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# The Discourse of Military Domination in Thailand

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### ABSTRACT

The paper sought Foucault's theories and Van Dijk's CDA approach to conduct a discourse analysis on some military public pronouncements of two prominent military leaders: Prem Tinsulanonda, Prayuth Chan-ocha. The research found that in the discourses social structure is promoted by the military stressing the importance of harmony in society. The idea of harmony is used to create collective happiness and ideally created by the charismatic leader with barami at the top and networks of 'bunkhun' (debt of gratitude) at the subordinate level. The paper argues that the networks of bunkhun stress the importance of the collective happiness over the individual which is an obstacle towards a human rights-based society.

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As mentioned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), human rights are based on the principle that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, including political rights, such as freedom of opinion and expression, and the right to take part in the government through representatives. However, since Thailand's absolute monarchy ended in 1932, Thailand has been in a cycle of *coup d'états* with twelve successful coups and seven attempted coups. The latest coup was launched in 2014 by General Prayuth Chan-ocha and once again the political rights of Thai citizens were ignored. However, instead of resistance from the general public, the Yellow Shirts and their followers celebrated with the military after the success in seizing power. Looking back at the prior coup in 2006 when similar support appeared from the middle class, the military used statements such as "there was 'no other way' to be rid of Prime Minister Thaksin" (Hewison, 2007, p. 237) to justify the coup. They claimed that the coup was launched to remove the populist government and that they were 'restoring democracy,' which was embraced by the urban middle class. However, a year later, the state became more conservative under the brand of 'Thai-style democracy' which emphasized royalism, traditionalism, nationalism and paternalism. Farrelly (2013) argued that Thailand's 'coup culture' was a product of elite networks linking the army and the palace. Therefore, "the defense of the monarchy [was] a justification for toppling elected governments," an idea which was easily accepted in a society with elites "reluctant to consistently embrace democratic processes" (Farrelly, 2013, p. 281).

From 2006 to 2014 Thailand faced political polarization between the political groups known as the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts. The Yellow Shirts began as The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a group formed in 2005 to campaign against and oust the Thaksin Shinawatra regime under accusations of corruption. The PAD was led by Sondhi Limthongkul and they successfully called for a coup in 2006. In 2014, the Yellow shirts' anti-corruption demonstrations came to the streets once again under the name of The People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). This time the campaigns were against Yingluck Shinawatra, the then-Prime Minister who is also Thaksin Shinawatra's younger sister. The PDRC

was led by Suthep Thaugsuban, a former Democrat Party member, and the demonstrations also ended with a coup in 2014. The PDRC were a combination of the Bangkok middle class, the Democrat Party and other supporters. The Red Shirts on the other hand were formed following the 2006 coup d'état against the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his party. During the political demonstrations of both the coups in 2006 and 2014 the Yellow Shirts "explicitly opposed 'populist' policies of redistribution and raised fears over higher taxes" (Phongpaichit, 2016, p. 405), indicating their belief in possessing privileged rights over the Red Shirts. The Yellow Shirts also devalued the results of national elections in which Thaksin's Party won the majority vote by claiming that the Red Shirts were "poor and uneducated, and hence less qualified to participate in democracy" (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016), and that the election results were thus not credible. The Red Shirts on the other hand insisted that their voices were legitimate which led to a long period of political polarization between from 2006 to 2014.

In 2014 the military stepped in to launch a coup after approximately six months of demonstrations by the PDRC and promised to remove Thaksin Shinawatra and all corruption. However, the coup not only "abolish[ed] the influence of Thaksin Shinawatra" but also shifted Thailand in an authoritarian direction (Baker, 2016, p. 388). Phongpaichit and Baker explained the cause of the coup was a network of elites as an oligarchy where "power is concentrated in the hands of a few as the top of the pyramid" (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016, p. 1). The elite "acquire privileged access to power, justice, education, health and other public goods" (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2016, p. 17). This has led to structural social inequality, as the elites (and, it appears, the middle-class yellow shirts) also believe that they have the right to access more political rights than the average person.

After the coup on May 22, 2014 the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) was formed by the military to legitimize their position. The NCPO promised to make national reforms and launch anti-corruption campaigns. They also claimed that the coup d'état would lead to political reconciliation by resolving the decade long political conflict and ultimately create a stable democratic political system by force (Bunbongkarn, 2015). Many supporters

saw the military as the saviour who stepped in to save the day, in the hope that the decade long political polarization would come to an end. Sombatpoonsiri (2017) points out that the coup in 2014 was justified by claims of restoring ‘peace and order.’ This is visible in how they carried out reconciliation programs under the name of ‘orthodox Thai norms.’ The norms which the military were interested in include “national unity, patriotism, loyalty, and Buddhism” (Sombatpoonsiri, 2017, p. 136). In effect, the Thai population were treated as subjects rather than citizens of the state (Sombatpoonsiri, 2017).

This research is a study on military discourse, to explore how the military positioned themselves as part of the elite network by seizing power, which violated political rights in Thailand. I seek to unpack the ideology behind the claims for privileged rights by the military by asking the question: What are the ideologies behind the justification for launching coups by the military in Thailand? With this in mind, I will analyze some public pronouncements of two military leaders: Prem Tinsulanonda, one of the most influential military leaders in modern Thai history, is the first. He was former Prime Minister of Thailand from 1980 to 1988, and also had close attachments to the palace by being President of the Privy Council from 1998 until his death in 2019. During this time, he launched many campaigns and made speeches on how the ideal Thai should behave. After the coup in 2014, he also made various public speeches supporting Prayuth Chan-ocha and the coup. Prayuth Chan-ocha is the second military leader to be analyzed as he was the coup leader in 2014 and prime minister from 2014 until present. By analyzing the discourse of the two military leaders, I have found many similarities between them. The striking similarities of ideology between the two leaders suggest that harmony is a key concept used to construct the ideal Thai nation.

Harmony is created by networks of *bunkhun* which is translated as a favour, or debt of gratitude. *Bunkhun* is a relationship of power between two subjects: the giver and the receiver. The receiver is in debt to the giver for being provided with something. The giver is ideally acting with a good heart, although he/she expects the receiver to remember their actions and repay later on. Even though *bunkhun* is a kind of debt, the debt is not always created with the willingness of the receiver; for instance, children are automatically indebted

to their parents for giving birth to them even though it was not the child's choice to be born, and with the same logic people are automatically indebted to their nation merely because they were born in Thailand. Therefore, the networks of *bunkhun* are not always clear cut or fair because in Thai society *bunkhun* receivers are obligated to appear to be obedient and thankful to the *bunkhun* giver, regardless of the fact that the receivers have not necessarily benefited from the gift. Therefore, obedience is required to cultivate self-discipline, because when all people have self-discipline, they do not express dissatisfaction, and with no dissatisfaction on the surface, it creates the image of a 'collective happiness' which is the ultimate realisation of harmony. Therefore, there is a connection between harmony, obedience and collective happiness, and it is expressed in the hierarchical order of *barami* (see below) with the ideal leader, and gratitude from the subordinate.

### Conceptualizing harmony

Previous studies on Asian societies have indicated Asia's unique system of stressing the importance of the collective and working within the family unit. Working as a collective is based on compromises made between members to most benefit the family as a unity. Woodiwiss's Familialism theory explains the family power structure behind Korean society, with a hierarchy of power shared unequally between the father, the mother, the eldest son, the younger son, the daughter, the daughter in law and so on. Therefore, the family does not have individual rights, but has "'joint rights' shared between the master and the members of the entity" (Woodiwiss, 2012, p. 972). Lu (2015) found that harmony is the value behind the Chinese familial system which is also based on the father-son relationship in a hierarchical structure. According to Chinese society, each member of the family is cultivated as an unequal member to keep each role from getting into each other's way. The concept of *Junzi* as the ideal leader in Confucianism stresses being "a person of high integrity pursuing moral perfection and relationship harmony" (Lu, 2015). Therefore, family as a collective with different roles to play is an important structure in both Korean and Chinese societies. These relationships are cultivated and maintained by the strict discourses used to identify respective

roles within society. The longing of a general person to become a *Junzi* is also a “tool used by leaders demanding others to focus on internal self-cultivation” which brings about harmony (Lu, 2015, p. 100).

While in China harmony is created by the concept of *Junzi* as a tool towards ‘self-discipline’ among individuals, in Thailand harmony is created by the concept of *Barami*. The concept of *Barami* is different from familialism in the sense that familialism stresses the importance of membership in a family, while *barami* stresses the perfection of the leader which leads to harmony by virtue of the gratitude of its subordinates. Jory (2002) explains the concept of *barami* as “charismatic power” and explained that the concept of charismatic power is rooted in Theravada Buddhism and the belief of ten morals of the perfect leader. The ten morals comprise of: “the Perfections of Giving, Moral Conduct, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Patience, Truthfulness, Resolution, Loving-Kindness, and Equanimity” (Jory, 2002, p. 37). The idea behind this principle is that by acting accordingly, the leader gains *barami* from cultivating charisma to win over the subordinates. And once the subordinates are won over, they will happily obey the leader by enjoying the merits and gifts coming from the superior, so that all will then live happily as a collective.

Persons (2008) found that *barami* is related to the concept of face in Thailand; *barami* is visible at many levels of leadership produced from a person’s goodness, not position or power, and people ideally willingly respond to the good deeds. However, Persons argues that this concept of *barami* excludes people who chase power for power’s sake, and people who chase money for money’s sake as the kindness needs to have no strings attached and be practiced “over a very long period of time [to] display a truly virtuous heart and do good works on behalf of others” (Persons, 2008, p. 72). However, Jackson (2004) points out that Thailand is a regime of images with “different types of policing and control over actions and discourse in the private and public spheres” (Jackson, 2004, p. 181). This means the regime is more concerned about maintaining the image of smooth and calm on the surface which does not necessarily represent the truth in private spheres. The principle of *barami* at the surface is used “to enhance the prestige of images” as it has a prestige value and is associated with

high status (Jackson, 2004, p. 204). Therefore, *barami* is used to cultivate the image of the prestigious person to maintain a high status rather than actually to correspond with the reality of their private behaviour.

*Barami* was also attached to national strategies during the time of nation building. Kasetsiri (2017) points out that during the period of 1942-1944 Phibunsongkhram, whose agenda was highly nationalist, identified nationalism with himself, as a person with *barami* and father-figure of the nation (Kasetsiri, 2017, p. 152). This conceit was also adopted by Sarit Thanarat, a general who staged a coup in 1957 and remained in power until 1963. The concepts of *Barami* and harmony are visible in Sarit's speech in 1959 which claims that the one great Thai tradition which should always be used is the idea of 'father of the house, father of the land.' He explained that "the Prime Minister is the father in a large family...we rule with love and friendship as if we are part of the same family" (Chaloemtiarana, 2018, p. 199). The concept of harmony is created from the 'love' and 'friendship' within the family and *barami* is visible from his quote that "Once we are able to make the citizens trust love and respect us as the head of family, we will be known as a good ruler" (Chaloemtiarana, 2018, p. 199). The charismatic ruler according to this concept is created as being leader of the family.

*Barami* was also in the form of creating unity as Raymond (2018) found that Thailand's framings of historical narratives focus on war and security with the king as the center of the narrative and the heart of creating unity. These narratives have existed since the reigns of Chulalongkorn at a time of nation building, and after the restoration of monarchical prestige by Sarit in 1957. Thai public and military education systems continued to teach Thai history based around the deeds of royals. For instance, "the fall of Ayutthaya narrative underlines the importance of internal unity" (Raymond, 2018, p. 246), and the "concept of the Thai nation is based around deeds of kings and emphasizing the importance of unity" (Raymond, 2018, p. 246). This ideology of unity has played a crucial part in Thai politics as Chachavalpongpun (2010) claims that unity was also a discourse used by the PAD to oust Thaksin as unity "allowed political leaders to rally support from the public against internal and external threats." (Chachavalpongpun, 2010)

This paper is a discourse analysis of the military's justifications on privileged rights over the public and uses the critical discourse analysis (CDA) method to analyze data. The concept of discourse used in the research is based on Foucault's concept of the relationship between discourse and truth, and discourse and power. According to Foucault, discourse is a set of words, expressions, and terms which are formulated in a certain way which cause social meaning. In terms of discourse and truth, Foucault claims that power exists in all truth, there is a force of power behind all discourse, "[truth] is not the reward of free spirits... it is produced by virtue and multiple forms of constraint" (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). He claims that every society has a regime of truth which constrains the discourses used in that certain society. Therefore, discourse articulates values and norms which emerge from institutions like politics and society.

CDA has many different approaches. Knowledgeable researchers in the field include Fairclough, Wodak and Van Dijk. Wodak's discourse-historical approach includes a systematic collection of samples of texts, which focus on the interrelationships of the discourse, but largely focuses on the linguistic analysis rather than the larger social structures (Lin, 2014). Fairclough's dialectical-relational approach integrates social theory with linguistic theories, while stressing more the interactive aspects of discourse such as systemic functional linguistics and conversation analysis (Lin, 2014). Van Dijk's CDA analysis method was chosen for this analysis as it is the only approach which integrates cognitive theories with social theories. Van Dijk uses the cognitive theories "as the middle layer to mediate between structures of language and discourse at the micro level and structures of society" (Lin, 2014, p. 215). The aim of this approach is to "explain how larger societal structures come to be enacted and reproduced" (Lin, 2014, p. 215). Therefore, it is the most appropriate for the study of military pronouncements as this approach explores the ideologies which "are socially constructed and thus linguistically represented and vice versa" (Sajjad, Malghnai, & Khosa, 2018, p. 202). That is, looking at how people position and express themselves in society, how they construct their roles by the pronounced language, and how they divide and categorise groups of people including themselves. These are all ideologies which represent the cognition of a social group



when they become shared attitudes. The sharing of attitudes is reflected by social acceptance and actions which uphold certain ideologies such as listening with agreement, sharing information, spreading the ideas, continuing the narrative, or teaching/passing on the ideologies. When analyzing through the social cognitive approach one does not relate discourse directly to society, but it is a triangular approach which connects discourse to cognition then to society in a triangle (Dijk, 2015). Therefore, the objective of the study is to first analyze the text, then gain an understanding of the ideology behind the text by unpacking the ideology. This study seeks to understand the ideology behind the discourse used to justify the military launching coups.

### **Prem Tinsulanonda and the ‘hierarchical gratitude’**

Even though Prem Tinsulanonda never launched a coup, he was one of the most influential military leaders in modern Thai society as he was prime minister of Thailand from 1980 to 1988 and was President of the Privy Council from 1998 to his death in 2019. He has been a role model as the Thai person with *barami*; he had the Prem Tinsulanonda Ratthaburut Foundation translated as ‘Foundation of a Statesman’ to promote his ideas of the ‘ideal Thai society,’ and positioning himself as the role model statesman. While working as President of the Privy Council he promoted King Bhumibol's ideologies and royal projects. Prem gave many speeches on how a Thai citizen should act and one of the main concepts he mentioned was the concept of the Thai family. Under this concept of the Thai family he stressed the gratefulness Thai people should have towards their fatherland.

Prem's book *We are Born to Return the Favor to our Fatherland* (Tinsulanonda, 2000), which was documented from quotes made by Prem in 2000 to cultivate the ideal Thai society, and was meant to be on the list of selected readings in Thai schools, can be analysed using the CDA approach this will demonstrate how ideologies are spread by a certain group. Prem's foundation also arranged for contests (with scholarships for winners) on writing about this ideal in 2000. He writes:

I have been trying to send this message for more than ten years so that it reaches

as many Thai people as possible. Thus, the Thai people will realize that we all have the duty and responsibility to repay the fatherland which we were born into and grew up in to make us the person we are today. We need a steadfast awareness that this duty and responsibility is inevitable... (Tinsulanonda, 2000, pp. 21-22)

After Prayuth Cha-ocha launched the coup in 2014, Prem supported him as prime minister and made various speeches to support his actions. In his speech after the coup in 2015, he enforced and welcomed Prayuth and supported the actions of the military by saying:

This is an important opportunity, an opportunity for us to show that when the nation is in a critical moment, the nation is in discord. We will come to take care of it, this is our duty, our duty to look after the country, as we have sworn to all holy things. (SpringNews, 2015)

By this speech Prem is positioning himself as part of the army. He mentions the coup as part of the army's duty during a crisis. The ideology is that the army are sworn to protect the country, and when the country is under threat it is justified for the military to interfere in politics. On another occasion of a Songkran water festival blessing ceremony, Prem also gave a speech about being Thai and the importance of giving back to the father land. He mentioned that Prime Minister Prayuth is a good example of maintaining the Thai identity and his work would succeed because he gives back to the fatherland.

I praise the prime minister for maintaining Thainess on the Thai New Year and coming to exchange blessings. This is very admirable, the prime minister did very well in keeping the Thai tradition. These are things that Thai people respect. And the Prime Minister has always maintained his Thai identity. Therefore, the prime minister will succeed in administering the country because the prime minister is a Thai who was born to give back to the fatherland, which is a great thing. I am delighted that the prime minister is a leader who sets an example for people who love our country that maintaining the Thai identity is important and is something to uphold and set an example on as we are doing... one thing that I think I must directly address with the prime minister is to hold on to the words 'we are born to repay the

fatherland.’ If the prime minister can do this the fatherland will become peaceful. With the prime minister as the leader of our country, we are his supporters. (Thai Khu Fa, Government House, 2018)

It is evident that Prem’s ideology of the Thai social system is expressed as a system of gratitude. For instance, he claimed that Thai culture which has been passed on from ‘our’ ancestors is to “repay the ‘gratitude’ towards a person or an object which has ‘*bunkhun*’ on ‘us’ such as your father, your mother, teachers, institutions, and other organizations” (Tinsulanonda, 2000, p. 23). He stressed that paying loyalty and obedience towards people and institutions which have granted some form of kindnesses to a person is part of being Thai. In Thai this form of kindness is expressed as ‘having *bunkhun* on someone’, which indicates that the *bunkhun* burden is on you. The receiver is obligated to return the kindness as one was treated kindly by the other. At the national level, Prem explains this logic by saying that all Thai people must “express gratitude towards the fatherland which is even greater and more important [than anything]” (Tinsulanonda, 2000, p. 23). This is where a social hierarchical ideology is formulated from a network of *bunkhun* from a top down perspective. According to this logic, all human beings live within a hierarchical structure with the individual at the bottom, then above the individual comes the parents, then above the parents comes the nation. Each level must feel grateful for the *bunkhun* granted by the upper level. At the family level, one must be grateful to one’s parents for giving birth to their children and bringing them up and at the national level, all Thai people must be grateful to the fatherland, for granting the land for all people to live in. In this sense, the land is most important at the top of the hierarchy as it is viewed as the house, then comes the leader who is constructed as the owner of the house, and then come the people, who are subjects relying on the leader for a roof over their head. Therefore, they must be grateful for the *bunkhun* of giving them a place to live.

### Self-discipline and harmony: The way to express gratitude

When one is grateful for having a roof over their head, Prem claims that gratitude towards the fatherland can be expressed by “acting as a good person, being a good institution, a good organization, being a good example, and focusing on doing good deeds towards the fatherland” (Tinsulanonda, 2000, p. 23). His focus is on everyone looking towards the interests of the nation and self-cultivating, being a good person. The phrase being a good person or *phen-khon-dee* is commonly used in Thai daily life, usually meaning going by moral rules and respecting Thai social norms. For Prem a good person is someone who is grateful to the nation, by prioritizing the nation before the individual person. The logic is that if each person has self-discipline and becomes a good person, the assembly of good people will create good institutions within the nation, then the nation full of good institutions will create ‘a good nation:’ a nation where self-disciplined people are tied together by gratitude, and at the same time, the gratitude network enforces the social norm that people must act in a good way. The reason people need to be good is because this gratitude network creates harmony or cohesion as he explains:

Cohesion within the nation is possible when we prioritize national interests, without polarization, without personal interests, and without benefiting our own partisans above the interests of the majority. Maintaining national cohesion therefore, is a great way to express gratitude towards the nation. Everyone should cooperate with constant awareness at all times [of cohesion].

(Tinsulanonda, 2000, p. 23)

The ideology of stressing the importance of the collective was also evident after the general elections in 2019, when Prem came out and endorsed Prayuth again. This speech uses corruption as the central argument by saying that being ‘non-corrupt’ is about working for the collective as opposed to the corrupt politicians who work for themselves. Therefore, the concept of *barami* is also used to idealize Prayuth as a leader because people who do good deeds gain most prestige.

It is a pleasure to see the prime minister and the army along with other government officials help take care of the nation. Up until today we can say that the prime minister is not corrupt. Because he is truly someone who thinks of the majority. An honest person must have far-reaching thoughts and act for others, not for oneself or those who are close by. Therefore, I always say to my friends that whether this government is efficient, is subject to personal opinion. But I am positive that this government is not corrupt. I say with pride that General Prayuth Chan-ocha's government is not corrupt. If what I say is wrong, the prime minister must take care of it. (Matichon TV, 2019)

Later on in the speech he also stressed that the prime minister should "be healthy and focus on working for others." As he said that with these good intentions things will "become accomplished, with admiration, or at least with little blame" (Matichon TV, 2019). The ideology behind this message stresses selflessness and sacrifice for the collective which follows the logic that the nation is the house which provided us with a roof and shelter and therefore we need to be grateful towards it and repay it.

The discourse of cohesion goes against democracy and human rights concepts in many ways. First of all, it positions people from a hierarchical perspective. It stresses that people are born into this hierarchy, since children are born as subordinates to their parents, and people are subordinates to their nation. According to this concept of cohesion, its importance exceeds the importance of personal or subgroup benefits. In other words, personal, or subgroup claims are not valid if they threaten the cohesion, since people are subordinate to the nation. However, under a democratic system, political parties are supposed to represent different groups and individuals. The meaning of national elections under a democratic system is so that people could choose a political representative to protect their own interests and a voice to express it. But with the ideology of cohesion people have obligations arising from gratitude and kindness, and obligations for harmony and cohesiveness, meaning there is less room for democracy to blossom.

## Prayuth's barami and bringing happiness

Prayuth Chan-ocha ousted an elected government to seize political power on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, and only fifteen days later he released a song named '*Khuen Khwam Suk Hai Prathet Thai*' translated into English as 'Bringing back Happiness to Thailand' to communicate with the public. This was the first of ten songs Prayuth was to write, but was by far the most successful one, as the song was played in shopping malls, restaurants, government offices and other public areas, and it was covered by many recording artists. It is worth analyzing the thinking behind the song because it reflects the ideology supported by the groups which embraced it. It was announced that the lyrics of the song were written by Prayuth Chan-ocha. Therefore, the song can be seen as a direct message from Prayuth and his team to the public to explain the reasons behind launching the coup. From the text it is evident that the lyrics expressed *barami* in the sense that the political polarization has set the nation on fire and thus the nation needed 'a hero' who wants to protect people from his heart to come and save the day. The lyrics are:

The day the nation and the king and all the people were safe,  
I protected you from my heart, this was my promise,  
Today the nation is facing disaster, with fire raging all the time,  
Let me be the one to step in, don't let it be too late,  
To bring back the love, how long would it take?  
Could you please wait, to get over the conflicts?  
I will follow my promise, I ask not for long,  
And the beautiful land will return,  
I will be honest, just please trust and have faith in me,  
The fatherland will soon be good, [I] want to return happiness to you: the people,  
[I] know today will be tiring, but I will fight against danger,  
The military does not give up, this is my promise,  
Today, the nation faces disaster, with fire raging all the time,  
Let me be the one to step in, don't let it be too late,  
The land will be good soon, happiness will return...Thailand. (Chan-ocha & Tantipimonpun, 2014)

The name of the song '*Bring Back Happiness to Thailand*' constructs Prayuth as the hero and center of a story as if he is the one who has *barami* to protect the nation. With the first phrase we see that according to the song, the three core components of 'Thailand' are the 'nation', 'the King' and 'the people'. The order of the three components is also interesting with the nation being first, the king being second, and the people being last. This is the list of components which according to the military ideology need to be saved. The military positions itself as the protector of three components from political polarization, and promised to handle the situation. The logic of the justification for seizing power from an elected government goes like this: when the nation, the king and the people are all safe, 'I' protected the 'you' with all my heart; now that the nation is facing disaster, 'I' must step in before it is too late. Political demonstrations are described as 'disaster' and 'fires' implying that the state is in chaos mode which could not be handled in a normal way.

Moreover, the ideology behind the song constructs the nation as a collective happiness. According to the song, Prayuth is stepping in to maintain happiness by getting rid of the chaos. In other words, he is claiming to protect the harmony of Thailand by bring back peacefulness based on a collective happiness. He is cultivating *barami* by trying to step in as the hero to keep the nation from falling apart because political demonstrations, especially the ones involving political polarization, are perceived as a disruption to the unity of peacefulness, as political demonstrations involve many demands, debates, negotiation, and conflicts. The political polarization was perceived as a political deadlock, as the two parties could not agree on who to rule. However, from a larger picture, the process of Red Shirt-Yellow Shirt conflict was a renegotiation of Thai society between the urban elites and the rural peasants. The urban elites were not willing to accept change which came with the Red Shirts. The military was part of the unwillingness to accept that there is more to Thai society than 'Thailand' as a unit of collective happiness.

The discourse used in the song also stresses irregularity and the urgency of bringing back peace, with the song's repeated stress on 'we can't let it be too late.' This means that under irregular circumstances the democratic process of elections and parliament should be

put aside. Because this is a State of Emergency, it needs special attention with a special person to take care of it, or else peacefulness will be taken away from Thai society. Therefore, the discourse of *Khwam Sa-ngop Suk* or peace is stressed over democracy at emergency times: democracy can wait as there are more urgent things to attend to such as putting out the political flames before it is too late. This is implied in the line “please wait, not too long for the return of the beautiful fatherland” (Chan-ocha & Tantipimonpun, 2014). As the political crisis was framed as an urgent incident which is destroying the nation, therefore, a hero using non-democratic measures is needed to for a better peaceful tomorrow.

The audience Prayuth is communicating to with this song is communal. He is not addressing Thailand as an assembly of individuals, but he is addressing Thailand as a unit, as a whole. The ideology behind this is that Thailand is constructed as a single unit similar to being one big family which needs control and protection from the father. In this sense, Thailand is not constructed as an assembly of individuals with different characteristics, different needs, or different values, which is normal for a democratic state, but Thailand is characterized as one unity which is being destroyed all together from the political polarization, and needs to be saved.

### **Prayuth government’s ‘Twelve Core Values for a Strong Thailand’ and loyalty**

To get a deeper sight of the ideology that Prayuth’s government is attempting to construct, the ‘12 core values of the Thai people’ was chosen for analysis as they were promoted by Prayuth’s government after seizing power to construct the ideal Thai society. The state agencies produced a poem, song, and 12-part film based on the teachings of the twelve core values in order to promote the values to as large an audience as possible. Students in Thai schools at all levels were also required to recite the 12 core values after the daily flag-raising ceremony. The twelve core values are:

1. Upholding the three main pillars: the Nation, the Religion, and the Monarchy;
2. Being honest, sacrificial and patient, with positive attitude for the common good of the public;



3. Being grateful to the parents, guardians and teachers;
  4. Seeking for knowledge and education directly and indirectly;
  5. Treasuring cherished Thai traditions;
  6. Maintaining morality, integrity, well-wishes upon others as well as being generous and sharing;
  7. Understanding, learning the true essence of democratic ideals, with His Majesty the King as Head of State;
  8. Maintaining discipline, respectful of laws and the elderly and seniority;
  9. Being conscious and mindful of action in line with His Majesty's the King's royal statements;
  10. Applying His Majesty the King's Sufficiency Economy, saving money for time of need, being moderate with surplus for sharing or expansion of business while having good immunity;
  11. Maintaining both physical and mental health and unyielding to the dark force or desires, having sense of shame over guilt and sins in accordance with the religious principles;
  12. Putting the public and national interest before personal interest."
- (Government Public Relations Department, 2020)

The ideology of harmony is also visible behind the twelve core values revolving around gratitude, *barami* and obedience. The can be identified through the discourse on gratitude, *barami*, and self-discipline.

The discourse of gratitude is found in values 3 and 8: "be grateful to the parents, guardians and teachers" and "maintaining discipline, respectful of laws and the elderly and seniority." This indicates a hierarchical system to maintain the unequal social structure. The same message has been passed on before by Prem's Foundation when he claimed that people who were born in Thailand must be grateful to the fatherland, and also their parents from a hierarchical perspective. The ideology behind the twelve core values indicate that the nation, religion, and the monarchy are the three main pillars of Thai society. These come first before all others, and the values do not mention the people who are the most important

part of the formulation of the state. According to this structure of discourse, the people are positioned as ‘followers’ and are subordinate to the state which is constructing a strong Thailand by seeking to popularize these core values of the gratefulness of the people towards the three core pillars.

The discourse of *barami* can be found in the four values which mention the monarchy, suggesting this is the primary concern. The ideology behind the core values mention a strong Thailand which must accept democratic ideas to uphold the King as head of state. It also uses the phrase ‘true essence of democratic ideals’ to validate its claims and respond to the Red Shirts, who were accused of being ‘bought’ by vote buying and populism. The discourse also emphasizes law and order, obedience and respect to people of higher social positions and requiring people to act “in line with His Majesty’s the King’s royal statements.” These values construct the idealized leader of the nation as the role model for the subordinates to follow. The *barami* of the monarchy is visible in many of the core values.

The discourse of self-discipline and obedience stress the collective over the individual and also stress self-control over desires, which may harm the harmonious life of the collective. For instance, value 10 states upholding “the King’s Sufficiency Economy, saving money for time of need, being moderate,” stresses the need to be moderate in order to be able to look after oneself, and be happy with what one has. The ideology behind such exhortations is that when people are happy with what they have, they do not come out on the streets and become the burden of the nation. It also includes the core value of “maintaining both physical and mental health and not yielding to the dark forces or desires.” In societies with extreme inequality, the contrast in quality of life between the regular person and the elite is highly visible. Therefore, the stress on self-sufficiency cultivates the notion that people should be happy with what they have, and should not care about bargaining for the same resources as the more privileged. When people have self-control over their desires they will not feel that inequality is an issue, as they will not desire things they cannot pay for, believing that it is part of a social structure that cannot or should not be changed. This is because value no. 12 of “putting the public and national interest before personal interest” is crucial for a strong

Thailand. This ideology leads to the belief that individual rights are subordinate to the collective rights.

## Happyyness

From the section above, we can see the construction of discourses of harmony and happiness justifying the existence of the oligarchic network of the elites to hold on to their privilege and power in Thai society. The values popularized by the military stress a happy society which is cohesive, and in which people obey this system because people are grateful towards their superiors. With this obedience by gratefulness, order and security come about. The superiors are expected to exercise their powers to keep order and security in a way that expresses *barami*, which means it is morally accepted by the people. Then the society functions with the self-disciplined subordinates listening to the leader and all living happily within the unequal social structure.

Happiness is an interesting concept as it is connected to having the good life. The good life is being happy and people becoming comfortable by obeying the charismatic leader who would in turn, look after the people, by charity and handouts. The leader is the big-hearted person willing to help and the subordinate who is self-disciplined and willing to behave in order to receive the handouts. This ideal is translated as a happy and comfortable life where people live together as a family-like relationship of depending on each other. This is when harmony is at its best. However, this is a reflection of inequality of dignity where the self-disciplined person has to compromise their rights, their emotions, and their needs.

On the other side of the coin, the concept of happiness and comfort also implies that there is no noise or conflicts which are supposed to bring about stressfulness. The meaning behind this is that the ideology behind the military government pronouncements indicate that the ideal Thai society would prefer a harmonious life without conflicts. However, as democracy is based on conflicts and numerous discussions, once political discussions escalate to a level of stressfulness, there is always an excuse for the military to step in, as tensions between polarized groups in society are still considered a national threat which need to be removed

by force.

Therefore, once political movements have escalated to a level of violence, the military has the justification for using violence against the disruptors of peace and harmony; as mentioned earlier, Sombatpoonsiri (2017) found that the justification for the coup in 2014 was for restoring peace and order (Sombatpoonsiri, 2017). This is because according to the discourse of harmony and collective happiness, people who choose to go against the system of harmony are considered outsiders. They are no longer part of the ideal Thai society, as they have broken the code or left the Thai family system. Therefore, they are considered outsiders and are not listened to. Their voices no longer matter, because once they are not considered as being a member of the Thai family for bringing about chaos, they are perceived as political criminals who aim at disrupting the Thai social structure. These criminals become the bad guys and are no longer considered worth listening to. This means that the people who are in need cannot voice or claim their rights freely without taking the risk of breaking the harmony code.

### **Why is harmony important?**

Harmony and peacefulness are often stressed in the discourses of authoritarian states. Why is this the case? First, breaking down the discourse of harmony (or peacefulness), we see that harmony is often used as an opposite to 'chaos or 'violence.' According to these discourses democracy, which provides the platform for claiming human rights, sometimes is also associated with political chaos, hate speech, or racism. In a word, it provides a platform for publicly expressing negativity. In a state in which leaders stress the importance of harmony, obedience, and collective happiness these kinds of conflicts and chaos would be framed as a taboo, because these states want to present the state on the positive side, where people are living a happy life even though in reality people are living with extreme inequality.

While democracy does provide a better platform for negativity and expression with the argument for freedom of speech, the system also provides an equal platform for voicing people's rights. Under authoritarian states, the government is controlled by the ruling elite,

and these people often claim that they are protecting the people by providing things such as the good life, or quality in life, such as, what Sarit did in the 1950s by taking away things which appeared to be 'dirty' to him such as sex workers, beggars, and tricycle taxi drivers (Chaloemtiarana, 2018). These people who are often at the bottom of society become neglected. Prem stressed the importance of being selfless and being grateful towards the nation in hierarchical order. Or with Prayuth's government, one of his first policies after stepping into power was resolving the decade long political conflict by force (Bunbongkarn, 2015) to clear out street vendors, and register all migrant workers so that they could be traced easily because national security became more important. These are all signs of moving towards a more authoritarian state as policing of the government becomes more visible in all aspects of life.

The promotion of law and order benefit the privileged in society, or the elites and middle class. For instance, cleaner streets, through clearing out the street vendors, is something the middle class long for and would definitely appreciate as part of government policy. However, the people who actually work as street vendors (and the people who eat street food) are often people of less privileged background who cannot afford to go to places with higher rents to open a shop. When they are cleared out, they are the ones who lose out in this process. Some people may disagree and claim that law and order comes before all people and the less privileged people in society also have an obligation to follow the rules of society. It is true that law and order is crucial for a state to function properly. However, we must not forget that law and order is created by people and can be adjusted according to reality of the people living within it. Therefore, in states with the elites in control of law and order, they make the rules without much consultation with the less privileged parts of society. When the less privileged have no say in the making of the law, they often end up suffering the most, and they end up compromising their rights for the better collective society based on the elite's perspective.

The example above suggests that the authoritarian state is about a harmonious relationship between the elite and the middle class, and leaving out those less privileged and

lower down the hierarchical structure. The authoritarian government constructs the head of state as the father figure of the state as he has charisma (*barami*) and deserves to be the leader of the harmonious family. On the other hand, when the harmony is broken by political unrest, the military is the defender who comes out to save the day as a hero protecting the collective family. Under this mentality, the father cannot stand alone. The father is only created when there are children under him. In this sense, the father is the elite government, and the children are those who are protected by the nation and are subordinate to the ruling elite. The children must be grateful towards the nation and they must be grateful among each other in a hierarchical order, with the elite networks of gratitude, followed by the middle class and the least privileged at the bottom. The fact that the middle class have a fair share in this hierarchical network make them support the system and seek to move up the ladder rather than seek to fight for more benefit for all classes. This is why the middle class felt they should hold on to the elite network rather than replace them.

Structural inequality in Thai society is maintained because people at the bottom of the pyramid have no access to the networks of the middle class and up. They have also not managed to access the good life according to the harmonious happy family image. This is because when people who are struggling at the bottom decide to go by the fixed authoritarian rules, they lose out in the system, but at the same time when they become angry and want to express themselves (as this is the only way they will be visible in society), they are viewed by the elite as problem makers who need to be removed from society. The reason is that they are deemed as disruptors of the cultivated harmonious image by the elites. Therefore, people at the bottom often find their rights being exploited due to lack of a platform to voice their issues, or not taken seriously due to their social status and inharmonious behaviour.

Democracy might be a platform for more public controversy, but it is a platform where ideally people of all groups can express their rights. Human rights movements are often associated with people of less privilege in society. Therefore, human rights movements often intentionally cause a buzz within society in order to be recognized and supported by the government. The ultimate goal for a human rights movements is to pressure government

agencies or certain social groups into paying more attention to those who are being oppressed or are in need of support from society. With authoritarian governments which see harmony as the heart of its functioning, this is not likely to happen. Many voices which criticize the government either get silently removed from society, or are never allowed to speak up to begin with.

The paper sought Foucault theories and used Van Dijk's CDA approach to conduct a discourse analysis on military discourse concerning the ideal Thai social structure. The research found that unequal social structure is promoted by the military discourse on the importance of harmony in society. Harmony is supposed to create collective happiness and ideally create the charismatic leader with *barami* at the top by the networks of *bunkhun* at the subordinate level. The paper argues that the networks of *bunkhun* stress the importance of the collective happiness over the individual which is an obstacle towards a human rights' based society where society gives more access to platforms for people to give voice to highlight inequality and suffering.

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