



THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS ON THAILAND'S POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract: This paper examines the influence of social movements on Thailand's political landscape, tracing their historical significance from early movements to contemporary digital activism. Social movements such as the Yellow Shirts, Red Shirts, and student-led pro-democracy protests have been pivotal in challenging authoritarian regimes and pushing for democratic reforms. The rise of digital platforms has transformed how these movements organize and mobilize, allowing them to reach wider audiences and sustain momentum despite government repression. However, challenges such as internal fragmentation, legal restrictions, and military intervention have often impeded their effectiveness. This study highlights the potential of social movements to shape future political reforms in Thailand, particularly through the engagement of youth activists and global support.

Keywords: Social movements, Political reform, Thailand, Digital activism, Youth activism

1.Introduction

Thailand's political landscape has been shaped by a complex interplay of military coups, constitutional reforms, and political unrest. The country has experienced several cycles of democratic governance interrupted by military interventions, most recently in 2014, when the military took power following mass protests and political gridlock. The monarchy continues to play a central role in Thai politics, providing a sense of continuity amid changing regimes (Thitinan, 2018). Over the decades, political factions such as the Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts have dominated the political scene, reflecting deep societal divides between the rural poor and urban elites (Naruemon & McCargo, 2018). These divisions, coupled with the country's frequent power shifts between civilian and military rule, have created a volatile political environment where social movements have emerged as key players in shaping political discourse and pushing for reforms.

Social movements in Thailand, like in many other countries, represent organized collective actions aimed at challenging existing power structures, raising



public awareness, and advocating for social or political change (Pongkwan, 2019). These movements often arise in response to perceived injustices, such as government corruption, authoritarianism, or unequal access to resources. Social movements play a crucial role in giving a voice to marginalized groups and influencing public policy. In Thailand, movements such as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) have been instrumental in shaping the political agenda, often mobilizing large-scale protests and pressuring the government to adopt reforms (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016). The ability of social movements to garner public support and challenge the status quo makes them significant actors in Thailand's political landscape.

This paper aims to explore the influence of social movements on Thailand's political landscape. It will provide an in-depth analysis of historical and contemporary social movements, focusing on how these movements have impacted political reforms, governance, and public policy. The paper will examine key movements such as the Yellow Shirts, Red Shirts, and the more recent student-led pro-democracy protests. Additionally, the paper will assess the role of digital platforms in shaping modern social movements and discuss the challenges faced by these groups in the context of government repression. The scope of the study will cover the period from the late 20th century to the present, highlighting both successes and limitations of social movements in achieving political change.

2. Historical Context of Social Movements in Thailand

2.1. Early Social Movements in Thailand: Pre-20th Century Influences

Social movements in Thailand can trace their roots back to the pre-20th century, where traditional forms of collective action took place. During this period, movements were primarily local and centered on grievances against landowners, tax collectors, and feudal authorities. Peasant revolts, such as the Phu Mi Bun movement in the late 19th century, reflected early forms of resistance to oppressive economic conditions and governance. Although these movements lacked the structure of modern social movements, they were significant in showing how collective resistance shaped the early political consciousness of the Thai populace (Thongchai, 2018). These early social movements laid the groundwork for more organized political activism in the 20th century as Thailand transitioned from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy in 1932.

2.2. The Rise of Student Activism in the 1970s

The 1970s marked a pivotal era in Thailand's political history, with student activism emerging as a central force for political change. Thai university students became disillusioned with military dictatorships and the suppression of democratic



freedoms. The October 14, 1973 uprising is one of the most significant moments in Thai political history, when students successfully mobilized against the military government, leading to the resignation of the ruling dictatorship (Kasian, 2017). This period saw the rise of organized student groups that demanded political reforms, social justice, and an end to authoritarian rule. Student activism was driven by both local issues, such as corruption and inequality, and global movements for democracy and human rights. However, the resurgence of military power in 1976 led to a brutal crackdown on student protesters, culminating in the Thammasat University massacre. Despite the repression, the legacy of student activism from this period continues to influence Thailand's political landscape.

2.3. Social Movements During Political Crises: The 1992 Black May Protests

The 1992 Black May protests were another watershed moment in Thailand's political history. Triggered by the appointment of General Suchinda Kraprayoon, a former coup leader, as Prime Minister, the protests reflected widespread frustration with the military's continued involvement in politics (Kullada, 2018). Civil society groups, students, and the middle class united in mass demonstrations in Bangkok, demanding the resignation of the unelected prime minister and a return to democratic governance. The government's violent crackdown on protesters resulted in numerous deaths and injuries, but the movement ultimately succeeded in forcing Suchinda to step down. The Black May protests highlighted the growing power of civil society and social movements in challenging authoritarian regimes. This movement is often credited with helping to pave the way for democratic reforms and the drafting of Thailand's 1997 "People's Constitution" (Nidhi, 2019).

2.4. Role of Civil Society in Shaping Political Discourse

Civil society has played a crucial role in shaping political discourse in Thailand, especially in times of political turmoil. Social movements, NGOs, and advocacy groups have often stepped in to fill the vacuum left by weak political parties and ineffective governance (Pavin, 2018). These organizations have advocated for a wide range of issues, from environmental conservation to labor rights, and have been instrumental in mobilizing public opinion. Civil society groups have also been active in promoting democratic values and human rights, frequently opposing military coups and authoritarian governments. For instance, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), commonly known as the Yellow Shirts, and the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), or the Red Shirts, emerged from civil society efforts to influence political discourse and challenge the status quo (Thongchai, 2018). The role of civil society in Thailand underscores the importance of collective action in shaping the country's political trajectory.



3. Key Social Movements in Contemporary Thailand

3.1. The Yellow Shirts and the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)

The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), commonly referred to as the Yellow Shirts, was one of the most prominent political movements in Thailand during the 2000s. Founded in 2005, PAD emerged in opposition to the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, accusing him of corruption, cronyism, and abuse of power (Naruemon & McCargo, 2018). The Yellow Shirts were largely composed of middle-class urban elites, royalists, and military sympathizers who sought to protect the monarchy from perceived threats posed by populist leaders like Thaksin. PAD's activism culminated in massive protests in 2006, which eventually led to the military coup that ousted Thaksin from power. The movement continued to influence Thai politics in the years following the coup, with PAD organizing significant protests against subsequent governments. The Yellow Shirts' ability to mobilize large numbers of people and maintain a strong media presence through outlets like ASTV made them a powerful force in shaping Thailand's political landscape (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016).

3.2. The Red Shirts and the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD)

In contrast to the Yellow Shirts, the Red Shirts, or the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), represented Thailand's rural poor and working-class population, particularly from the north and northeast regions of the country (Kasian, 2017). Formed in response to the military coup that ousted Thaksin Shinawatra, the UDD sought to restore democracy and reverse the disenfranchisement of the rural majority. The Red Shirts accused the military, monarchy, and urban elites of undermining Thailand's democratic institutions. The movement gained momentum in 2010 when UDD members staged large-scale protests in Bangkok, calling for the resignation of the government led by Abhisit Vejjajiva. The 2010 protests ended in violent confrontations between protesters and the military, resulting in over 90 deaths. Despite the crackdown, the Red Shirts continue to be a significant political force in Thailand, advocating for democratic reforms and challenging the dominance of the urban elite in Thai politics (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016).

3.3. Student-Led Movements and the Recent Pro-Democracy Protests

In recent years, Thailand has witnessed a resurgence of student-led movements advocating for democratic reforms. The 2020 pro-democracy protests, led by university and high school students, have been a notable development in Thailand's political landscape. These protests, which began as a response to the dissolution of the Future Forward Party, quickly expanded to include broader demands for



constitutional reforms, the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, and an unprecedented call for reforms to the monarchy (Chachavalpongpun, 2021). The student-led protests have used social media platforms to organize and communicate their message, making them highly decentralized and difficult for the government to suppress. Unlike previous social movements, the 2020 protests have challenged traditional taboos by openly discussing the role of the monarchy in Thai politics. Despite facing legal repercussions, including arrests under the lèse-majesté law, the student movement has continued to be a potent force in advocating for political change in Thailand.

3.4. Environmental and Labor Movements: Their Role in Political Advocacy

Beyond the well-known political movements like the Yellow and Red Shirts, Thailand has also seen the rise of environmental and labor movements that have played a critical role in political advocacy. Environmental movements, such as protests against the construction of dams or coal-fired power plants, have highlighted the intersection of politics and natural resource management. These movements often mobilize local communities to fight against projects that threaten their livelihoods and ecosystems (Pavin, 2018). Labor movements, particularly those representing factory workers and migrant laborers, have also been vocal in demanding better working conditions, fair wages, and labor rights. While these movements may not have the same visibility as the Yellow or Red Shirts, they have been instrumental in raising awareness about social and economic justice issues. Environmental and labor movements in Thailand have demonstrated the capacity to influence policy, particularly when aligned with broader social movements advocating for democratic reforms (Nidhi, 2019).

4. The Impact of Social Movements on Political Change

4.1. Social Movements as Catalysts for Democratic Reform

Social movements have historically played a crucial role in catalyzing democratic reforms in Thailand. Movements such as the 1973 student protests, the 1992 Black May uprising, and the more recent pro-democracy movements have succeeded in bringing political change by challenging authoritarian regimes and pushing for democratic governance. The 1973 student protests led to the fall of the military dictatorship and a brief period of democratic rule, while the 1992 Black May protests resulted in the resignation of an unelected prime minister and paved the way for the drafting of the 1997 constitution, often referred to as the “People’s Constitution” (Nidhi, 2019). Social movements have continued to serve as a platform for expressing popular demands for greater political freedoms, government accountability, and the protection of human rights. By mobilizing citizens, social



movements create pressure for the state to adopt reforms, thus driving democratic progress.

4.2. The Role of Social Movements in Challenging Authoritarianism

In Thailand, social movements have been instrumental in challenging authoritarianism and pushing back against military control of the government. The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) are key examples of movements that have mobilized to challenge what they perceived as illegitimate rule (Kasian, 2017). Both movements brought thousands of people onto the streets in opposition to government actions they viewed as authoritarian, though their aims and political alignments differed. The 2020 pro-democracy protests led by students have also directly challenged the authoritarian government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, calling for constitutional reforms and an end to the military's control over Thai politics (Chachavalpongpun, 2021). These movements challenge not only the specific leaders in power but also the structures that perpetuate authoritarian rule, such as the military's influence and the lack of democratic institutions.

4.3. Influence on Policy-Making and Constitutional Reforms

Social movements in Thailand have had a profound influence on policy-making and constitutional reforms. For example, the widespread opposition to the military-backed government during the 1992 Black May protests led to the drafting of the 1997 constitution, which introduced significant democratic reforms, including provisions for a stronger parliament and the establishment of independent agencies to oversee elections and human rights (Naruemon & McCargo, 2018). The ongoing calls for constitutional reform by the current generation of activists reflect the continued desire for a more democratic and accountable political system. Social movements have also influenced specific policies, such as labor laws and environmental protections, as they bring attention to issues often overlooked by mainstream political parties (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016). These movements have pushed for greater transparency, citizen participation in governance, and reforms that reflect the demands of marginalized communities.

4.4. Social Movements and Their Impact on Electoral Politics

Social movements have had a significant impact on electoral politics in Thailand, influencing voting patterns, party formation, and political alliances. Movements such as the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts have aligned themselves with political parties, with the Red Shirts supporting the populist policies of Thaksin Shinawatra and his political successors, while the Yellow Shirts have often aligned with royalist and military-backed parties (Kasian, 2017). These movements have



mobilized their supporters during elections, shaping political outcomes and fueling political polarization. The influence of social movements on electoral politics has also extended to the emergence of new political parties, such as the Future Forward Party, which gained significant support from young voters and pro-democracy activists before its dissolution in 2020 (Chachavalpongpun, 2021). By shaping the political discourse, social movements influence the direction of electoral politics and the policies that elected officials pursue.

5. Social Media and the Evolution of Social Movements

5.1. The Rise of Digital Activism in Thailand

The emergence of digital activism has revolutionized the way social movements operate in Thailand. With the proliferation of smartphones and internet access, digital platforms have become essential tools for activists to mobilize, communicate, and organize. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have allowed activists to bypass traditional media channels, enabling them to directly reach large audiences and mobilize support for their causes (Thongchai, 2018). In recent years, digital activism has played a central role in movements such as the 2020 pro-democracy protests, where young activists used social media to share information, coordinate rallies, and express dissent. Digital activism has allowed movements to be more decentralized and fluid, with online platforms providing a space for public discourse that can rapidly escalate into offline protests.

5.2. The Use of Social Media in Organizing Protests and Raising Awareness

Social media has proven to be a powerful tool for organizing protests and raising awareness in Thailand. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow activists to quickly disseminate information about upcoming rallies, create event pages, and engage with supporters. Hashtags such as #SaveOurFuture and #FreeYouth became rallying cries for the student-led pro-democracy protests, spreading awareness both domestically and internationally (Chachavalpongpun, 2021). Social media also facilitates the live-streaming of protests, enabling broader participation and providing real-time updates to those who cannot attend in person. In addition to organizing protests, social media has been instrumental in raising awareness about political issues, such as government corruption, human rights abuses, and calls for constitutional reform. Memes, viral posts, and videos have been used to communicate complex political messages in accessible ways, engaging a broader audience and fostering political discourse.

5.3. Government Response: Censorship and Control of Digital Platforms

The Thai government has responded to the rise of digital activism by increasing its efforts to control and censor online platforms. The state has introduced several legal measures aimed at curbing online dissent, including the 2007 Computer Crimes Act and the lèse-majesté law, which prohibits criticism of the monarchy (Pavin, 2018). These laws have been used to prosecute activists who post content deemed critical of the government or monarchy on social media. In addition, the government has pressured social media companies to remove content that violates these laws and has blocked access to websites and platforms that host such content. The Thai government's efforts to control digital platforms have intensified during periods of political unrest, with internet shutdowns and the arrest of prominent digital activists becoming more common. Despite these challenges, activists have continued to find ways to circumvent government censorship through the use of VPNs, encrypted messaging apps, and decentralized social media networks (Nidhi, 2019).

5.4. The Role of Social Media in Shaping Public Opinion and Political Discourse

Social media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and political discourse in Thailand. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have become the primary sources of news and information for many Thais, especially younger generations (Thongchai, 2018). Social media allows individuals to engage in political debates, share opinions, and mobilize collective action, creating a new public sphere for political engagement. The open nature of social media platforms has also led to the democratization of information, where users can challenge the narratives presented by state-controlled media. However, social media also has the potential to amplify political polarization and the spread of misinformation, as echo chambers and disinformation campaigns can distort public opinion (Pavin, 2018). Despite these challenges, social media remains a crucial tool for activists to shape political discourse and influence public opinion in Thailand.

6. Challenges Faced by Social Movements in Thailand

6.1. Repression of Dissent: Legal Frameworks and Restrictions on Protests

One of the most significant challenges faced by social movements in Thailand is the legal repression of dissent. The Thai government has implemented a range of laws and regulations designed to suppress protests and limit the freedom of expression. The Public Assembly Act of 2015, for example, imposes strict conditions on public gatherings, requiring protesters to notify authorities in advance and limiting the areas where protests can take place (Pavin, 2018). Additionally, the Computer Crimes Act and the lèse-majesté law have been used to criminalize online dissent, with activists facing arrest and imprisonment for posting content critical of the government.



or monarchy on social media (Nidhi, 2019). These legal frameworks have created a climate of fear among activists, discouraging participation in social movements and limiting the ability of citizens to freely express their political views.

6.2. The Role of the Military in Suppressing Political Movements

The military has played a central role in suppressing social movements in Thailand, particularly during periods of political instability. Since the 1930s, Thailand has experienced multiple military coups, with the armed forces often stepping in to “restore order” during times of political crisis. In recent years, the military has been instrumental in cracking down on pro-democracy movements, most notably following the 2014 coup led by General Prayut Chan-o-cha (Kasian, 2017). The military's involvement in politics has created a tense environment for social movements, as activists face the constant threat of violence, arrest, and intimidation. Military forces have frequently used force to disperse protesters, as seen during the 2010 Red Shirt protests and the 2020 student-led demonstrations. This militarization of political repression makes it difficult for social movements to sustain their activities and mobilize widespread support.

6.3. Fragmentation Within Social Movements: Ideological and Leadership Divides

Fragmentation within social movements has also posed significant challenges to their effectiveness. Many movements in Thailand suffer from internal divisions, with competing factions and ideological differences leading to leadership struggles and conflicting agendas. For example, the Yellow Shirts (People's Alliance for Democracy) and the Red Shirts (United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship) were deeply divided along ideological lines, representing urban elites and rural poor, respectively (Naruemon & McCargo, 2018). These divisions often result in weakened movements that struggle to maintain a unified front against government repression. In addition, leadership divides can lead to infighting and splintering within movements, making it difficult for them to sustain momentum and achieve long-term political goals. Fragmentation also limits the ability of movements to build broad coalitions, which are essential for effecting systemic change.

6.4. International Reactions and Global Support for Thai Social Movements

While Thai social movements face significant domestic challenges, they have also garnered attention and support from the international community. Human rights organizations, foreign governments, and international media have raised awareness of the repression faced by Thai activists, particularly in relation to freedom of expression and assembly (Pavin, 2018). For example, the United Nations and international NGOs such as Amnesty International have condemned the use of lèse-



majesté laws to silence political dissent and called for the Thai government to respect the rights of protesters (Thongchai, 2018). Global support has also come in the form of solidarity protests held in cities around the world, as well as digital activism campaigns that amplify the voices of Thai activists on international platforms. However, international support can also be a double-edged sword, as the Thai government often portrays foreign involvement as interference in domestic affairs, further justifying its crackdown on social movements.

7. The Future of Social Movements in Thailand's Political Landscape

7.1. The Potential for Social Movements to Influence Future Political Reforms

Social movements in Thailand continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the country's political reforms. The ongoing pro-democracy movements, particularly those led by students and civil society groups, have shown resilience despite government crackdowns. These movements demand fundamental changes, including constitutional reforms, greater accountability, and the protection of civil liberties (Pavin, 2018). While immediate reforms have been slow to materialize, the sustained pressure from these movements suggests that they have the potential to influence future political developments. Historical precedents, such as the 1992 Black May protests and the 1973 student uprising, demonstrate that persistent social movements can eventually lead to significant political shifts. As Thailand faces continued internal conflicts and dissatisfaction with the political status quo, social movements are likely to remain catalysts for reform.

7.2. Youth Activism and the Changing Political Dynamics

Youth activism has emerged as a powerful force in Thailand's political landscape, significantly altering the dynamics of political discourse. The rise of student-led movements, such as the 2020 pro-democracy protests, reflects a generational shift in the demand for political reforms (Chachavalpongpun, 2021). Young activists have brought new energy to Thailand's social movements, challenging not only the government but also traditional power structures, including the monarchy. Youth activists have employed innovative strategies, such as the use of social media, to organize and amplify their message. This new generation of activists is more willing to challenge long-held political taboos, including the role of the monarchy in Thai politics, which older movements avoided. With youth participation increasing, the political landscape in Thailand is likely to evolve further, as younger generations push for more democratic and inclusive governance.

7.3. Prospects for Achieving Long-Term Political and Social Change



The prospects for long-term political and social change in Thailand depend on the ability of social movements to maintain momentum and build broad coalitions. Although government repression remains a significant challenge, Thailand's political history shows that sustained activism can lead to substantial reforms (Kasian, 2017). The success of these movements will depend on their capacity to unify diverse groups under common goals and continue to mobilize public support despite attempts to stifle dissent. Furthermore, the role of civil society and international pressure will be crucial in supporting these movements. While achieving immediate political change may be difficult, especially under an authoritarian regime, social movements have the potential to shape long-term political narratives and lay the groundwork for future reforms. The key to achieving lasting change will be the ability to build on current momentum and adapt to changing political environments.

7.4. Role of Global Social Movements in Supporting Thai Activism

Global social movements and international solidarity have played an important role in supporting Thai activism. International attention to the repression of social movements in Thailand, particularly through organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, has helped bring awareness to human rights violations and government crackdowns on protests (Nidhi, 2019). In addition, the global network of social movements has provided Thai activists with both strategic and material support, enabling them to learn from the experiences of other movements worldwide. Global movements like #MeToo and climate activism have inspired Thai movements, and there have been cross-border collaborations to raise awareness and generate support for pro-democracy protests. The role of global social movements in supporting Thai activism is likely to grow, especially as digital platforms make it easier for international communities to connect and share resources. This global backing can provide Thai activists with the moral and strategic support needed to persist in their struggle for political reform.

8. Conclusion

8.1. Summary of Key Findings

This paper has explored the significant role social movements have played in shaping Thailand's political landscape. From the early movements of the 20th century to contemporary pro-democracy protests, social movements have consistently acted as catalysts for political reform and democratic change. The Yellow and Red Shirts, student-led movements, and environmental and labor campaigns have all contributed to the ongoing dialogue about governance, authoritarianism, and citizen participation in Thailand. While social movements have made strides in challenging the political status quo, they continue to face obstacles, including legal repression, military



intervention, and internal fragmentation. The rise of digital activism has empowered these movements by enabling better organization and outreach, but government censorship remains a significant challenge. Despite these difficulties, social movements have left a lasting impact on policy-making, electoral politics, and constitutional reform.

8.2. Reflection on the Significance of Social Movements in Thailand's Political Evolution

Social movements have been essential in Thailand's political evolution, particularly in pushing back against authoritarianism and advocating for democratic governance. These movements represent the voice of the people, especially marginalized groups, and serve as an important check on power. The role of student activism, in particular, has been crucial in Thailand's modern political history, with young leaders emerging to challenge deeply entrenched political structures. The sustained pressure exerted by social movements has led to key moments of political change, such as the fall of military regimes, the drafting of progressive constitutions, and the introduction of social reforms. While the success of these movements has varied over time, their persistence demonstrates the ongoing struggle for political freedom and equity in Thailand.

8.3. Implications for Thailand's Future Political Trajectory

The future of social movements in Thailand will significantly influence the country's political trajectory. As young activists continue to challenge the political and social status quo, the potential for further democratic reforms remains strong. However, the state's ongoing repression of dissent, coupled with the military's entrenched role in governance, presents significant challenges to the realization of long-term political change. Global social movements and international support may bolster Thai activists' efforts, but sustained progress will require internal cohesion and a unified vision for reform. Ultimately, the trajectory of Thailand's political future will depend on the ability of social movements to navigate these obstacles, build broader coalitions, and maintain momentum in the face of repression. Their success will shape the development of Thailand's democratic institutions and determine the extent to which the country can transition toward a more inclusive, participatory political system.

8.4 Body of Knowledge

The role of social movements in Thailand's political evolution has been pivotal, acting as both a barometer of public discontent and a catalyst for political reform. Historically, social movements have emerged during periods of political instability and repression, such as the student-led uprisings of the 1970s and the 1992 Black May



protests. These movements have consistently challenged authoritarian regimes, advocating for greater political participation, democratic governance, and social justice (Kasian, 2017). In more recent years, digital activism has transformed the landscape of social movements, allowing activists to organize and mobilize more efficiently through social media platforms. The student-led pro-democracy protests of 2020, for instance, utilized Twitter and Facebook to coordinate large-scale demonstrations and spread their message of reform (Chachavalpongpun, 2021). Despite the state's attempts to suppress dissent through legal frameworks and military intervention, social movements have demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Fragmentation within these movements, however, has sometimes hindered their ability to present a unified front, particularly between ideological factions such as the Yellow and Red Shirts (Naruemon & McCargo, 2018). Nevertheless, the influence of these movements on policy-making, constitutional reforms, and electoral politics remains significant, illustrating their vital role in shaping Thailand's contemporary political trajectory.

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