

## Book Review: Prajak Kongkirati. (2024). Thailand: Contestation, Polarization, and Democratic Regression.

Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9781009517690. 86 pages

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Received: 8 December 2024 / Accepted: 14 March 2025 / Published: 29 April 2025

► Khaikham, L. (2025). Book Review: Prajak Kongkirati. (2024). Thailand. Contestation, polarization, and democratic regression. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 18(1), 115-118.

*Thailand: Contestation, Polarization, and Democratic Regression* (2024) provides an in-depth examination of Thailand's political instability, focusing on the recurrent struggles for power, the influence of elite actors, and the increasing divide between the ruling classes and the general populace. Across four well-structured core chapters, Prajak Kongkirati examines military interventions that have disrupted Thailand's democratization efforts. With a historical analytical approach, Prajak explains that military elites maintain political control by aligning with the monarchy to gain their legitimacy. He also explores "chronic political instability" (p. 1) as the central aspect of modern Thai politics since Marshal Sarit Thanarat in the 1950s to the present-day conflict (2023). The book's theme revolves around three main concepts: contestation, polarization, and democratic regression.

Firstly, the concept of 'contestation' demonstrates the persistent and intense struggles for political power in modern Thai politics. Prajak highlights contestation as reflected in the ongoing conflicts among different political actors such as the monarchy, military, and politicians. In Chapter 2, Prajak begins his argument with Marshal Sarit Thanarat's creation of a formidable alliance between the monarchy and the military in the 1950s. Since then, the royal-military alliance gradually became a dominant force, influencing regime changes, and hindering democratic consolidation in Thai political institutions. The patterns of political repression in Thai history are evident in several key events and practices. These include the student-led demonstration on October 14, 1973, the subsequent brutal massacre of students on October 6, 1976, and the manipulation of democratic processes. This manipulation is characterized by practices such as "dirty elections" (p. 7), "money politics" (p. 14), electoral fraud, and the dominance of local provincial bosses, known as *Jao Pho* (p. 17).

In addition, the discourse of "Thai-style democracy" (p. 62), which prioritizes harmony and order over strong political institutions, strengthens elite control while encouraging political conflict and an illegal economy. Prajak argues that

Thai politics is unstable, with military coups repeatedly obstructing democratic progress to protect the elites' political power. The contestation of political power extends beyond mere elite rivalry to include widespread social conflicts, especially between pro-establishment forces and reformist groups demanding democratic change. Consequently, the royal-military alliance contributed to a turbulent political situation marked by the military coup in 2006. This followed the 1997 economic crisis, the introduction of a new constitution and electoral system in 1997, and the rise of the populist party, *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT) Party, in the 2001 election.

Secondly, in Chapter 3, Prajak employs a multilevel framework both at the national and local levels to investigate the complex, reciprocal relationship between local and national political struggles and elite power. The 1997 economic crisis eroded public trust in the traditional political elite and created opportunities for ambitious capitalists. At the same time, new organizations, mechanisms, and rules had been set in the 1997 constitution with an effort to establish a stable government, strengthen the checks and balances system, promote strong executive power, encourage party-based competition, and eliminate vote-buying and money-driven politics. Altogether, it paved the way for Thaksin Shinawatra and his allies to join politics to protect and advance his interests and capitalize on the public's desire for change. Through its successes in the 2001 and 2005 elections, Thaksin's TRT Party transformed Thai politics into people-centered policies. It formed a single-party government that challenged the patronage networks of local strongmen and royal-military alliances.

In Chapter 4, Prajak describes the 2006 to 2014 Thai political crisis as a period marked by polarization, inequality, and violence. Polarization was evident in the "color-coded" (p. 23) street politics, with the yellow-shirt movement supporting traditional elite structures, often aligned with the monarchy and military, and the red-shirt movement supporting Thaksin Shinawatra and the TRT. Prajak argues that this polarization stems from socioeconomic inequality, urban-rural divides, and competing political ideologies. This ideological divide turned political disagreements into deep social fractures that affected daily life, institutions, and public discourse. This polarization escalated political violence and social unrest, such as hiring thugs and gangsters to incite hatred, destroying property, and clashing with opposing groups. The violence weakened collective trust and complicated efforts toward political reconciliation between 2006 and 2014.

Thirdly, Prajak examines 'democratic regression' as a recurring setback in Thailand's transition to democratic governance in Chapter 5. This regression is primarily caused by elite interference, military interventions, and the strategic use of laws to limit political freedoms. For example, the 2006 and 2014 military coups were a deliberate strategy of royal-military elite actors to protect their interests and maintain their power. Unlike previous coups, the 2014 coup occurred to ensure an orderly and peaceful transition from King Bhumibol (Rama IX) to King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X) in 2016. At this point, the royal-military elites maintained their control through the 2017 "undemocratic constitution" (p. 50), institutional manipulation, co-optation of certain civil society groups, and efforts to depoliticize Thai society. Likewise, media censorship, restrictions on freedom of expression, and judicial actions against political dissidents and opposition parties also reinforced the regression.

Prajak suggests that democratic regression in Thailand results in weakened democratic institutions, increased political violence, and persistent polarization. The rise of a new generation of younger, urban voters challenges traditional power structures by voting for the progressive *Future Forward Party* (FFP) in the “unfree and unfair” (p. 50) election in 2019. Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court’s decision to dissolve the FFP in 2020 sparked a wave of student-led protests throughout the country. The protests criticized the monarchy, challenged traditional institutions, and called for democratic reforms. Unfortunately, the victory of the pro-democracy parties in the 2023 election does not promise political power due to the use of undemocratic means by royal-military alliances to consolidate their power and the pushback from pro-democracy forces.

Finally, Prajak emphasizes the potential for change among the younger generation of politically active citizens. Consequently, while the country’s democratic future is uncertain, there is still hope for democratic progress.

*Thailand: Contestation, Polarization, and Democratic Regression* (2024) presents clear, original arguments beyond summarizing existing knowledge. It offers a critical perspective on Thailand’s political trajectory. Prajak’s analysis focuses on three main ideas: contestation, polarization, and democratic regression, shaped by themes of political instability, the monarchy’s role in politics, and identity struggles with mass mobilization. These interrelated themes provide a holistic framework for understanding the complex interplay of historical, institutional, economic, and social factors shaping Thai political instability.

This book highlights significant political transitions. The book provides an in-depth, detailed historical analysis of Thai politics based on a broad range of academic sources and debates. Prajak provides readers with a strong foundation for further study. He lays out how the monarchy has legitimized military rule since the Sarit Thanarat era and shifts in political and economic structures. This approach emphasizes the formation of the royal-military alliance since the 1950s and its influences throughout Thai politics. Furthermore, Prajak uses multiple factors, such as elite, institutional, structural, and ideological factors, to investigate the complexities of elite persistence, polarization, democratic backsliding, and social movements. This approach offers a more comprehensive view to understand Thailand’s political dynamics and democratic challenges.

As part of the *Cambridge Elements in Politics and Society in Southeast Asia* series, it offers concise overviews and original ideas. Despite these strengths, however, the book reveals some limitations. It assumes readers already have a basic understanding of Thai politics, as it does not follow a traditional chronological approach and often mentions key historical events only briefly. Readers who are unfamiliar with Thai history may find it challenging or need to use it as a starting point for further research.

Furthermore, due to space constraints, Prajak chose not to address external influences such as Cold War dynamics, US economic assistance, and Thailand’s alliance with the US, which had profoundly shaped Thai politics from the 1950s to 1970s. In fact, during the Cold War, Thailand became a key US partner in Southeast Asia and received substantial financial aid for infrastructure, military support, and anti-communist efforts. Sarit’s government – for example – used this support to restrain leftist ideologies and restore the monarchy’s symbolic role as ‘a central soul of the nation’

for Thai identity and stability. As a result, excluding these aspects limits the overall context of Thailand's political developments within global dynamics.

Overall, the book is a valuable resource for those with some background in Thai political history. It is particularly useful for scholars and researchers focusing on democratization, authoritarianism, and Southeast Asian politics. Graduate students of political science and Asian studies would benefit from its in-depth analysis of Thailand's political democratization, elite power struggles, and sociopolitical conflicts. It provides a solid framework for comprehending the elite rivalries, mass mobilization, and democratic challenges that have shaped modern Thailand's political landscape. This book is an excellent choice for readers looking for deeper insights into contemporary Thai politics.



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