] on 'YouTube' overtly addressing the injustices and actions from the military government which resonated with many Thai netizens. In one week, the song reached 21 million views, which is unprecedented for a song in Thailand (Ellis-Petersen 2018a), and revealed that many of the silenced are still listening. More importantly, the song reignited a flame for interaction with politics - it motivated many young Thais to question their government as well as their own roles as citizens. In an article by The Guardian, Thitinan

[1] https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/thailands-ruling-generals-threaten-critics-with-an-attitude-adjustment/2015/09/15/5fdacfda-5bd3-11e5-b38e-06883aacba64_story.html
[2] https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/location/thailand
[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZvzvLiGUtw

Pongsudhirak, a director at Chulalongkorn University, said "(the) song could lead to the opening of the floodgates of popular dissent" (Ellis-Petersen 2018). Thailand has a tense relationship with political dissent, thus, to understand how the country reached this most recent boiling point, it is important to look back at the volatile political history and political developments over the last 8 years leading up to the first election. This thesis focuses on the lives of these individuals, among others, throughout this period authoritative control.

It's a coup! What's next?

Since 22 May 2014, Thailand has been governed by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta initiated by Thailand's military and led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha (Kongkirati 2012, 363). After seizing power through a coup from the democratically elected leader, Yingluck Shinawatra, sister of previously (and controversially) ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra[4], Prayuth has taken over as the de-facto premier, reminding the country of its turbulent political history and previous experiences with military authoritarian rule (363). Kongkirati (2012) explains that "Prayuth's premiership brought back the old model of 'Thai-style democracy' in which the royal–military alliance dominates politics with an ultra-conservative discourse" (363). Instability and contestation appear to be historically embedded in Thai politics, with more recent developments "pit(ting) the coalition of aristocratic elites and urban middle class (dubbed 'yellow shirts') against an emerging rural middle class, the poor and local tycoons turned politicians (dubbed 'red shirts')" due to a perpetual doubt in governmental legitimacy (Montesano in Sombatpoonsiri 2017, 102). As protests grew increasingly polarized and violent, ultimately resulting in 28 deaths and hundreds of injuries, the military stepped in to restore order and conjointly saw its opportunity to take control of the government (Sombatpoosiri 2017, 104-105). Avoiding the reminiscent violent militaristic interventions of 2010 and the more controversial

[4] For a full analysis on the Thaksin era read (Kelly Connors 2007, Ch. 10).

Thammasat University massacre in 1976[5], the most recent military intervention and coup attained relative legitimacy through its peaceful intervention and the subsequent aftermath. Despite this, Thailand has been in political limbo since 2014 with democratic elections having been postponed several times in the past five years. During this time, the ruling junta has clamped down on freedom of expression, and banned public gatherings and political campaigning, leaving Thai people in state of political uncertainty, awaiting the military leadership's next decision.

In September 2018, an election was officially announced and the ban on political activities was lifted, allowing political parties to begin materializing and campaigning. The last time Thai citizens were able to have a formal say in the nation's leadership was in a 2011 election (Reuters 2018). Initially an election date of February 24th, 2019 was set, and the last possible postponement saw the date changed to March 24th, 2019 - the citizens of Thailand would once again be granted the opportunity to choose (vote for) their leaders.

Political advertisements lined the streets of Bangkok revealing both new and old faces of the political world. Junta leader and Prime Minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha would lead the Pralang Pratcharat Party (PPRP) whose policy focused on maintaining the military regime establishment. The Pheu Thai Party (PTP) is a reconstruction of Thaksin's old party which won every election since 2001. The Democratic Party (DMP), Thailand's oldest political party, ran on a conservative and royalist platform, led by former General turned Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (2008-2011) who approved the 2010 massacre on 'red shirt' protestors which saw over 90 people gunned down by the military. The Future Forward Party (FFP), a newly formed party with a young and charismatic leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, ran on a progressive agenda calling for the military to have less influence in politics and a transition to full democracy. Another new party, The Bhumjaithai party (BTP), with a young and popular leader from the northeast of Thailand, ran on a platform of legalizing medical marijuana. Drama entered the atmosphere when the Thai Raksa Chart Party – an additional party loyal to Thaksin - nominated former Royal Princess Ubolratana Mahidol as their leader. The

[5] https://time.com/4519367/thailand-bangkok-october-6-1976-thammasat-massacre-students-joshua-wong/

King quickly intervened and disqualified the party on the decree that members of the Royal family must stay "above politics" (Charuvastra 2019b). Rumors of a coup began as the military began moving various regiments in provinces surrounding Bangkok immediately following the Princess' nomination (Nanuam 2019). Eventually the dust settled and campaigning continued with heavy and sometimes dirty tactics being used by many leading up to the election. Held on March 24th, the 2019 Thai election saw a turnout of roughly 75% of registered voters (Election Commission 2019), and transpired peacefully. But once again, the Thai people would have to wait until May 9th for official election results and months longer for the government to be installed and the 'democratic process' to (re)commence. In Thailand, it seems, politics and waiting are inherently intertwined.

What is explained is a brief analysis of the 'general' political developments in Thailand in the last 8 years, culminating to the first 'democratic' election in that time. It touches on the multi-tiered entanglements within Thai politics - the Monarchy, the military and various political leaders and parties. This thesis focuses on an ethnography in Bangkok over a period of three months - before, during and after the 2019 election - though it encompasses a much longer timeline which digs into the past, encounters the now and embraces the future. Beyond the above-stated summary, many feelings, thoughts, actions and reactions occurred.

Ethnography of waiting

Undoubtedly, waiting is something we all do every day, yet we are likely unaware of it. Other times, we wait with great expectation. Ghassan Hage (2009) describes waiting as "such a pervasive phenomenon in social life that it can be seen, and indeed has been seen, as almost synonymous to social being"(1). Waiting might almost be better observed on a continuum, ranging from the mundane and repetitive to great hope and anticipation – nevertheless, there are countless impressions and meanings to waiting. John Rundell fittingly sums up subjective meanings and forms of waiting, "we all wait for futures—yet not for the same ones, nor in the same way, nor at the same tempo" (51). If we look at Thailand, and the overlapping political entanglements that affect the nation, one

can wonder what the people's experience with waiting and uncertainty entails. Are there hopes, dreams and anticipated futures? Or doubts, fears and disenchantment? Maybe we can "work with waiting as a category that allows people's doubts and uncertainties to coexist with potentials of hope" (Bandak and Janeja 2018, 5). By having a closer look at waiting, and how people live their lives in waiting, one is able get a closer glimpse at the true sentiments of a situation beyond one's control. By understanding these sentiments, we can better understand modes and reasons for wide-ranging possibilities of action and inaction.

Waiting has just recently emerged as a highly applied theoretical concept in anthropology, yet there are a limited amount of ethnographic works dealing with "waiting as an analytical category in its own right" (Bandak and Janeja 2018, 4). This calls for further ethnographic research on the concept. Ethnography itself is entangled with the phenomenon, as most ethnographic research is a process of observing and waiting for something to happen (25). "It is therefore pertinent that we attend to the temporalities at play in the phenomenon of waiting, and in the discipline of anthropology" (Bandak and Janeja 2018, 9). In the context of my ethnographic research in Bangkok, an anthropological lens provides narratives into 'the human condition' through experiences of waiting, revealing forms of political agency.

This research thesis takes 'waiting' as an object of ethnographic research and analysis to examine how waiting, in its many forms, unravels feelings of political discontent. The central question of my research is:

> ***How do everyday manifestations of living in political limbo and waiting for an uncertain (political) future in Bangkok reveal citizens' perceptions and practices of political action and inaction?***

Several other sub questions served to approach my central question and will be addressed in the subsequent chapters. The next section will provide a theoretical analysis of waiting and how it pertains to my research findings. Following that will be a methodology section that presents my ethnographic approach including the actors,

spaces and timing of my research. Then, I will present the chapters of this thesis which are an analysis of the most prevalent themes and feelings that unfolded. The first chapter focuses on the feelings expressed by participants in relation to the political situation and will delve into their modes of political participation. Following that will be an interlude, which will present the importance of social media as a space for expression and contestation. The second chapter will discuss the concept of escape as it was used both by the military junta and participants. While the military used the moralization of governance to redirect and suppress opposition, participants used expressions of irony, cynicism and non-participation methods to subversively contest the situation. Briefly, another interlude will follow, which will describe the urban spaces of Bangkok and how they were used as tools both by the regime and by participants as 'zones of exception'. The third chapter will explain various creative modalities which directly contested the dictatorship as well as created space for contestation. Finally, concluding remarks will address the relevance of the findings of this research, it's limitations, and possible further analysis on the subject. It will also discuss the aftermath of the elections and future possibilities for Thailand and my participants.

Theoretical framework

The politics of waiting

Pierre Bourdieu explains that waiting is one of the ways that people experience the "effects of power" (Auyero 2011, 5). "No one is entirely free from the idea of the state," (Spencer 2007, 16) yet how one chooses to examine this presents a "more of an open question" (16). In my interpretation, power and the state are synonymous and how we observe the effects of this 'power configuration' offers many analyses into the realm of how the political unfolds. Here, Spencer is broadly channeling the political, while at the same time expressing that we can explore a multiplicity of effects, reactions and unexpected possibilities that emerge from political control of the state on its citizens. Spencer explains that the political "has the potential to transform other areas of life, but not in any particular or predictable way" (73). For Spencer, politics represents the material - government and institutions - but the *political* is more dynamic and inclusive, representing broad dimensions of how politics affect political life. This creates a 'ubiquitous contingency' (Hansen 1999, 57) in citizens, generating infinite space for scholars to explore the many manifestations that transpire. As Spencer (2007) observed in his research in Sri Lanka, "the political was an inescapable feature of the social landscape," something that resonated during my research in Bangkok. 'Waiting' is one of the many facets produced by the political and will be a fundamental theme in this thesis. Echoing Andrew Dawson's description of Serbia as a "nation in waiting" (2018, 151), I wish to point out an akin singularity occurring in Thailand through a theoretical analysis of waiting.

Humans connect often by sharing like feelings and experiences, yet, it would be difficult to claim that any singular and similar experience is *exactly* the same – each is unique when we look at the subtleties. Looking at the human experience of waiting in what Bandak and Janeja (2018) refer to as the 'poetics of waiting' – "the existential

affordances of being placed in temporal relations, gaps and intervals where the outcome is uncertain" – we can better understand "how people in ostensibly similar conditions still experience and deal with them differently" (3). To start understanding waiting, it is important to consider the experience of time.

Temporal limbo

"Waiting is a particular engagement in, and with, time" (Bandak and Janeja 2018, 1). It is related to one's past, present and future. Vrabancic explains, "'Waiting for something' always implies a temporal dimension where present and future are strung together on the thread of the wish that runs through them" (2018, 192). Waiting represents a period of transition or 'transience', a liminality and ambiguity. In the words of Victor Turner (1968), "betwixt and between" moments in time (95), "the short interval between tick and tock... full of expectation" (Jeffrey in Bandak and Janeja 2018, xiii). In this temporal *limbo,* we can examine the essences of meanings and experiences of waiting. For waiting is experienced differently depending on singular and overlapping 'temporal horizons' (Rundell 2018, 43) – social, political and existential to name a few.

How one understands time is important to understand how one waits. Ultimately waiting lies in the present, the moment that begins after something - from the past - and hangs on the shift to what is next - the future. Waiting for political change in Bangkok has become indeterminate as time has dragged on over the years and promised elections have become unpredictably postponed, stretching the experience of time. Citizens have been left in a state of 'liminality'. Bendixsen and Eriksen (2018) explain that "the indefiniteness of liminality also indicates why the present is not experienced as meaningful, at the same time as it is indeterminate and potentially eternal" (in Bandak and Janeja, 103). However, agency exists even in a state of limbo, where the production of "waiting time" and the manifestations that are enacted become a challenge to the "political order" (108). "Turning Foucault (1978) on his head, Abu-Lughod (1990) says that where there is resistance, there is power" (107). Similarly, in Bangkok, I observed the agency in waiting as acts of commanding resistance to the power of the state.

Waiting and agency

How is the sense of waiting experienced? While human beings find themselves in this temporal gap or pause, waiting becomes the space where life unfolds. While more recent anthropology often tends to focus on the negative and the suffering of humans, "the harsh dimensions of social life" (Ortner 2016, 47), there is always an alternative way of looking at a process. So too, waiting can be studied both as a mechanism of disempowerment (Bandak and Janeja 2018, 7), "structurally and institutionally imposed" (5), or, a period of hope, reflection and engagement. Procupez suggests that "modalities of waiting are shaped not only by those who make others wait, but also by those who wait" (in Bandak and Janeja 2018, 8). For example, in a prison, you could find two prisoners with similar histories, serving similar sentences, yet one may spend their time wallowing in anger while another may use the time for self-improvement. Waiting then, becomes what we make of it. Hage (2009), resonating Crapazano, unmistakably sums up the ambiguity and range of agency in waiting, "Crapanzano nicely calls waiting a 'passive activity', emphasizing that it is something we do, though we can also easily see it as 'active passivity' for a slightly different but meaningful take on what is the same mode of being in the world" (2). According to Hage, agency has a spectrum. He explains that there is a range of entanglement with the intensity of which people do their waiting (8), from apathetic mundanity to pronounced anticipation. In this regard, he suggests that even one's individual choice to wait and do nothing can be seen as an act of agency.

Waiting, as forlorn as the word sounds, it often "a social experience as well as a basis for political mobilization and democratic politics" (Bandak and Janeja 2018, 4). Waiting in political limbo can create feelings of doubt and uncertainty but also of hope. Hage explains that Procupez views patience as a political stance, where patience is "waiting while working to make something happen, it is (reluctant) hope and the formation of a collective subjectivity" (in Hage 2009, 8). In a more extreme narrative touching on Agamben's (1998) theory of 'bare life', Appadurai (2013) explains the hope that waiting on the political can produce even in the most clamant situations:

> Politically organized hope thus produces in bare citizens the internal resources to see themselves as active participants in the arduous process of waiting; it converts the passive "waiting for" into the active "waiting to": waiting to make the next move in the queue and ultimately to claim the full rights of citizenship (in Bandak and Janeja 2018, 13).

"Detachment from the world" (Cordner 2018, 175) may be another response where "even deep patience can co-exist with 'agency', activity, exercise of the will" (176). Summing it up, Minnegal (2018) writes, "we may wait not just for something that requires or enables us to act, but for the appropriate moment to act" (91). Various modalities and ranges of agency are infused with waiting just as its entanglement with temporality. Furthermore, these modalities in the everyday produce more elusive, surprising and innovative manifestations *from* waiting. By operating through these continuums and ranges of understanding agency in waiting, my hope is to reveal how ordinary citizens in Bangkok contest the political order in the process of waiting.

Stuckedness - killing time and creativity

Hage (2009) refers to 'stuckedness' as "a sense of existential immobility" (97). Stuckedness is experienced more and more and with greater intensity due to the "social and historical conditions of permanent crisis we live in" (97). It creates a sense of heroism and resilience in a human's ability to 'wait it out' (the crisis). Hage stresses the significance of how stuckedness is perceived and used as a tool, making it "a celebration of a form of waiting, a 'waiting it out' or weathering of a crisis situation where the self is experiencing existential immobility" (102). This also makes it "a governmental tool that encourages a mode of restraint, self-control and self-government in times of crisis" (102). Similarly, in Bangkok, the military dictatorship has asked its citizens to be patient and thanked them for their perseverance. A situation that many times before has seen strong resistance and moments of violence has somehow become normalized through the junta's framing of their need for intervention and the

importance for citizens' calmness and resilience while ambiguously awaiting elections. Hage (2009) explains:

> Crisis today is no longer felt as an unusual state of affairs that invites the citizen to question the given order. Rather, it is perceived more as a normalcy, or to use what is becoming perhaps an over-used concept, crisis is a kind of permanent state of exception. In this sense, enduring the crisis becomes the normal mode of being a good citizen and the more one is capable of enduring a crisis the more of a good citizen one is (104).

"Most became accustomed to lives of limitation, learning the skills and attitudes necessary to succeed in truncated worlds" (Gonzales 2015, 215). Since citizens in Thailand have no choice but to wait, pressured with an analogous notion of the need for compliance, conformity and cooperation (in other words, submission), many experienced waiting in various ways, from boredom and 'killing time' to moments of resistance through creativity and expression.

In Samuli Schielke's (2008) ethnographic work on boredom in Egypt, he reflects on how young men, in a period of "prolonged waiting", find ways to "kill time, to fill the emptiness" experienced in waiting (260). He argues that "boredom is born out of frustration about monotony, of there being no realistic prospect of progress," making some "fall into a state of passivity, just killing time and letting the monotony take over their lives (258)." Likewise, myself and the participants experienced moments of boredom and killing time. It is in these moments where the mundanity of waiting can address questions about what one feels about their own future, career trajectories and the future of Thailand. Masquelier (2013) argues that periods of boredom create rituals that "do not kill time so much as they enliven it" (486). In her ethnography, she finds that unemployed young men in Niger felt that in these extended periods of idleness, sentiments of hope emerge "creating the possibility of a future" (483). She concludes, "in exploring the generativity of waiting, I have been inspired by approaches that privilege creativity at the expense of crisis" (487). As I discovered during my ethnography, waiting can indeed serve as an inspiration for expression and creativity,

even in moments of boredom and killing time. "The notion of creativity", Rundell (2018) explains, "becomes tied to contingency, expansion and an increasing reach towards a future that is less planned and more indeterminate. It is this contingency which... transforms the very modality of waiting" (42). As agency begins to be sensed in waiting, hope can emerge from yearning.

Yearning and hope – looking ahead

"'Yearning' denotes a persistent longing" (Jansen 2015, 54). Jansen conveys from his ethnographic work in Bosnia on yearning for political change that "as writings on the political economy of hope remind us, prevailing temporal reasonings affect people unequally and the possibilities that they open up are never evenly distributed" (55). Yet he could not "help but be struck by strong regularities, common denominators, shared patterns and dynamics, similar experiences and dispositions around yearnings for 'normal lives'" (55). I observed both the differences of how the political situation affects people individually as well as the shared commonalities in the collective experience. 'Sensing the political' in the yearnings for 'normal lives' in Bosnia, Jansen sought to find "connecting points for political hope" (56). Like Jansen, participants expressed sentiments of 'political hope' not only for Thailand, but also "for the world" (56). From apathy to active participation, everyone engages with waiting for political change in a myriad of ways which uncover how one sees the future. Whether hopefully or hopelessly, the concept of hope is entangled with periods of waiting for political change.

* * *

In a recent article discussing Thailand's political positionality between democracy and dictatorship, Elinoff (2019) argues that "anthropology and ethnography are fundamental for understanding the emerging forms of the political in the 21st century" (143). By pursuing an ethnography of experiences and manifestations of Thai citizens waiting in 'political limbo', I will uncover an insight into a world of people that experience 'structural' and 'institutional' "forms of waiting" (Bandak and Janeja 2018,

5). "For a period, short or extended, an individual or a collective finds itself placed in a situation where what is hoped for or anxiously anticipated has not yet been actualized" (1). This experience allows for an examination into what Hannah Arendt describes as 'the human condition' (1). By exploring this human condition and the "different modalities of waiting" (Rundell 2009, 44) we can approach the 'ambivalence' of agency in waiting which render it "a particularly unique object of politics" (Hage 2009, 2). Hage continues, "Waiting can, for example, define class and status relations in the very obvious sense of 'who waits for whom' "(2). As Hage summarizes from other ethnographies, there is "an inherent tension in all forms of waiting, whether existential or social" (6-7). Waiting also has different levels of intensity which, as Hans Baer argues, can correlate with different levels of socioeconomic and political power or agency (2009, 137). Examining and analyzing these characteristics and 'multiplicities' of waiting with my research population and location, given their significant context (and the indefinite wait), will provide insight into techniques and manners that will extend knowledge into 'the human condition' and experience as well as motives and *forms* action and inaction. My objective is to bridge a connection between the structural and existential experiences of waiting (3) to provide further knowledge into the political sentiment and experience in Thailand. "One waits in limbo because here waiting time is controlled by the nation state" (Rundell 2009, 47). *How* one waits, will be the central theme in the following chapters.

Methodology

The who, the where and the when

Field research for this thesis was conducted in Bangkok, Thailand during the period of February 9, 2019 to May 12, 2019. This allowed for an analysis of 'waiting for political change' in the stages leading up to the election as well as 40 days after, as citizens awaited election results and the installment of a new government. Prior to the research, I had lived and worked in Bangkok for a period of five years, from 2013 to 2018, giving me an insider look at what the political developments and sentiments in the capital were over that period of time. Being the capital of Thailand and holding over 10 percent of the nation's citizens make it the primary site of politics, information and contestation. Thailand also finds itself in a frequently transient and highly debated locus in the international political conversation about democracy. As the nation was preparing itself for its first encounter with democratic elections in eight years, a few key moments are worth noting during the three month period I was there - as many conversations revolved around these events and the periods surrounding them:

- March 24 - Election day
- May 4 to 6 - Royal Coronation of King Rama X
- May 9 - Official election results released to the citizens

The timing and location of my research placed me at the temporal and spatial epicenter of a nation in transition. My aim was to get closer to the *people* and understand how this period affected them.

One of the central rationales for choosing Bangkok to do my research in addition to the relevant timing was my access to a research population. Understanding the social urban environment and already having many Thai friends, acquaintances and connections allowed me to pursue an ethnography of young (ages 18 - 40) middle class

Thai citizens in Bangkok. Social status and class status also played important roles in addressing some of my questions on attitudes and manifestations of waiting in relation to politics, class and agency. Having spoken with many friends during the five years under the military dictatorship, I could comfortably say before heading out on my research that many voiced various levels of dissatisfaction with the ruling government and absence of democratic elections. While discussing politics openly in Thailand is generally avoided, most of my research population were enthusiastic about sharing their perspectives and in some ways I felt like a medium for expressing their frustrations and opinions. I spent most of my time discussing with young professionals, students, activists, government workers, and creatives. I will use only nicknames to maintain ambiguity, while other names have been changed to retain anonymity. Any participants who wished to be named have been with their consent.

Methodology and positionality

"Ethnographic research is a special methodology that suggests we learn about people's lives (or aspects of their lives) from their own perspective and from within the context of their own lived experience" (O'Reilly 2012, 86). This involves both observing the daily lives of research participants and participating in their daily lives (86). A variety of qualitative research methods were used during my three months of field research including participant observation, informal conversations, semi-structured and open interviews, analysis of online media sources, analysis of social media posts and urban and spatial ethnography. More often than not, a combination of these methods was used in my exploration. Over the course of the research I spent many hours doing participant observation - observing, conversing and practicing "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1998), aiming to become more informed of the lived experiences of my participants and their relations to my research question. "Moreover, research based on participant observation allows dynamics of power, agency and politics to be theorized from below" (Boccagni and Schrooten 2018, 210). During these practices of participant observation, my objective was to keep a balance between aiming to achieve my objectives and maintaining a comfortable and 'normal' atmosphere for my participants.

When meeting a participant for the first time, I explained my objective and asked for permission to use our interactions for my research. In every case with the participants involved in this thesis, the participants were keen to be a part of my research. I also believe that this thesis provides another channel for the participants to share their feelings - *unquestionably*, through my own interpretations.

In my first month, I was able to establish my core participants with whom I would spend most of my time throughout the three months. Rick, Yo, Praew, Su and Win were people I met several times (some more than others) over the research period and spent countless hours in discussions, or sometimes just 'hanging out'. They served as my core participants in 'everyday life ethnography'. We would often meet in the evening or during the weekend and have dinner or drinks, with the purpose of hanging out more so than research. Yet, it is in these moments of prolonged hanging out and forgetting about the 'research elephant' in the room when some of the more subtle feelings were expressed. There are several other participants that I encountered once or twice in the Bangkok social scene. Some conversations were shorter, while others lasted hours. I did my best to always introduce my research and ask for permission to use our interactions. I also followed the political art events of Headache Stencil[6] and participated in discussions at his shows, conducted an informal interview with Hockhacker from RAD, spent hours hanging out with my friend and creative, Note, and had a very enlightening interview with a professor from Chulalongkorn University who asked to remain anonymous. Some of my interactions involved multiple participants while others were one on one. Other times, my core participants connected me with new participants during social evenings. Very often, it was easy to spark up a conversation at a social space as young Thai people are very friendly and actually quite excited to talk about their feelings on the political situation. With the exception of one three day period, all other participant fieldwork was conducted in private settings in Bangkok (residences or apartments), at public and social events and locales, in restaurants and cafes or just walking on the streets.

Three other methodological approaches were fundamental to this research. First, throughout my fieldwork I conducted spatial and urban ethnography (Hannerz 1980), so that not only my time spent with my main research population was of use, but also

my time spent traveling from place to place in Bangkok, observing the modalities of life in a megacity. Waiting in the more obvious sense, is experienced in every moment in crowded cities. More basic and common observations of waiting will give a more general picture of how people and cultures experience and deal with waiting. It is also important to understand the *spaces* where my participants spend time, and how they give meaning to those spaces. The levels of comfort and openness to speak in different spaces will also reveal perceptions of agency in relation to the state. Secondly, I observed the realm of social media (mainly 'Facebook'), as it is a space where many friends made statements or posted articles stating their discontent with the political situation. Social media is also an interesting and relevant medium, as it is what many people do while they are waiting. Thirdly, staying up to date with various news sources served as central talking points in many conversations, and actually guided them. It can be said that many of the feelings that transpired from the military regime's decisions are circulated through media sources. Because of this, an analysis of media representations is essential.

The following chapters will focus on ethnographic data gathered from my research. Many conversations were often in relation to political developments expressed through various media sources. Therefore, my observations and arguments will involve a triangulation of information from ethnographic fieldwork, media and social media analyses and theoretical contextualization.

* * *

Finally, it is important to always be aware of and reflect on my own positionality before, during and after my research as well as its limitations. As O'Reilly (2012) states, "we cannot undertake ethnography without acknowledging the role of our own embodied, sensual, thinking, critical and positioned self" (100). I sympathize with most of my participants' opinions about the political situation in Thailand, yet, I have tried to also be aware and reflective at all times to avoid bias as well as tune in to all perspectives. That being said, I do have a stance on the current government and the lack of a democratic process. The very theme of my thesis focuses on modes of political action and contestation, which is why the participants I sought out expressed various

levels of dissatisfaction with the military government. This thesis is by no means a reflection on how all Thai people feel about the current government. It is only a small representation of young middle class Bangkokians, which is one of its primary limitations. I am also aware of my standing as a Western researcher and a (non-citizen) outsider and how my outsider perspective, as any perspective, always incorporates subjectivity. Democracy means something different for everyone and I was made aware of that throughout my research.

Chapter 1

The effects of waiting

This chapter will explain the feelings and actions expressed by my participants in relation the political developments - as they were understood by my participants and as they were expressed through various news sources. It will reveal how even in non-seeming ways, Bangkok youth are producing and enacting small undertakings of political agency and participation.

Between hope and hopelessness

''Prayuth will win if he wants to win,'' Win said to me in early February. She was referring to the fact that she believed the upcoming election was essentially rigged and that military regime would continue its rule through an election where most arrangements favored a victory for Prayuth, the self-appointed Prime Minister since the coup. Su echoed this sentiment but explained it a bit differently, ''*it's like they didn't explain anything to the people, they just made them choose, yes or no? yes or no? YES OR NO?''* She continued to describe how the election was essentially thrown onto Thai citizens without transparently explaining the terms and conditions. At the same time, people had no choice but to accept these terms if they wanted an election to finally take place. One of the main conditions of the election that my participants were referring to was the undemocratic appointment of 250 senate seats by the ruling junta, meaning that of the remaining 500 democratically elected representatives, only 126 would have to show support for General Prayuth and his party for him to remain in power as Prime Minister (Han and Khemanitthathai 2019). One could argue that from its inception, the election was not entirely democratic. Yet, what could the Thai people who felt this way do about it?

Article 44 of the ''interim constitution'', fashioned by the NCPO, gives the head, General Prayuth, ''power to pass any order deemed necessary for strengthening public unity and harmony, or for the prevention, disruption, or suppression of any act that undermines public peace and order or national security, the monarchy, national

economics, or administration of state affairs" (Sopranzetti 2016, 306). This law rendered the junta absolute power until the appointment of a new government, which meant that any time before, during or even *after* the election, General Prayuth could decide to rescind the scheduled transition to 'democracy' (Kongkirati 2018). The ambiguity of the law left many people feeling 'potentially' powerless or even useless during the democratic process. It also left many in a state of uncertainty about the future and used its equivocality to prevent any possible political dissent through fear of the law. Many of the people that I spoke with expressed feeling powerless or stuck, waiting in various modes (Hage 2009). Bandak and Janeja (2018) say that "whatever has placed an individual or a collective in a situation of waiting, such a situation elicits diverse attitudes, and often leads to existential questions and doubts" (16). Often, conversations at some point or another revealed feelings of doubt, uncertainty, frustration, anger, anxiety, despair, disillusionment or boredom in relation to the political situation. However, these expressions were often coupled with sentiments of hope and anticipation.

Countless people that I spoke with referred to an infinite cycle of democracy, protest and unrest, coup and dictatorship which Stent (2012) describes as "gradual swings of the pendulum, with dictatorial conservatism, generally backed by the Army, alternating with more democratic rule" (22). This cycle, which many academics have analyzed and media sources have discussed, gave an impression similar to what Yurchak (2005) describes in his book about the feeling in late Soviet Union, "that everything was forever" (1). Those who wanted change, then, revealed hope for the immediate future, in relation to the upcoming election, but also felt stuck in a cycle that would likely lead to more unrest and another coup. This placed many that I spoke with in a layered temporality of waiting, between a more immediate hope, and a longer feeling of hopelessness. Though, even the immediate hope was tarnished by the reality that the election would not be fair, while some saw a more hopeful future far off in the distance. Jarrett Zigon explains that "hope does not arise in good times. Rather, hope is born out of the conditions of struggle. Hope is what we find when we might expect to find hopelessness" (in Bandak and Janeja 2018, 76). Many participants shielded their hopes and excitement for the election with expressions of doubt and frustration. Frederiksen

(2018 in Bandak and Janeja) describes how people may start to wait in doubt, but even so, waiting is then related to something, "there is something to wait for (or through), a horizon that creates a meantime"(173-174). A few narratives of some of my participants are highlighted below to better illuminate their lives in the meantime, during this extended period of political limbo or stuckedness. Many of the stories begin in relation to the past.

* * *

Yo, who currently works for the South East Asian Regional Center for Archaeology and Fine Arts, had an interesting life path which brought him to that point, entangled with political circumstances and personal decisions. He previously worked for a media company during the 2006 coup which was run by one of the leaders of the 'yellow shirt' movement. This is what he had to say:

> *I disagreed with the way things were done, were happening. I think because we're a media company, I don't think that's our role, to mobilize people. I'm not a very political person, but, I disagree with that thing because I don't think that's the role of journalism. I think when you start to take sides, I think you lose the balance. I never went to the rallies ['yellow shirt' rallies]. I was sent there once when they shut down Suvarnabhumi airport, just once. But, to be honest, I think that politics overwhelms me, because I think there are just too many players. But I try to be educated about democracy in general. I think in a way I began to do anthropology at Thammasat University in 2015 (because of this). And they asked during the interview why I wanted to take the program and my answer was, I was so confused with what's going on in my country. It's like, there are too many groups of people, they are arguing about democracy, but what kind of democracy? And I was like, so confused. How did we get to the point where people actually support the coup? Like how did this happen? This doesn't make sense.*

He has friends on all sides of the spectrum, from supporters of the coup and dictatorship to those seeking democracy. To this he said: *"I see that some people still don't want to have an election, it's sad, it's that kind of mentality*". He continued:

> *I don't define myself as a yellow shirt and not as a red shirt. Though, there are things that I agree with the red shirts, that is, at least for me it seems that at least you need to start with a democratic process, even though it's not gonna be perfect, but it has to start somewhere. By the way, I don't really support Pheu Thai. I still can't get over Thaksin, some of the things that he did.*

We also spoke about who he supported in the upcoming election and he said that he favors the FFP, although he always has some doubt and stays critical. About supporting a party or a side he explained:

> *Maybe it's a personality thing, I'm an introvert, I'm not going to go to rallies and stuff like that. But also, maybe because there are things that I always agree and disagree with a certain group of people, so I prefer to try to understand them first.*

Yo voted one week early in the election and when I asked him how he felt about his decision a few days before the election, he chuckled and said:

> *It's alright. Because I don't know who will be the prime minister, who actually will get to form the government, so I don't know. But I am leaving some room for, I don't know, disappointment. I'm not entirely hopeful about the election.*

Yo was always thoughtful when he spoke, expressing himself calmly and eloquently. In the meantime, he has shifted his professional development to the preservation of Southeast Asian traditional culture and arts, becoming much less directly involved in the political sphere but always staying deeply informed about it. We discussed not only his political perspectives and personal trajectory but also about traditional Thai culture and history.

Rick is a student finishing his bachelor's in international politics. He is a young political analyst and keeps himself very emotionally and temporally involved with the political state of Thailand as well as the upcoming election. He, of most of the people I spoke with, shows the most hope (perhaps because he is the most emotionally invested as well), although, he repeats at times how he is aware that most likely little will change. He has been a pro-democracy activist since before the coup in 2014. We often met over beers and talked for hours. This is what he had to say about the night the coup happened:

> *The last curfew [that] happened. I went to my friend's place and we were planning to protest in the first day, right after, in the next morning. The next day we just marched at Thammasat University. Then, I was walking in democracy monument with a blank paper and I saw a squad of military coming to me and we dispersed immediately in five directions. Ya, that's the first day after the coup...*

We spoke and had a laugh about the irony of marching for democracy at Democracy Monument and being chased out by the military. The monument has remained protected by the army throughout the military rule. He also described to me tactics used by the military to choke out dissent, in a few cases, his friends were attacked:

> *My friend got beat up by police, he got choked until he stopped breathing. (It was) the agent provocateur of the opposition. Actually, I think it's assigned by the military. Choked him until he is out of consciousness and they had to do CPR to bring him back to life.*

When I asked him why pro-democracy protests on the streets mostly stopped sometime in 2015, he explained that there was a military crackdown and many young activists' parents were visited while others received 'attitude readjustment'. He explained that activism never stopped, but that new corridors were used. Some, such as Rangsiman Rome[6] created the New Democracy Movement (NDM) and infiltrated politics, many

[6] https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/rangsiman-rome

joining the FFP. Others took a stance on activism for an election, and it seems that some did not like this stance. On June 3rd, Sirawith 'Ja New' Seriwiwat, the leader of the We Want Election Group and a friend of Rick's, was brutally attack by men with baseball bats and hospitalized (Charuvastra 2019c).

Most conversations with Rick though, involved projection and speculation (a political analysis) of the possibilities leading up to the election and after it. He sometimes drew up small charts, Figure 1.1, or sent me links, Figure 1.2, trying to connect dots to help me understand the tangled web of Thai politics. Before the election he said this: *"[It's] likely that Prayuth will win, but if he wins, parliament is going to be a mess".* Still, he always showed a beaming hope. Once time he said to me, *"Ya, but if we pass the reformation [of a democratic parliament, after the election], if the reformation is successful, then Thailand would be the next Tiger of Asia... it would be a huge change for Thailand".*

A lot of the conversations with Rick revolved not only around politics but also Thai culture and history. Other times, we talked about global politics, Muay Thai, love life (or the lack of it), hip hop, legalizing marijuana or approaches to Eastern and Western philosophies of life. We continue to stay in touch, and he often sends me news links and updates on the situation.

Praew is a young artist and graphic designer. She doesn't care too much politics but does support the FFP as a kind least of all evils. What she does feel and has expressed is anger with limitations on freedom of expression and freedom of speech. As she grew up, her mother was always in strong opposition to Thaksin and his party. This is something she always remembers and says shaped her early political opinions. However, as time went on, she became more aware that many people were going to jail for saying very minor things that could have even been misinterpreted as being against the monarchy or the regime. This is something she both observed and disagreed with. Upon first thought, the coup did not seem so bad to her, as it restored some calm to the streets of Bangkok. However, as the junta intensified its grip on politics and law, increasing internet surveillance, giving harsher lese majeste[9] punishments, shutting down or disappearing protestors, as well as limiting artistic, written and creative expression, Praew became more opinionated about the military dictatorship. She knew that she

opposed these ideals, as an artist and as someone who believes in freedom of speech and expression.

Note is a creative and a brand name on the Thai youth social scene, known for hosting animated parties and events under the name Dudesweet[7]. There is little, it seems, that he doesn't get involved in. When I asked him if he considered himself a politically active person, he said, *''I used to, then I [got] lazy''.* He opposed when Thaksin "*wanted to clear everything from the past'',* and then joined the protest movement against Yingluck in 2013, "*and suddenly, it became something I didn't sign up for''* [referring to the royalist 'yellow shirt' movement]. He did not support the core causes and said that in a way, the coup was a relief because the protests were getting boring and going nowhere. When talks began about an election in 2015 he said:

> *I was thinking, oh election, and then what happens? It's the same players in the game. If it was three years ago, I wouldn't know who to choose. But this is the most interesting election, the way they cheat, the process, not only all the players, but how they cheat, the math.*

We also talked a lot about the democracy. *''Because people are so busy, I kind of feel like democracy isn't working anymore''*, he said. He continued *''someone should upgrade democracy''!* Switching modes back to the current election and the theme of my thesis, he said:

> *What I've been waiting for actually, is for him [Prayuth] to win, and that's gonna start it, that's when people are gonna go out, that's when people are gonna... and as an army guy, a military guy, that's what they're scared of the most, is losing face, someone saying something about them, someone making a song about them... their reaction is like, when you make them look stupid.*

* * *

[7] https://www.dudesweet.org/

It felt like most people were secretly beaming with hope and anticipation about the potential changes the election could provide, but were also hesitant and protective of their emotions as well as of having too much optimism, conscious of the process which advantages Prayuth and the constant threat of a coup, even if a different leader is chosen. There was hope but uncertainty. Previous political developments as well as the five year waiting period gave citizens a period to reflect and shape a political opinion, one in which those that I spoke with expressed as 'against the dictatorship'. After waiting for elections for five years, voting itself is finally an act of action, for which many have voiced excitement at the opportunity. The agency, though, in their votes, becomes quickly diluted by all of the uncertainties and possibilities of the election. However, as Note said, there is still hope and excitement to see what happens after Prayuth wins, when he no longer holds the same power as he did under the junta. One night, Praew, Win, Su and I discussed how powerless everyone has been in the last five years, especially in the more immediate moment of waiting for results. Praew especially expressed a bit of despair, as did Su, though I do believe in some ways this also relates to how easily some become emotionally invested in things. Even though Yo was constantly up to date and interested in the sluggishly evolving political situation, he seemed much less emotionally attached to it, as did Win. Rick tended to show more anger and frustration, sometimes fearing for his own safety. Most shrugged it off with a smile, which can mean many things. Ultimately, life went on as usual, even given the existential affordances to the political situation by my participants. People continued to go to work, socialize, pass the time with their hobbies and just live.

Media sources echoed the unfairness and irregularities of the election. The headline of an article by The Economist (2019) released ten days before the election read: "All for show, Thailand's generals plan to remain in charge, whatever voters say, Their rigging of the system makes this month's election a sham." On election day, Thitinan Pongsudirak (2019) released an opinion piece in the Bangkok Post titled, "5 years backwards under military rule", which described the developments in Thailand over the last five years and called for more a "more level playing field in Thai politics". After the election, the Election Commission, which was appointed by the junta, delayed the announcement of the unofficial results (AFP and Online reporters, 2019). A number

of local and international news sources cited numerous irregularities and fraud before, during and after the election (Reuters 2019; Al Jazeera 2019; Bangkok Post 2019; Pratchathai 2019). While anxiously awaiting the results, some activists launched petitions to oust the Election Commission while other journalists expressed the fear that the cycle of unrest would arise again (Yonipam and Boonlert 2019). Official results would only be released on May 9th, leaving Thai people in the dark for another six weeks. In the meantime, as unofficial results were released, it seemed that General Prayuth would again be the premier thanks to "baffling mathematics" (Han and Khemanitthathai 2019). It appeared that everybody already knew it, but as Note revealed, what followed is when things really began to heat up.

Engagement while waiting

Is waiting a political action? Can there be agency while waiting? These were two important sub questions for me to approach my main research question. **"**Brun (2015) argues that the 'protracted uncertainty' experienced by Georgian refugees is realized as 'agency-in-waiting', producing both frustrated boredom and a future-oriented hope" (Bielo in Bandak and Janeja 2018, 140). While existential anxiety and uncertainty coupled with feelings of despair, anger, and boredom entertained a faint hope in those that I spoke with, this hope proved enough for them to enact forms of political agency. There are several paradigms that demonstrate my participants making choices to 'act on the world' (Dwyer 2009, 23). It is actually their hope which gave them their agency. Initially, many participants could not understand why I wanted to know about their mundane lives and opinions, but as we discussed more, many were able to understand their agency, even within our discussions. After all, even partaking in political discussion shows a will of engagement and force.

By choosing to participate in this research on political action and inaction, participants have already become agents through active political conversations. With many, the conversation still continues. Yo, at first, did not necessarily see his role as an active one, but actually, he was enthusiastic about having his voice heard, making sure every time we spoke that my phone was close enough to him to catch the recording.

His interest in politics and urge to gain a better understanding on the subject even prompted him to pursue an education in anthropology. Rick expressed excitement about the fact that the research was another channel for him to express his political views. Speculating with Rick on potential outcomes was a way for him to participate in politics. RAD had accumulated an outstanding 60 million views on their 'YouTube' channel. Due to the relevance of their political stance with my research, I decided to reach out to a group member on social media to try my luck at speaking with them. To my surprise, one of the group members, Hock, responded immediately, scheduling a meeting for the following day. This reveals how committed and perseverant some youth can be when it comes to getting their voices heard. It was clear that external to this research, my participants were actively engaging in political conversations in workplaces, with friends and on social media platforms. Praew and Win mentioned that they often joke in their offices about the election. Openness and engagement in political conversation, especially on social media, was a strong force that influenced young voters and stirred up frustration on the side of the regime and its supporters.

Su explained that in a social media 'Line' group with her family she would often share links informing family members on the policies of political parties, though she would never get a response. This brings forward another form of agency which I would say many, but not all, took part in. All of the people that I spoke with stressed a yearning for an end to the military dictatorship. The way to do this was approached differently by those that I spent time with. Supporting the PPRP, the Democrat Party or the PTP essentially meant continuing the cycle which already exists – military rulers, royalists, and populists. However, with the emergence of the FFP, suddenly, an alternative outside of this cycle seemed to exist, offering a progressive agenda and calling for an overall elimination of military involvement in Thai politics. Both royalists and the military regime saw them as a threat not only in the election but to the fabric of Thai governance and traditionalism. By supporting the FFP, which most of my participants did, they acted as agents against the traditional structures of Thai authoritarianism, traditionalism and populism in governance. Openly supporting the FFP, posting on social media about them, and ultimately voting for them are strong and willful acts of agency by my participants, challenging the older generations. Professor P

explained to me that in the culture of Thai education, the way the youth are taught is *''don't criticize, don't tarnish''. When there is a threat – report to higher-ups. Don't solve [a problem] on your own.''* General Prayuth himself uses this strategy referring to those that don't criticize his rule as "khun dee" or "good people", and claiming "the superiority of unelected "good people" over elected politicians in preventing corruption and defending the monarchy" (Sopranzetti 2016, 312). Professor P described a slow shift and break between the younger and old generation, with the older generation "*slowly becoming a minority''.* The younger generations are beginning to announce their political voice, thinking, choosing and acting for themselves, and not necessarily following the political advice of their elders. A young Thai voter, Noon, echoed this sentiment to the Washington Post:

> [In the past] some of us would vote for whoever our parents said are good. But nowadays we can access social media, so we can make our own decision. Since social media is a big factor here, we can understand more about the real problems in Thailand [and] match it with the politicians' policies (Mahtani and Wangkiat 2019).

When election results were finally released, the FFP came in third place with over six million votes. The PPRP and PTP both received roughly eight million votes. Overall, more than 60 percent of the population voted against the dictatorship and there were hopes that a coalition between the FFP, the PTP and other parties could give them a house majority against a PPRP coalition. Many of my participants were dismayed at a victory for Prayuth and the PPRP, but nonetheless, they served as political agents through their votes by appointing an influential number of members from a progressive party for the first time in parliament. Although the hopes of many of my participants were shattered, Professor P described it as a *''silent loss and small victory''. ''If you stick to it, if you wait, one day they [the older generation] become a minority. That's the long term hope''!* Hock described it as a 'coming of age', *''We have something to do more than just in the University, it's the new and younger generations' time to speak out and stand out''.*

* * *

This chapter presented many of the feelings expressed by participants through my own interpretation. It also touched on the election process as it was expressed by media sources as well as how it was interpreted my participants. It continues by informing how even in moments of apparent powerlessness to the state, acts of agency through political engagement, conversation, and participation transpire. To ease some of the tension, frustration and boredom derived from the political situation, my participants often spoke and expressed themselves in ironic, satirical, or cynical ways. This, I will argue in the next chapter, was one of the best ways for people to emotionally handle such an intense situation - the political future of one's nation - and, was also a powerful and subversive tactic for contestation. Being that irony and cynicism are so abundant on social media, and that social media was a major channel for political expression in Thailand, I wish to elaborate on its role as a space for social contestation in a brief interlude.

Interlude

Contesting on Facebook

Since its inception, social media has become a powerful object of ethnographic analysis. Consequently, it proved to be an important research element as part of my ethnographic toolkit. Since the last election in 2011, social media use in Thailand has exploded, making Thai people "among the heaviest internet users in the world" (Ellis-Petersen 2019b). While there are many viable arguments that suggest social media depoliticizes politics and detaches users from real on the ground issues, which I tend to agree with, in the case of Thailand and the 2019 election, it became an effective space for political agency. In a study by Boonchutima and Shuo (2014), it was found that social media plays a key role in political engagement among Thailand's youth population. As it was explained in the previous chapter, politics are affective, bringing forth a variety of emotions. This time around, social media was one of the main platforms not only to share news and information but also to express how one felt in relation to the political situation. According to Thanathorn in an article by Ellis-Petersen (2019b), "this upcoming election will be the first time in this country that social media shows its potential". In the article, popular Thai journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk said:

> It is a real source of hope to me that through social media, particularly Facebook but also 'Twitter' and 'YouTube', ordinary citizens have built themselves up into influential political commentators, voicing ideas and criticisms of the junta that traditional media would never dare, and they have absolutely huge followings (2019b).

While traditional media has been restricted by the junta, social media has sprouted up as a main space for challenging the regime. This has also bolstered national media sources "to push the limits of press freedom, which we are seeing play out in real time in this election", according to Pravit (Ellis-Petersen 2019b).

With hundreds of deaths in past street protests, Professor P explained that *"young people are tweeting instead of taking to the streets".* She articulated that it is *"not worth it to stand before the tanks",* and it will not solve anything when street protests turn to violence. The tense political situation and constant fear of authoritative repercussions limited political conversations on the streets and brought them to the digital world. Social media also becomes a space that protects dissenters although it can be a slippery slope because of ambiguous laws such as Article 44. However, in the case of Rap Against Dictatorship, it was social media that safeguarded them. The government threatened prosecution under the draconian Computer Crimes law, but after the song received millions of views and shares, authorities backed down (Ellis-Petersen 2019b). Referring to the song, Note said, *"that's their point, they wanted to make the government angry, so in that sense, the government is so stupid to react to them".* In relation to engaging in political discussions with people he disagreed with, or just seeing their opinions in 'Facebook' posts, Yo said, *"I might not want to discuss politics in real life, but, online, on social media, I would selectively discuss certain things,* ***selectively****"*. In many cases, social media actually bolstered further political interaction.

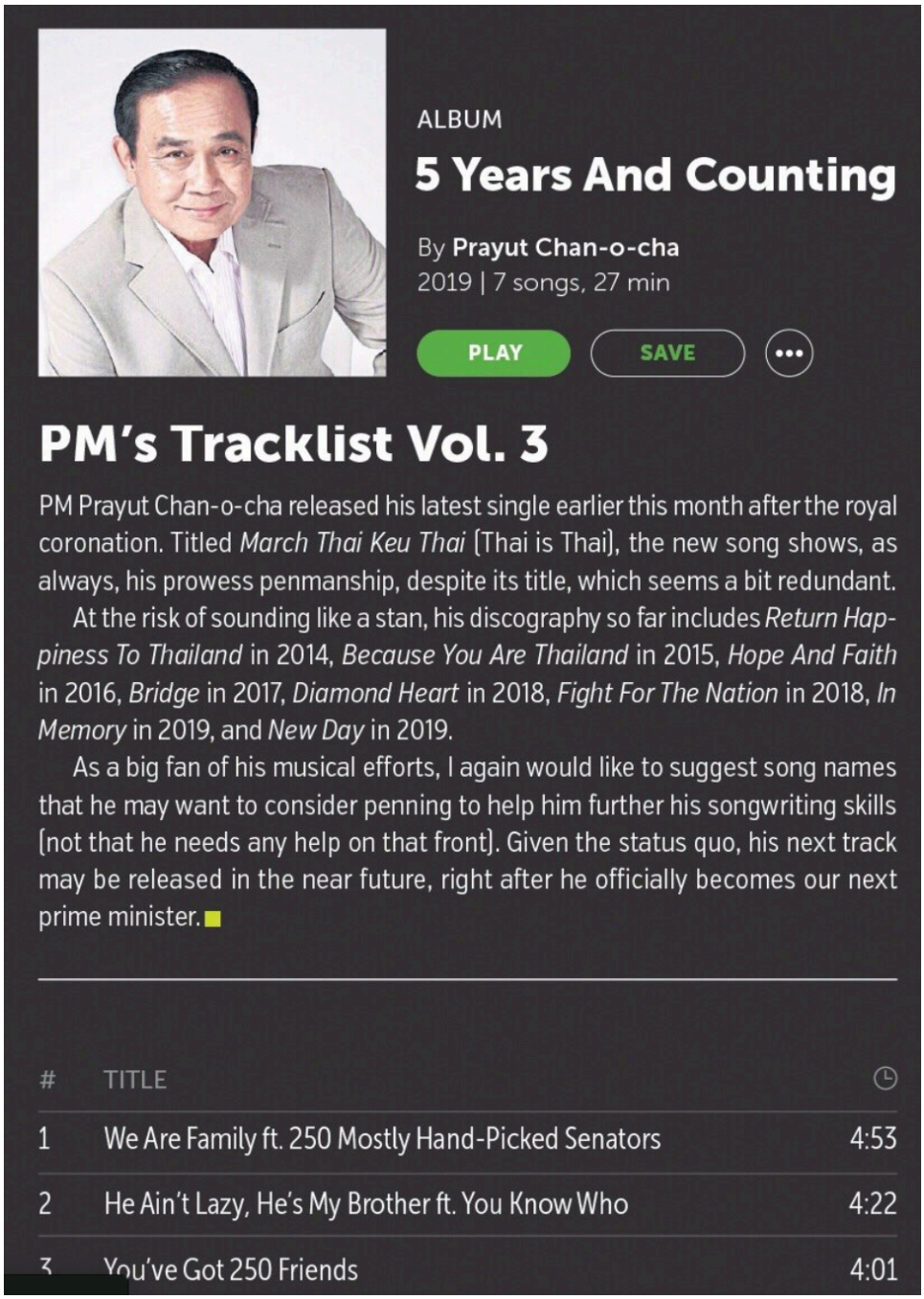
Most of the time, friends used social media as a space to share news and information, but sometimes they used it to share their feelings or push others to become politically active. Praew and others used filters over their profile photos with phrases such as, *Anti Prayuth Prayuth Club (*a play on the streetwear brand *Anti Social Social* Club), or more existential ones such as *"Dead inside but still hate Prayuth"*. Other's used an FFP filter or the hashtag #notmypm in reference to Prayuth. Peachji said:

> *Hey gorgeous voter! Today's the day we've (Thai people) been waiting for 5 fucking years! Life without democracy filled of oppression, doubts, fear and injustice. It's your right to choose who will WORK for you on behalf of your taxes! So do not let anyone get in your way of your head. This is the right way to show (love) to this country!*

He was stressing the importance of the role of political participation as citizens in elections as well as showing political agency by pushing Thai citizens to vote. Most

though, used satire and irony to lighten up the mood as well as to subversively express their feelings and contest the dictatorship. The following chapter will highlight some of the ironic and cynical expressions made by my participants on social media. Below is an example, including a photo of General Prayuth.

Ironic meme



Source: Facebook

Chapter 2

Escape

This chapter examines how the concepts of escape and deflection were used both by the regime and participants. It will analyze how escape was reproduced in various ways, most prevalently through irony and cynicism by my participants, which became subversive and effective means of contestation.

Regime tactics - redirection through moralization

In the illuminating discussion with Professor P, we addressed the concept of Thai culture as it applied to the government, education, social behavior and politics. She explained that one way that Thai people approach a problem comes from their culture which "*has to do with Buddhist belief".* An example she gave is when people have a black car or a dark colored car (which are viewed as negative colors), they will put a sticker on it reading, "*This car is yellow (or pink)".* Yellow, or bright colors are seen as 'good' colors; but the importance for my argument is not in the meanings of the colors, but in how the simple application of a sticker with a statement can divert a reality. What appears as a contradiction becomes legitimized through karmic belief, or redirection. Diversion and redirection have been common tactics used by the current regime and previous political actors and factions to claim legitimacy, as well as to delegitimize opposition.

Thailand has been on a rocky road to democracy since the late 1970s, but, following the financial crisis of the late 1990s, a 'people's constitution' drafted by a popularly elected Drafting Assembly paved the future for unparalleled electoral participation (Sopranzetti 2016, 301). Thaksin Shinawatra offered the nation a possibility of escape from the financial crisis[8] and, in 2001 was democratically elected as prime minister. His popularity was unprecedented and he gained support from both the urban

[8] For a full analysis refer to (Hewison 2007, 238-240).

middle class, the rural masses and civic society organizations (302). However, over the years, Thaksin authoritatively abused his democratically elected power and found loopholes in the new constitution, strengthening his government's political control (Hewison 2007, 239). In 2006, a military staged coup, widely supported by "many political activists, public intellectuals, and members of civil society" ousted Thaksin, seeing no other alternative to slow his tightening grip on state power. Popularly known as 'the good coup', the aim was "to bring Thailand back to its democratic path" (Sopranzetti 2016, 303). However, "no popularly elected politician was allowed to govern for more than nine months, until the election of Yingluck Shinawatra in August 2011" (303). It can be said that it was Thaksin's mishandling of elected power that led to Thailand's most recent period of military authoritarianism and undemocratization. Ironically enough, the moralized 'good coup', which was supposed to restore democracy, inadvertently or calculatedly, did precisely the opposite. The most recent phase of undemocratization began with the formation of the People's Alliance for Democracy or People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC)[9] in late 2013 during months of unrest on the streets of Bangkok between the 'yellow shirts' and the 'red shirts'. Being a major faction of the 'yellow shirt' movement, the PDRC called for a revolution, claiming that:

> Participation in the administration of the country is a right reserved for citizens who vote the "right" government according to the will of the people's revolution, a political force here defined not by majority rule but by the "moral" standing of its representatives (305).

While initially aimed at opposing an amnesty bill proposed by premier Yingluck, giving immunity to those accused of political crimes since the 2006 coup, the PDRC quickly switched its tactics to aspirations for another coup. Their objectives were conceded with the May 2014 coup that initiated the prolonged period of waiting. In justification of the military intervention, General Prayuth said this:

[9] For a full analysis, refer to (Sopranzetti 2016, 299-316).

> Our country has seen so much trouble because we have had too much democracy, unlike other countries where the government has more power to restrict freedoms. . . Today I am here to move the country forward. I have to erase disputes and I don't know when the disputes will end (Elinoff 2019, 144).

Looking at things from a zoomed out lens, Thailand has seen some dramatic political shifts over the past 20 years, and now it seems like an end to authoritative rule is unforeseeable.

An ailing King reinforced royalist discourse allowing the coup to take place. In 2016, the death of King Bhumibol (Rama IX), who was the paramount figure for political validation, allowed for the military to gain complete control over politics. The final period of King Rama IX's reign marked a decoupling of the monarchy and democracy, which had already begun since the ousting of Thaksin (Sopranzetti 2016, 308). This was promoted by the 'yellow shirt' movement which "castled around the monarchy" (308). With the 'yellow shirt' movement ultimately achieving success *again* in removing the popularly elected leader in 2014 - enforced and subsequently ruled by the military - it became clear that a shift from popular sovereign rule to that of '*barami* (moral charisma)' (Jory 2002, 42) was in full effect. Sopranzetti (2016) explains that the resurgence and domination of anti-democratic politics stems from discourses of ultra-royalism and anti-corruption (307). In a study about the ideology of corruption among 'yellow shirt' supporters, it highlighted that corruption became more than misusing public office for privatized gains, emphasizing the individuals behind corruption as being immoral, unpatriotic and disloyal, thereby transforming corruption into an issue of morality, nationalism and royalism (Aim Sinpeng in Sopranzetti 2016, 309). Since his rule, Prayuth has himself adopted the concept of moral rule as well as moral citizenship, emphasizing the importance of morality and good governance to that of democracy - a phenomenon commonly conveyed as 'Thai-style democracy' (312). Using the arbitrary moralization of 'good' citizenship and 'good' governance, the current dictatorship and past political movements such as the 'yellow shirts' have deflected an evident shift away from democracy toward authoritative rule as something that the nation needs, while still asserting to be proponents and defenders of democracy. Perhaps a clearer

example of Prayuth's tactful diversions is when he brought a life-size cardboard cutout of himself to a media conference and asked the press to address the questions to it as he walked off (Mayberry 2019).

Professor P also described the importance of how Thai national identity is fashioned and proliferated in a sense of *''how one views the foreign*". She described how much of Thai history and identity highlights how "*Thailand prevented the West from changing the Thai''*. In school, students are taught that 'Thai' means 'good', 'pure' and 'pristine'. While I believe many of the teachings to be true, with Thai identity and culture being largely untarnished by Western or colonial rule, these teachings have also been used as powerful political instruments. In Thailand, the sense of border is strong and clear, as is the idea of nationhood and identity. This has allowed the junta to implant itself as protector of the nation. These philosophies have also guided the junta to take a step toward Chinese-style governance, which discourages dissent as well as the need for governmental transparency. Though I believe it is difficult to assert what kind of political system is best for a nation, a 75 percent voter turnout in the 2019 election suggests that a majority of Thai people still wished to exercise their right to vote. Sopranzetti (2016) explains how both China and Thailand affirm that they require different systems of governance than those in the West due to distinctive histories and cultures (312). What has become apparent is that in recent years, Thailand has shifted its ideological political trajectory from the West to the East. This shift in ideological stance was revisited in the aftermath of the election.

As unofficial results streamed in throughout late March and early April, talk of rife cheating exploded in the media and social media. While tensions grew, the FFP had become a target for the regime and its supporters. After all, delegitimizing or eliminating them would remove any threats to a PPRP majority in the house. In early April the army chief, General Apirat Kongsompong, directly attacked and threatened those who challenged the election results and members of the FFP. Apirat explained that many scholars who had studied abroad had lost their understanding of 'Thai-style democracy', referring to members of the FFP who had studied in Europe (Peck 2019). He said, "don't introduce the leftist views you learned that made you all pretentious" (Peck 2019). Then he continued by addressing activists who challenged the election results:

> Once the referee has made a ruling, you blame the referees. When boxers fight, this guy loses, and you blame the referees. If it's like this it will never end. It will be a never-ending cycle of revenge and disapproval. How can it end? I've said already," Apirat said, before taking a long pause. "I don't want to say something too harsh (Peck 2019).

The words of Apirat expose the harsh reality of the unrelenting power of military 'high-ups' in shutting down dissent and using the threat of Western notions as a form of delegitimization. The election itself can be said to have been a diversion, offering citizens the chance to vote, but allowing the regime to remain in place through various mechanisms, which reinforced their victory. The date for official election results to be released could also present some questions, set just three days after the elaborate three day coronation ceremony for King Rama X. The coronation and the monarchy precede all politics which could have been an attempt by the regime to deflect the attention from awaiting election results to draw focus on the coronation. In the week before May 4th, the streets were filled with yellow shirts, this time to celebrate the crowning of a new monarch.

The literal, the existential and the ironic

Escape from the stressful political situation and developments was endeavored by my participants in various ways. In Yurchak's (2005) book on political feelings in the late Soviet Union, he explains how people used political jokes to emancipate themselves from the anxieties of living under authoritative rule (Jansen 2015, 215). In his book on people living in the late Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jansen describes how the concept of state control over time can aim at rendering citizens "docile by making them wait" (217). However, the boredom, monotony and frustration produced by the political situation in Bangkok in fact generated cynical and ironic expressions by many participants, which implicitly attacked the regime and expressed their feelings. Because directly attacking the regime could be viewed as illegal under Article 44, Professor P

described how the youth have *''learned how to talk in codes''* and are becoming "*more ironic everyday''.* Referring to the use of social media and other outlets, as well as increasingly cautious and private conversations, she explains that people "*communicate through not communicating''.* Yurchak (2005) speaks of similar secret conversations 'behind closed doors' having occurred in the Soviet Union (5). Regardless of the situation, Thai youth will *''find another way around''*, said Professor P, whether it is through internet memes or the creative use of language. Others claimed not to be so affected by the situation, or attempted to remove themselves completely from it. Here are some of the stories and articulations.

* * *

After a month of ethnographic research, I became a bit exhausted with the topic of politics as did some of my participants. Su, Win another friend and I decided to take a break to the beach a few hours from Bangkok for three days. For the entirety of the time we naturally decided to not talk about work or stressful things in life. It became an escape in the more literal sense, from the crowded and politically advertised streets of Bangkok to a quiet place more seemingly removed from the tensions brought on by uncertainties and work life. As we headed back to Bangkok, discussions about the political situation instinctively reemerged, reminding us that it was only a brief escape.

Escape in the more literal sense was expressed by some of my participants. Su and Win wish to eventually find a way out of Thailand. The political standstill provides an uncertain future for them. Rick had expressed that he was considering applying for refugee status in Germany or somewhere in Europe, fearing for his safety at times. However, he does not wish to do this because of the fear that he would not be able to return. One Facebook post by Rick read, *''I will move to another country if Uncle Tu [Prayuth's nickname] gets elected to be prime minister''*. Although yearning for a different life, the realities of the difficulties in starting a new life kept many hanging on and hoping for change. A few others that I spoke with, Toon and Took, chose not to vote

or concern themselves with politics at all, removing themselves almost completely from the political.

As it became clear that Prayuth would lead the government, cynical approaches to the developments were also often expressed. A post by Note said, *''I want the council to turn to be a theater, I would like to see a red carpet show''.* In our conversation, Note was also quite critical of the younger generation, saying, "*young people of Thailand are overrated''*. He doesn't see them creating something new, and explains how we would like to see young people *''not just bitch about... not just want something, but do something, contribute some ideas''.* He reflected a bit and became nostalgic about a time in his early twenties when he would go to a café called Hemlock and discuss politics with young intellectual Thais. "*That kind of thing is missing in society right now''*, he said. He was also very reflective about the difference in realities for those living in Bangkok compared to those in the countryside. He said, *''Bangkok people always romanticize the people in the country, but it's a hard life''.* His reflexivity allowed him to be aware of his cynicism and romanticism about different classes and generations.

In posts on social media, some were poetic with cynical undertones. In one post, Peachji wrote, *''The future of Thailand is darker than the cloudy sky''.*

Others were just tired of it, as Noomie stated, *''so tired with this country's regime''*.

In the week leading up to the royal coronation when many Thais wore yellow, another poster ironically exclaimed, *''All of these yellow shirts... Am I in France?''*, sarcastically connecting the situation in Thailand to protests in France.

In another ironic post, Su wrote, "*when you combine great great movie you watched before sleep and the breaking news this morning about the election*", coupled with a picture from the film she watched which just said the word 'merde' (shit in French).

To express his anxiety about the political situation, Rick wrote, *''Reading Thai politics is so stressful I have been watching Game of Thrones just to relax''*.

As official election results were announced, coalition governments were being formed by pro-regime parties and pro-democracy parties. After many talks, the DMP Party and the BTP parties which came in fourth and fifth places respectively joined the PPRP signaling a majority for the PPRP in the house. Many young voters criticized the DMP for their choice to stand with Prayuth. A popular internet meme referring to this (shown below) was shared by many.

Ironic meme *Source: Facebook*

The image shows Prayuth walking away smiling and the DMP turning back to look at Prayuth. The phrase 'Thai people' is represented by the woman on the right who is offendedly staring at the DMP. The far left image has altered the DMP logo to add a soldier, suggesting that they now support the military.

As research progressed, many of the people I met were at social gatherings such as bars, parties and events. It became evident that the Bangkok middle class youth spent a good portion of their time going out, socializing and drinking - another form of escape from the larger situation surrounding them. When I met Olan a few weeks before

the election and introduced my research, he laughed exhaustedly when I asked him how he felt about the political situation. Two weeks after the election, I saw Olan again in the same bar, sitting in the same chair, and when I asked him how he felt he responded in the same way. For Olan, the situation was so far beyond his control, that laughing about it was the best way to cope with it. Physically and emotionally, it seemed that not much had changed from before the election to after. Many others I spent time with escaped the exhausting and frustrating reality by ironically laughing at it.

Note's reflexivity about those in the countryside brought up a good point. One which I discussed at length with Yo and more briefly with others. Yo explained that though the urban middle class, and particularly the youth complain about the political situation every day, yet, they are much less directly affected by it as the lower class rural populations. Many also admitted that having the existential ability and time to 'wait' during this period was a privilege of the urban middle and upper classes that is not equally enjoyed by the rural poor. It was nice to see that many of my participants, while cynical, were aware of their status, agency and freedoms as the urban middle class.

* * *

Many of the examples show how the feelings produced by the political from the first chapter were expressed by participants in ironic and cynical ways – particularly on social media. As time dragged on, my friends became more cynical but often expressed it in humorous and sarcastic ways similar to what Yurchak (2005) describes as *anekdot* – short, formulaic jokes involving irony which became "ubiquitous" (273). Just as the regime had used redirection and diversion as tactics to legitimize their rule as well as to thwart opposition, similarly, many have used irony, humor and sarcasm as subversive (or redirected) ways to contest it. Professor P explained how *"always finding a way around the truth, not directly tackling it*" can be "*exhausting*". This is likely why others contemplate leaving the country for a better life, or choose not to participate in politics. However, even in moments of apathy and 'non-participation', Greenberg

(2010) argues, we must ask ourselves "*what* people, and young people in particular, are opting out of when they do not participate in politics" (63). In this sense, the political is always contested, whether by choosing to not participate in it, escape it completely, or find ways around the rules to subversively contest it – people are participants in creating the political which "is always a contingent formulation that is forever open, unsettled, and unreconciled" (Elinoff 2019, 145).

* * *

This chapter discussed the political developments in Thailand over the past 20 years by describing the shift from democratic rule to authoritarian rule through redirection via the moralization of governance and citizenship by the royalist 'yellow shirt' movement and the current regime. It then revealed political agency and contestation by participants through the use of irony and sarcasm, which was also a redirected or sometimes masked method of opposition. The following chapter will discuss several creative practices of political action that were prominent during my ethnography. First though, a brief interlude will present the meanings and uses of spaces in Bangkok as 'spaces of exception' for political participation.

Interlude

Spaces of exception

> *Life under the new regime, as under any dictatorship, is divided and often contradictory. On the one hand, it goes on normally. Shopping malls and restaurants are crowded and streets filled by the usual frenzy of vendors and office workers, almost boosted by the end of the street protests that had dominated the country and taken its capital city hostage multiple times over the last decade. On the other hand, people involved in direct actions and critical activities are watched, controlled, and silenced. In these circles, the dominant feeling is one of being inside a perimeter that is slowly closing in around them, while the rest of the society quietly pretends not to see it (Sopranzetti 2016, 303).*

Waiting is done often in Bangkok, whether it is waiting for a cab or a motorcycle taxi driver. Waiting for the skytrain. Waiting in a long line for popular food. Waiting, standing and not moving, when the national anthem is played in public spaces at 8am and 6pm. Waiting in traffic is also a big process of people's daily lives. Motorcycles are a loophole for this, breaking most traffic rules, weaving between cars and running countless red lights. When a member of the royal family is driving somewhere, their path is cleared, closing entire roads and expressways. Traffic comes to a halt and everyone using these roads must wait as the most important members of Thai society drive swiftly to their destination. Sometimes, people wait a long time for their food, only to see the wrong order arrive at the table (a very common occurrence in Thailand). In some ways, I could compare this to young people in Bangkok's relationship with politics. Hunger and anticipation (for change), only to be followed with not what one wanted, but maybe what one expected, depending on how cynical one is.

People waiting at a skytrain station in Bangkok for the national anthem to play.

Road closures for royal members and stopping for the national anthem represent moments *and* spaces of exception, where the daily becomes interrupted, as does the physical space, bringing movement to brief but sudden halt. Similarly, many of my conversations have been in another realm of exception and exclusion, where participants avoid spaces where political conversation is a risk and prefer to enter into their own milieus of exception. The zones of exception frequented by my participants echo Yurchak's (2005) description of 'deterritorialized milieus' in Leningrad. He describes them as having a "peculiar relationship to the authoritative discursive regime". It was in these zones of exception where touching on 'waiting the long wait' in the political scheme of things was more approachable with participants. It was also in these spaces where people would go to escape the mundanity of the everyday and let loose through drinking, dancing and socializing, often preferring to avoid the heaviness of political discussions. Bangkok is filled with private spaces and "areas of exception", including endless hidden and underground bars and cafes where sizeable youth sub-cultures flourish. Yurchak uses the term 'being *vyne',* to describe this lifestyle, which means living both inside and outside (128). It is being situated within a system yet not necessarily following all of its constraints (128). Yurchak explains, "these styles of living

generated multiple new temporalities, spatialities, social relations, and meanings that were not necessarily anticipated or controlled by the state, although they were made fully possible by it" (128). Likewise, in Bangkok, by creating an authoritative discourse aimed at a moralization of 'good' citizenship, the regime has also generated a multitude of enclaves in Bangkok which challenge this conceptualization. These spaces also included the privacy of people's homes, where partying would continue late into the night. Still, even there we would sometimes find ourselves lowering our voices when discussing certain topics or having a look to the left and right, maybe not because of the actual danger but because of the conditioned taboo of discussing such matters. Some creatives and party organizers would take things a step further and organize events in these spaces ironicizing the political situation (shown below).

"Uncle Tu [Prayuth] FOREVER" at a party on the Bangkok social scene.

Source: Anonymous

Bangkok is a place of many contrasts and contradictions. I believe Professor P's example of the bumper sticker is fitting. In this type of environment, the military government used space as a political device by trying to frame the 'return to happiness'

to the Thai people through an effort of 'spatial cleansing', which Elinoff (2019) argues has become an attempt at eliminating political debate (158). Prayuth asserts that through a return of spatial order to the city, political disputes will disappear and "everything and everyone will be returned to their right place" (158). However, in a culture and city where people *'always find a way around'*, it seems like these declarations are only blind detractions from real political problems. One night a few friends and I spoke with a young man working at a bar on Soi Twilight, a small street in central Bangkok. He told us that the whole street will be removed soon to make way for a mall. My friend wanted to do a story about it because he felt it was a prime example of gentrification. The young guy did not seem to care very much and said, "*the bars will move across the street"*. I feel this echoes the sentiment in Thai life and politics. No matter what, people will find a way *around*. 'Kick us out of here, then we can move over there'. In a place where authoritativeness, rules and subordination seem to be a major process of state control over the people, laws, at the same time, are constantly being broken and challenged - from running red lights, traffic infringements, street food stalls without licensing, and businesses having alcohol advertisements to carved out 'spaces of exception'. Are these not in a way acts of contestation? Ultimately, defying the law, and even more so, in the very face of it.

Chapter 3

Creative action

This chapter will describe various creative approaches to protesting the military dictatorship. It will explain how they can be some of the most effective forms of political contestation because of their interactive, alluring, interpretive, and ubiquitous means of communication, their ability to 'reach' more people and their power to create spaces for political participation.

Heroes of contestation

In an ethnography of prisoners waiting on death row, Kohn (2009) explains how in situations of powerlessness, some prisoners embody "rigorous self-action and creative production" as a way to cope and create a sense of hope (218). In Bangkok, for some who felt trapped about being able to express frustrations or speak about the situation, creative measures provided a different channel of communication and use for the temporal space of waiting. Schielke (2008) describes a boredom, stuckedness and hopelessness in the daily lives of his participants in rural Egypt, killing time to fill the emptiness in periods of prolonged waiting (260). In the cases of some creatives that I spoke with, empty time, or waiting time, noticeably served as an essential precondition for creativity (Bendixsen and Eriksen in Bandak and Janeja 2018, 91). Kohn (2009) explains that, "A human need for self-affirmation and a sense of worth can perhaps only be fostered through the creative process when all other avenues are shut (226). In the cases I will present, it was not only a personal sense of self-worth that creatives sought out of their work, but also to stir things up, give citizens hope, and create a sense of self-worth for others who were beginning to lose hope. As politics are always contingent, so too are the creative processes that emerged as reactions to the them.

* * *

In the weeks leading up to the election, political party advertisements began to line the streets of Bangkok culminating to the day of the election when there was almost no space left to place them. I was surprised to find that the next day after the election, the streets had already been completely emptied of almost *all* advertisements. Win explained to me that some people like to collect them, and that some may be worth money one day or could provide good luck. Still, it was difficult for me to believe that the streets had been nearly cleared in one day by 'collectors'. Just as the anticipation for the election had built up, traces of it fleetingly disappeared. This, I felt, was a way for the junta to deescalate the excitement, and return the streets to its rule swiftly. However, it seemed that a fashion design student had gotten their hands on some of the advertisements and was bent on not letting them disappear so easily. With collaboration from Note (Dudesweet), they decided to have a photo shoot.

Source: https://www.instagram.com/dudesweetworld/

The photo on the right includes Prayuth's campaign advertisement for the PPRP. Whether, ironic or just fashionable, these creatives used the contingency of post-election cleanup to create a form of art which was then shared to thousands of users on social media. Note also held a big party called 'Vote Dudesweet'[10] weeks before the election, including ballot boxes and ballots, satirizing the entire situation. One of event's main acts was DJ Leena Galaxy[11] who Note mentioned had been sent to 'attitude adjustment' for outspokenness against the regime. Her call to the partygoers was to 'dance for democracy'.

Headache Stencil[12], also known as the 'Thai Banksy', began sharing his work after the coup. He is primarily a graffiti artist, but as the election neared he decided to create an installation exhibition titled 'Thailand Casino' which overtly attacked the junta and political actors. His art and installations are a critique of the election and echo the sentiment that was expressed by my participants and many citizens - that the election favored a victory for Prayuth. In an interview with The Guardian about the 'Casino' exhibition he said, "That's what this exhibition is saying, that the whole game is manipulated for the military to win and for the Thai people to lose" (Ellis-Petersen 2019c). In the article, he explains that initially, his goal for the exhibition was to get Thai people to engage with the election, however, his intentions shifted as the government continued to pass laws that showed "they don't care about the people (Ellis-Petersen 2019c). While I did message him and received a response, he was too busy preparing for another exhibition to meet up. This did not matter so much, because his events created a relevant space to meet some of my participants. The show featured an image of Thanathorn sitting casually in a sofa with the words 'now or never' above it. It also included an image of the leader of the DMP and Prayuth kissing on the lips, foretelling of the coalition alliance which happened between the PPRP and the DMP

[10] https://www.eventpop.me/e/5261?fbclid=IwAR0tsOGiK87DR18VYxn4od8cxpDhYk__43cF0Pfv3iu6AsE2Zp0nGUb1jqs

[11] https://www.facebook.com/dudesweetworld/videos/627830854313958/?v=627830854313958

[12] https://www.instagram.com/headache_stencil/?hl=en

after results were released. Below is a photo taken at the 'Thailand Casino' exhibition featuring gold statues of Prayuth and Thaksin playing poker (gambling is illegal in Thailand). It also includes the hand one of my participants contesting the junta.

Source: Anonymous

The image contains multiple layers of contestation, commentary on Thailand's recent political history and presents the contradiction of political lawmakers breaking the law.

Rick, Win Su and I also went to Headache's next exhibition titled 'Sex, Drugs, and Headache Stencil'. Although Headache is often evasive, having already been threatened by the military, he was at the show for the entirety of the night and Rick got a chance to talk to him for a while. The exhibition revealed the sex and drug world of Bangkok and Thailand. It was a social commentary on how conservative Thai culture turns its head away from things that it does not wish to address - another form of diversion. Rick explained that the message of the exhibition was that we must not turn our heads away, but find ways to approach issues like human trafficking, sex work, and

drug abuse. In this way, Headache is challenging traditionalism by calling for discourse instead of continued diversion, or *"put[ting] everything under the carpet"*, as Professor P put it.

Headache's 'Thailand Casino' exhibition also served as the backdrop for RAD's video for their second song titled "250 Bootlickers"[13] released one day before the election. Hockhacker (Hock) from the group explained to me that the group did not know Headache personally and never met him, but a simple message on social media gave them the approval to film there. The title of the song was in reference to the 250 members of senate which would be handpicked by the junta. "Fifty million people starting to have no choice, because their worth is less than that 250 people", one rapper shouts in the song. When we discussed the song, Hock explained that he was waiting for the song to have more meaning, since the 250 members' names had yet to be been released. In this way, "waiting can be understood as an empty gap appearing in the interstices between events" (Bendixsen and Eriksen in Bandak and Janeja 2018, 91). The lyrics and meaning of the song were contingent on the waiting period, becoming more relevant as politics unraveled. I asked Hock how he felt about the coup when it happened, and he explained that while some members of the group were already political before it, the coup and its subsequent aftermath became an inspiration and opportunity for him to express his discontent with the government and laws of censorship. An important question for my research was whether there was a breaking point in waiting. In the case of Hock and the group, the breaking point had started years ago, but the rappers waited to form and chose the right moment to act. Releasing Prathet Ku Mee (What My Country's Got) when elections were imminent gave the song even more agency. His latest song talks about 'when is enough enough?'- "time will tell you", he said, "its four or five years and nothing changed".

Hock is now creating a space and a brand for young rappers called 'Rap is Now', promoting creativity and hosting rap battles. We also discussed how the space and modes of activism have changed over the past five years. He explained that activism

[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GSdVFOD5U8

has shifted to the internet, art and music, but he still believes that "in some way, it must be on the street, like graffiti or live performances – but the way we use online, its more power... its faster than on the street". When we talked about the unofficial election results he said, "it proves that [there is] a new order [referring to the success of FFP], people can now think [more for themselves] to choose the [political] party...it also proves what support each party has, even Pralang Pracharat (PPRP)". To wrap up our talk, we discussed how dictatorship pushes people to become more creative, "yes", he said, "because when you have a box and you know that to go outside the box, you have to move up, move up, to break the cycle outside the box". But in the end he said he would prefer democracy and non-dictatorship, "It's good if you see people more creative in the arts, but if the coup [did] not happen, maybe our life would be better."

* * *

Creative contestation is an emergent topic in Thailand as ambiguous laws and enforcement by the junta has seen some artists run to the shadows and inspired others to push boundaries[14]. The examples provided reveal how some creatives have had success with challenging the dictatorship even though they had at times been threatened by it. These stories and creative expressions also fuse with the aforementioned themes of this thesis. Note used irony and humor to satirically mock the election. Headache Stencil used humor, speculation, and layered depictions of corruption to make a point. RAD expressed anger and frustration, attacking the ruler and the regime through their provocative lyrics. What is even more powerful is that they not only contest the junta but create events, music and art that millions of Thai youth can relate to, giving the silenced a voice. These artists not only create art, but a space for political engagement. They are by far not the only examples, but three that I engaged with both directly and indirectly, as did *all* of my participants. My 'non-creative' participants also engaged with forms of creativity for contestation through their uses of irony, and other techniques to mask their opposition. Professor P explained to me that *"young people rely on a hero",*

[14] https://www.luredby.com/blog/young-bloods-bangkok-thailand-military-artist-censorship?fbclid=IwAR2dXntXNcI-XNIxZtkFq0hMBC5g1PxKiZNEeKDSxMnjXhKCvENm_19YOSc

and that right now, *''they need a new hero''*. Perhaps these are some of the unexpected heroes emerging from a suppressed crowd. The long wait has surfaced creativity, but ultimately, it is the authoritative regime which has sparked the flame for political action by trying to silence it.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis is to reveal how even in a nation such as Thailand where freedom of speech in relation to politics and the monarchy is severely restricted[15], manifestations of political participation and contestation by citizens are abundant, especially among the youth population. Another ambition, which was a hope before my research and has been additionally confirmed through its content, is that this thesis aims to serve as another medium for the political engagement and expressions of participants. In a country where speaking out against the government can have dire consequences, and a turbulent political history creates the feeling of being stuck in a perpetual cycle, the youth have not yet given up hope, although the certainty of uncertainty has produced feelings of frustration. What is uncovered, as in many cases before it and now, is that while authoritative measures have created an atmosphere of fear and suppression, they have also forged a space where citizens find ways to challenge censorship.

Citizens seeking democracy, or an end to the military rule, have been 'stuck in limbo', awaiting the possibility of elections and change. The ethnographic lens on experiences of waiting provides a more in-depth look at the feelings produced by the political. Through ethnography, meaningful time was spent with several participants, allowing for detailed and often barrierless discussions with friends who doubled as participants and vice versa. The playing field in Bangkok is one of approachable sociality and doing ethnographic participation and observation provided an accessible space for interaction. What is discovered from the ethnographic viewpoint are an array of forms of political engagement, participation and contestation. Young Thais are engaging with politics in a variety of ways, from conversations with friends, family and work colleagues, staying up to date with the evolving situation, sharing information or just expressing their feelings in relation to politics. Moreover, the feelings produced by the political are

[15] https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/thailand

reproduced in a multiplicity of behaviors and actions, often subtly contesting the military government. The tactic of redirection has been used by the current regime to legitimize their actions through the moralization of citizenship and governance. But young Thais have also wisely adopted this tactic to subversively undermine and ridicule the dictatorship through irony, sarcasm and cynicism - particularly on the ever-increasingly influential and uncontainable space of social media in Thailand - revealing a formidable voice of contestation. Creatives have also taken charge to oppose the repressive government using a blend of tactics which also provide spaces for many to relate to, engage with and voice perceptions about politics. In a country where political gatherings of more than 10 people are illegal, young Bangkokians have found a host of other means to participate in and contest the authoritative government. One of the limitations of this research is one of possible urban/Bangkok-centrism - particularly youth - which has overseen various other groups and forms of contestation such as those observed in the ethnography by Elinoff (2019). Because of this, further ethnographic research into modes of political action in Thailand is recommended as more perspectives of various pro-democracy groups and individuals who yearn for political change would categorically provide more understanding into the affectivity of politics and forms of citizen political participation and contestation.

Thailand held its first democratic election in eight years in March. Prayuth is no longer the self-appointed military leader, but now the 'democratically elected' premier. The political participation through voting by most of my participants has shifted the swing of the pendulum toward that of democracy, with a coalition opposition challenging Prayuth's every move. Now another limbo begins, between democracy and dictatorship.

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Appendix

Figure 1.1 Rick trying to describe the confusing political situation to me.

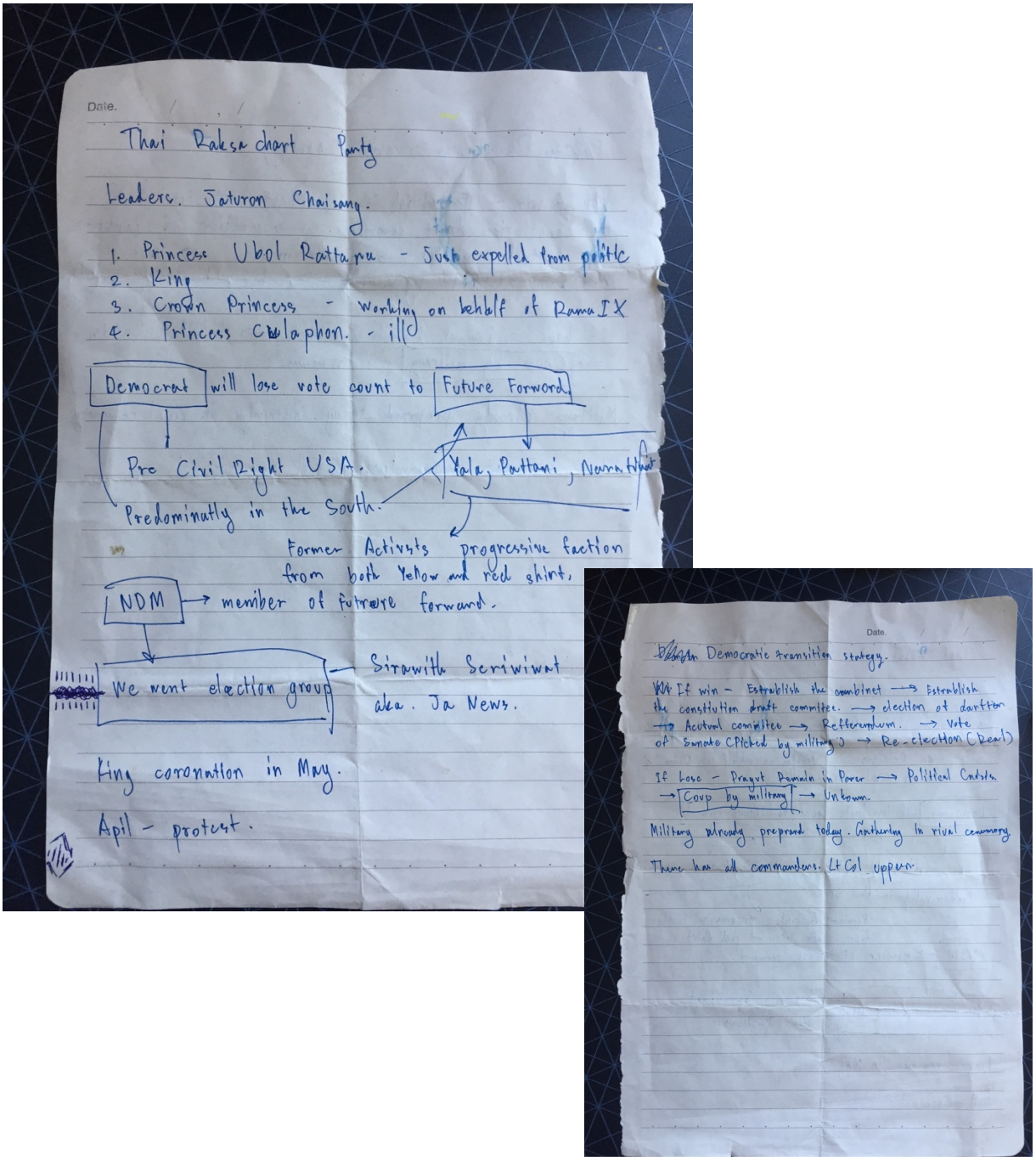
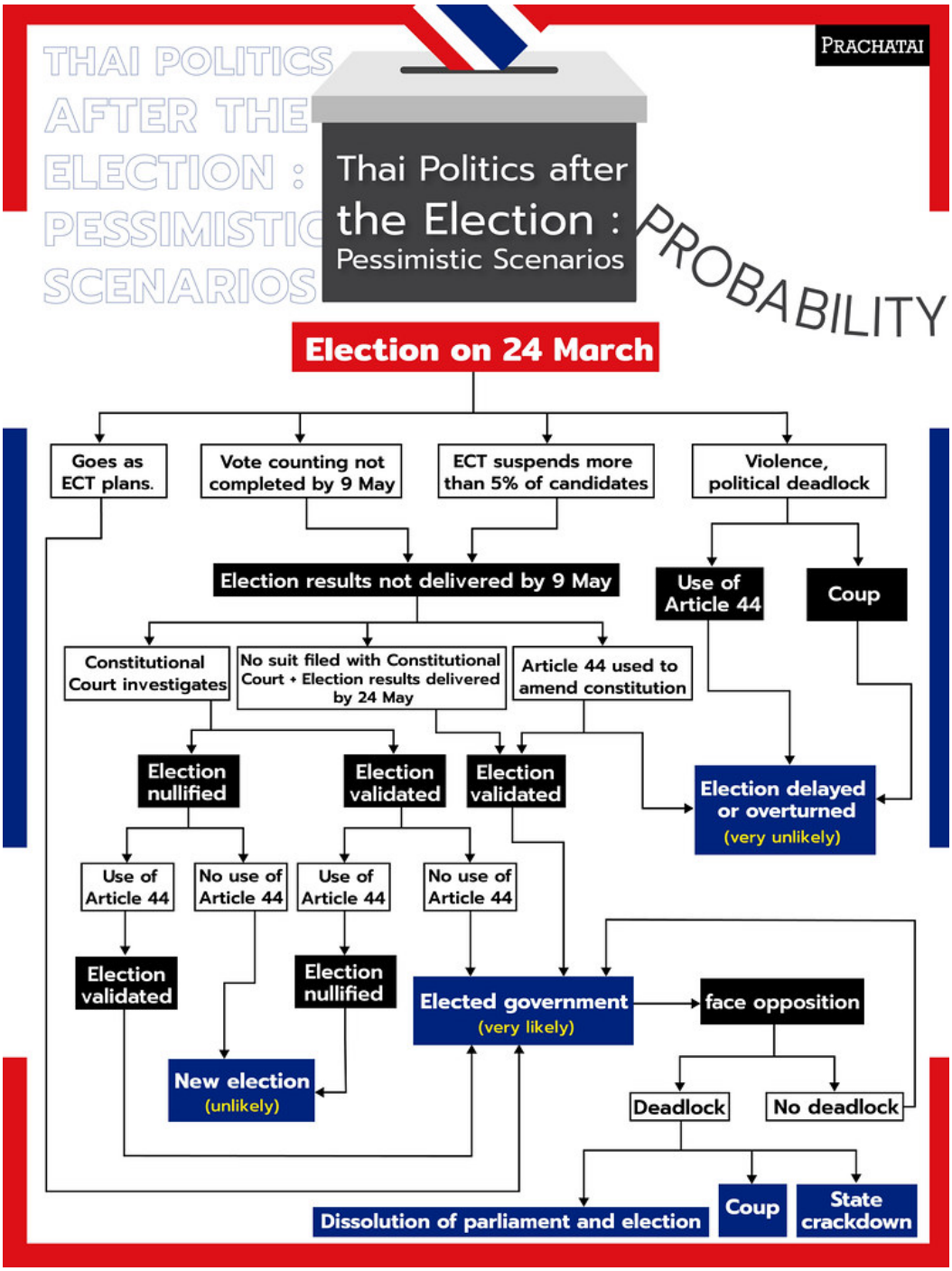


Figure 1.2 Possible scenarios of the election, sent to me by Rick.



Source: https://prachatai.com/english/node/7927