

Structural and Sociocultural Determinants of Military Authoritarianism in Thailand

Shanasuek Wisetchai*

Faculty of Humanity and Social Sciences, Phranakhon Rajabhat University
Bangkok, 10220 Thailand

Abstract

Military authoritarianism has persisted in Thailand despite repeated attempts at democratic transition, yet the structural and sociocultural conditions underlying this persistence remain insufficiently examined. This study aims to examine the structural and sociocultural factors that contribute to the persistence of military authoritarianism in Thailand. A qualitative approach was employed, combining document analysis of official documents and archival materials with in-depth interviews with 20 key informants, including political scientists, politicians, military officers, legal scholars, and civil society actors. Data were analyzed using grounded theory procedures for systematic category development and phenomenological reflection for experiential interpretation, with triangulation across documentary and interview data to enhance credibility. The study uncovers three principal factors sustaining military authoritarianism. First, long years of deep political polarization have curtailed the ability of democratic institutions to manage conflict, creating persistent governance vacuums in which the military positions itself as a neutral arbiter. Second, the absence of credible conflict-resolution mechanisms and the deteriorating legitimacy of constitutional, parliamentary, and oversight institutions have undermined public trust, enabling extra-constitutional intervention under the guise of emergency circumstances. Third, the state's framing of national security narratives—reinforced by entrenched nationalist sentiments—allows the military to rationalize its political dominance by characterizing dissent, reform movements, or democratic mobilization as threats to national unity. These three factors operate as a mutually reinforcing structural cycle in which civilian authority is fragile, public trust in democratic processes is undermined, and opportunities for military reassertion persist. In conclusion, the findings confirm that the persistence of military authoritarianism in Thailand is not contingent upon any single political event but rather reflects the long arc of embedded institutional failings and socio-political and cultural forces.

Keywords: Thai politics, Military authoritarianism, Dictatorship, Political development

*Corresponding Author
email: shanasuek@pnru.ac.th

Introduction

Thailand has a particularly long-standing history of military interference in politics, which has left an indelible imprint on the political and social landscape of the country (Bamrungsuk, 2015). Military coups totaling 13 occurrences have happened in Thailand since the change of government in 1932 ended absolute monarchy (Farrelly, 2013), reflecting the general instability of the country's democracies. These have led to continued military rule in the country, oftentimes for reasons of national security and the supposed need to keep political order. The latest coup that took place in 2014 was by General Prayuth Chan-ocha who overturned the democratically elected civilian government (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2016). This event not only rapidly prevented the democratic process, but also created legal and political devices that tend to the long-term retention of military dictatorship, such as crafting a new constitution that gives the military and its related organizations power, restructuring the political system strategically to allow the coup group to continue its rule, and greatly stifling freedom of expression for citizens. These events represent an extremely great problem to establish a stable democracy in Thailand.

The Freedom House report, issued by an independent international organization that systematically assesses global conditions of freedom, has documented a declining trajectory for Thailand. In the 2025 assessment, Thailand scored 34 out of 100, with 11/40 for political rights and 23/60 for civil liberties, and was classified as "Not Free." This downgrade from the previous year's "Partly Free" status was driven by the dissolution of the leading opposition party by the Constitutional Court and the authorities' repatriation of activists, refugees, and asylum seekers to countries where they faced ill-treatment (Freedom House, 2025). The decline continued in the 2026 assessment, with the score falling further to 33/100, political rights stagnating at 11/40, and civil liberties decreasing to 22/60 (Freedom House, 2026). This sustained downward trend underscores the deeply entrenched restrictions on political expression, peaceful assembly, and press freedom in Thailand. These intransigent constraints persist in tarnishing Thailand's international stature, especially around human rights and democratic rule. The intertwining of military intervention and state administration also exacerbates economic vulnerabilities. Hewison's broad overview of Thai political economy noted that coups as well as military rule have historically produced economic disorientation, lower foreign investment and a prolonged lack of growth, all adverse to the long-term development of Thailand as a nation (Hewison, 2014). Repeated military interventions breed chronic instability and have dampened investor confidence, leading to delayed investments that steadily erode the quality of life of citizens and the country's competitiveness over the long haul.

Given these numerous reasons, it is crucial to conduct research into the durability and strategies to counter

military dictatorship in Thailand in order to completely grasp the reasons that enable military dictatorship to endure in the context of Thai society, and to seek ways to proactively foster sustainable democracy. Although a substantial body of literature has examined individual coups, civil–military relations, and political economy in Thailand (Bamrungasuk, 2015; Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2016; Hewison, 2014b), much of this scholarship has focused on specific episodes of intervention rather than systematically analyzing the interplay of structural, political, and sociocultural factors that collectively sustain military authoritarianism over time. In particular, there remains a lack of integrative qualitative research that draws on the lived experiences of political actors and scholars to explain how institutional erosion, the absence of trusted conflict-resolution mechanisms, and nationalist security narratives interact as mutually reinforcing conditions. This gap limits both theoretical understanding and the formulation of effective policy responses aimed at breaking the cycle of military intervention. Such an integrative study will provide a deep, nuanced grasp of Thailand's intricate political dynamics, in terms of power structures, of the actions by various ruling actors, of such devices as those that allow military dictatorship to persistently operate within this country.

This study offers practical and targeted policy recommendations to address key challenges related to comprehensive military reform in Thailand, particularly in establishing effective systems of checks and balances. In addition, it aims to foster greater citizen engagement in political processes. The insights generated from this research are expected to benefit scholars, policymakers, and civil society actors seeking to advance political reform in Thailand. Furthermore, the study highlights the potential value of comparative analysis with countries that have experienced similar patterns of military intervention, thereby providing a broader foundation for informed policy development.

Objective

1. To examine how the erosion of democratic institutions and constitutional processes creates conditions conducive to recurring military intervention in Thailand.
2. To analyze the role of the absence of trusted conflict-resolution mechanisms and legitimate neutral institutions in perpetuating cycles of political crisis and military reassertion.
3. To explore how national security narratives and nationalist ideology are mobilized to legitimize and normalize military political dominance.

Literature Review

Academic analyses of authoritarian durability have recently shifted away from institutional and structural explanations and toward a more nuanced understanding of the social influences responsible for the persistence of military or military-influenced regimes. Institutional structures, including constitutional design and monitoring, can account for the formal basis for intervention, but they cannot account for the maintenance or legitimacy of military rule in the long term. Political culture, shared norms, and long-standing conceptions of authority shape public expectations of state power and order, influencing whether citizens perceive military intervention as acceptable or even desirable. Hierarchy, nationalism, identity, and elite-centered patronage networks thus constitute the socio-cultural context that renders military rule both politically viable and socially resonant. The following section examines these socio-cultural foundations in greater depth.

Socio-cultural Foundations of Military Authoritarian Regimes

The endurance of political influence or military rule in authoritarian or military-controlled states has also been generally theorized according to socio-cultural theories, which stress the role played by political culture and shared values, and elite-centered social arrangements for shaping long-term patterns of political authority. One argument of scholars working under this approach is that the cultural and social formation of political systems, far more than institutional design by itself, also have a decisive influence on the sense of power that shapes and legitimizes the concept of power and its continuity across political and social generations. As Huntington (1957) points out, constitutional documents are embedded in cultural understandings of the order and authority that undergird society as a whole, and construe constitutions as something more than written statements in law, constitutions as societal guidelines, giving expression to social expectations about the appropriate relationship between the state's central character and the violence or domination conducted by its members. Likewise, Linz & Stepan (1996) maintain that a culturally bound boundary between state authority and unelected power centres is key to the survival of democratic governance; where these cultural boundaries are tenuous, or contested authoritarian figures are given the social licence to grow their power.

Political culture theory explains how the patterns of trust, participation and civic orientation of the people create a socio-cultural milieu in which political authority operates. Almond & Verba's (1963) classic study also point out that to truly oversee is impossible without the collective social norms of accountability and civic engagement. In societies where such norms are fragile, the oversight bodies grow culturally weak, making them vulnerable to domination by the powerful. Schedler (1998) also characterizes weak courts, legislatures and auditing institutions as 'authoritarian enclaves' – a society where the habits of obedience and reduced resistance to civic authority are a social routine. Building on this argument, Pye (1966) contends that political development is inseparable from the cultural legitimacy of institutions; as long as people do not accept norms that are broadly accepted, that facilitate autonomous mechanisms for oversight, institutions will inevitably be susceptible to elite capture.

Other socio-cultural dimension which underwrites regime durability are elite networks. Scott's (1972) study of patron–client systems illustrate how long-standing hierarchies of service, duty, and equal protection become cultural norms that insinuate themselves deep into quotidian political life. Networks like this, operating under the rubric of shared expectations of mutual benefit, embed political loyalties and re-produce power structures through the

generations. In other words, elite cohesion—created by common culture/ collective interest—also sustains regime stability as dominant values are aligned among strategic groups (Lipset, 1959). As Schattschneider (1942) also notes, elite formations shape political discourses and public notions about genuine conflict and their ‘equity, making such contests a site of socially acceptable contest’. A recent study of these networks also shows the consequence of the networks: Ricks (2019) demonstrates how elite blocs, mediated by deeply rooted social relations, continue to operate on electoral scales in formal democracies.

Collectively, these studies show that socio-cultural determinants intersect in creating a sustained environment in which authoritarian- or military-mediated politics remain socially viable. Rather than seeing regime endurance as simply a technicality of institutional design, this literature illuminates the centrality of practices, hierarchies, and shared notions of authority with which we all identify. Such socio-cultural foundations thus prove a critical perspective to explore the persistence and the normalization of non-democratic systems in specific societies.

Political Factors and enduring of Military influence

Some political explanations for the longevity of authoritarian or military-led regimes point out how the nature of conflict, partisan weaknesses, and the making of legitimacy influence the shape of political space more generally. A prominent theme in the literature is political polarization, which has been widely regarded as a structural obstacle to democratic consolidation by scholars. Linz & Stepan (1996) explain that, when parties to the system are so polarized, compromise becomes harder to achieve, thus lowering elites' incentives to maintain democratic norms and resulting in a greater probability of extra-constitutional interventions. Huntington (2006) also contends that societies on the rise of political mobilization without significant institutional stability risk further conflict which can open it up to the emergence of a political vacuum, one that could be exploited by non-democratic actors — specifically the military — in order to re-establish order. So, polarization operates as a trigger that undermines the legitimacy of civil political competition and enhances the attractiveness of authoritarian “solutions.” A second theoretical problem is related to weak party systems.

Classic literature such as Schattschneider (1942) underscores that parties are fundamental to the structure of political contestation, to the accumulation of interests, and for the survival of democratic rule. But where parties are poorly institutionalized, personalistic or scattered, they don't provide stable pathways to political participation. Weak parties, Schedler (1998) claims, enable democracies to be undone, because they are unable to efficiently galvanize supporters, check executive authority, organize collective efforts vis-à-vis authoritarian invasions. Pye (1966) further observes that political development also involves organizationally unified parties that are able to organize political expectations and contain elite arbitrariness. Without these structures, the political stage is one populated by non-party actors (e.g., the military and bureaucratic authorities who can control the state more easily). The third factor that has been considered by the literature is military-manufactured legitimacy—the stories, signs, and ideological frames that armed forces use to legitimize their rule.

Huntington (1957) sees the military institution as one which generally assumes the professional responsibility of the guardianship over stability of the nation thus providing an account in which one frames membership in politics as obligation not as abnormality. Scott's (1972) expansive treatment of authority and patronage draws attention to the fact that legitimacy is shaped over social networks of obligation and loyalty which give the dominant actors power that extends even beyond formal institutions. Similarly, Lipset (1959) holds that legitimacy does not depend solely on institutional effectiveness but also on the shared beliefs among elites and the public; when the military presents itself as the arbiter of national unity or security it is perceived as having a more acceptable and durable political position. These theories illuminate that legitimacy is not inherited, but is actively constructed through rhetoric, symbolic politics and institutionalization. Political polarization, weak party systems, and military-manufactured legitimacy together constitute an entwined array of political conditions that can undermine democratic resilience and contribute to the maintenance of non-democratic rule. Such theoretical underpinning enables an analysis of how political conditions shape the persistence of regimes dominated by military rule across diverse contexts.

The theoretical literature on structural and political determinants of regime durability offers a robust basis for thinking about how regimes influenced by authoritarianism and/or the military become self-reinforcing over time. Some provide structural analysis of this development, stressing the role of constitutional design, institutional weakness, and elite cohesion in the institutional arrangements of both formal and informal regulation, and others focus on the political explanation that political contestation is only possible through polarization, fragile party systems, strategically constructed legitimacy, which are mechanisms through which actors with non-democracy can maintain authority with relatively little resistance. Across these works—from classic institutionalism to theories of democratic consolidation—a range of historical, structural, and cultural perspectives converge on a common insight: the persistence of authoritarianism is rarely attributable to a single event. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of institutional, cultural, and strategic factors that collectively constrain democratic development. Taken together, these perspectives form an integrated theoretical framework that provides a basis for understanding how such factors operate within specific national contexts, interacting to sustain enduring systems of military or authoritarian rule.

Conceptual Framework

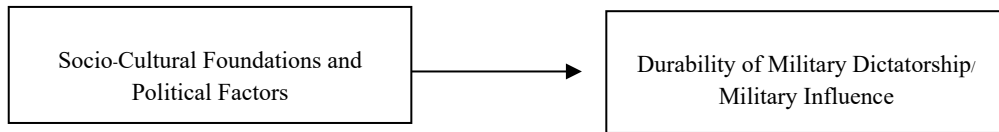


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

1. Population and Samples

The sample comprised 20 key informants consisting of 4 political science scholars specializing in Thai politics and civil–military relations, 4 legal scholars with expertise in constitutional and public law, 4 politicians with direct experience in parliamentary politics and national-level administration, 4 retired military officers with experience in national security, and 4 representatives from civil society organizations involved in democratic advocacy and political monitoring.

2. Research Instrument

A document analysis protocol and a semi-structured interview guide were employed as the primary research instruments. The methodological integration of grounded theory and phenomenology was operationalized as follows: phenomenology informed the design of the interview guide and the interpretation of participants' lived experiences of political crises and military intervention, foregrounding subjective meaning and contextual understanding. Grounded theory procedures guided the systematic analysis of data, moving from open coding through axial and selective coding to generate empirically grounded categories. In this complementary design, phenomenology served as the lens for data collection and experiential interpretation, while grounded theory provided the analytical framework for category development and theory building. To ensure conceptual consistency, the instruments were reviewed by three experts in political science and qualitative methodology through a peer review process.

3. Collection of Data

Data were collected using (1) a systematic review of constitutional texts, parliamentary documents, and academic works, in addition (2) conducted research study with the use of in-depth interviews with selected informants. The interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. All materials were bundled into analytic units for repeated coding and comparison purposes.

4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using grounded theory procedures: open coding to identify initial concepts, axial coding to establish relationships between structural, political, and socio-cultural factors, and selective coding to consolidate core categories explaining the persistence of military dictatorship. Phenomenological reflection was used to interpret participants' experiences, while triangulation across documents and interviews enhanced credibility.

5. Research Ethics

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of Phranakhon Rajabhat University prior to data collection, project number 01.005/67. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet outlining the research objectives, procedures, and their rights as informants. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information was anonymized during transcription, and pseudonyms were assigned in the reporting of findings. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and accessible only to the research team. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Result

Since its transition to constitutional democracy in 1932 with the idea that ultimate sovereign power lies with the people, Thailand's government has been deeply influenced by the military since the start. Due to its historically earlier institutionalized and more systematically developed institutions more so than other democratic institutions, the armed forces have long remained prestigious and powerful in the public imagination, perceived to be disciplined, competent, and ready to be the national leader when the civilian institutions of Thai society break down. But that prominence has come at great expense. These episodes of coup d'état and extra-constitutional action have continuously disrupted the continuity of democratic rule, solidifying a political culture that departs from universal democratic norms, and impacting the nation's standing on the world stage. In a history stretching back to the 1932 revolution, Thailand has seen thirteen successful military takeovers, each reflecting a struggle between entrenched state power and the societal appetite for meaningful political engagement. Not only have these cycles of interferences impeded the orderly establishment of democratic institutions, but they have also institutionalized military influence as a force in the state system, redrawing boundaries of laws and processes and the nature of the state's relationship with the people. Within this historical framework, the following chapter delivers the empirical findings of the study, emphasizing the factors that continue to sustain military authoritarianism.

1. Erosion of Democratic Institutions and Processes

Long-standing institutional weakness and constitutional legitimacy issues in Thailand have always determined the political development of Thailand. Since the transition in 1932, constitutional rules have been rewritten, challenged and overridden, which has produced little in the way of a broad consensus of authority. The lack of a stable and consensual constitutional order has led to a political space where adversaries constantly challenge who has ultimate decision-making authority. These underlying uncertainties further fuel the recurrent inability of elected governments to

carry out their mandate — an observation witnessed several times, such as with the brief governments in the 1990s, and the consecutive dissolutions of parliament (2006, 2013, 2014). Each dissolution, annulled election or constitutional reset disrupts executive continuity, rendering state agencies unfocused and without the necessary strategic purpose. For example, the annulment of the April 2006 election, followed by prolonged political protests, created conditions under which the executive branch was unable to function effectively. At the same time, no alternative institution possessed sufficient legitimacy to restore stable governance. Such episodes illustrate how constitutional fragility can generate abrupt political vacuums, thereby enabling non-elected actors to intervene in the political process.

Empirical evidence from the in-depth interviews corroborates these patterns. As one political scientist observed: “Every time a constitution is rewritten, people lose a piece of their faith in the system. It is not just a legal reset—it signals that the rules of the game can always be changed by those in power.” (Informant A3, political scientist)

This irregular rhythm — short parliamentary terms, cabinet instability, legislative impasse — has repeatedly undermined the slow process of institutionalization that democratic consolidation demands. Parliamentary terms in Thailand often tend to end prematurely — such as in 1992, 2006, and 2014 — interrupting the gradual strengthening of political institutions by parties and oversight bodies and parliamentary committees over time. Legislative stagnation can be particularly exposed during times of popular mobilization (for example, during the 2008 protests, which obstructed parliament from functioning as usual and during early 2014 when attempts to hold an election in general were blocked by street blockades and also because of administrative blockages). These breakdowns erode the perception of democracy's effectiveness at governing or resolution of conflict. Oversight organizations come up against the same problems. Institutions that are tasked with monitoring of executive power often function in an environment where their independence is constantly questioned. However, during cases of corruption or abuse of power, oversight institutions may have an inability to restore the public trust necessary to settle any argument decisively. High-profile cases — like the investigations ahead of the dissolution of Thai Rak Thai in 2007, the accelerated judiciary hearings against governing-party MPs in the late 2000s or the contested decisions that unseated the Samak and Yingluck administrations — drew interpretations from different political camps of whether they were legitimate accountability or politically motivated interference. Rather than resolving the matter, these institutional maneuvers occasionally intensified it, causing people to see even more of an uneven hand and less confidence in the Constitution. The return of these kinds of disputes conditions those in power to regard oversight — not as a mechanism to resolve the crisis, but only as a stage for competing factions.

In addition, the layer of institutional weakness is laid bare by the party system. There are too many parties that are unable to maintain organizational cohesion over a protracted period, and many of these parties are effectively transient coalitions of personalities or business networks rather than lasting ideological communities. This instability is evident in the fragmentation of successor parties to Thai Rak Thai following 2007, as well as in the recurrent rise and collapse of political parties—from Thai Rak Thai to the People's Power Party, Future Forward, and various smaller regional parties. Similarly, the shifting coalition arrangements of the 1990s underscore the persistent difficulty parties have faced in establishing stable identities and coherent policy platforms. Frequent leadership turnover, factionalism, and allegations of vote-buying have further undermined public trust in electoral competition, thereby weakening the perceived legitimacy of democratic processes. These structural deficiencies are particularly visible during electoral cycles. The disrupted elections of 2006 and 2014, for example, demonstrate how procedural irregularities, administrative obstruction, and political boycotts can render elections ineffective as mechanisms for conflict resolution. Ongoing concerns regarding unequal access to political resources, procedural unfairness, and pervasive vote-buying continue to erode confidence in representative institutions. Rather than consolidating democratic authority, recurring electoral controversies tend to reinforce public skepticism regarding institutional neutrality and the integrity of the political system.

Compounding such institutional weaknesses are profound social and ideological fissures. Political rivalries more and more are characterized by differing conceptions of where legitimacy, identity and authority lie. The clashes between the PAD and pro-government groups in the mid-2000s, the violent clashes between the Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt movements in 2009–2010, and the prolonged mobilizations of the PDRC in 2013–2014 illustrate how polarized societies transform institutional disputes into existential struggles. Disparities over inequality, regional identity and ideological positioning have produced a citizenry oriented more toward confrontation rather than compromise. Rather than serving the collective work of democracy, civil society becomes instead split into rival factions, each attempting to delegitimize the institutions perceived as favoring the other side. In this context, the political system allows for non-elected actors to perpetually stake a claim to being guardians of stability. The coups of 2006 and 2014 show all the ways in which the military used the collapse of institutions and the mistrust of the public to assert the power to “restore order.” The acceptance by segments of the public in 2014 — captured in media images of citizens applauding soldiers — mirrored not just political affiliation but also a deeper sense that conventional institutions had failed.

Each failure deepens the feeling that democratic mechanisms cannot cope with crises, making it progressively normalized to justify intervention as an alternative means of dealing with political dysfunctions. Together these patterns provide the background against which political order is cast, characterized by disputed constitutional foundations, fragile institutions, splintered party organizations and a deeply divided citizenry. Democratic authority, under those circumstances, is weak. When governments are unable to deliver on their promises, when oversight institutions can't guarantee neutrality and when parties can't articulate a coherent picture of stable representation, the general public doesn't regard democratic processes as vehicles for dealing with conflict; they see them instead as agents of additional instability.

At these moments, military intervention can be politically made intelligible — not only to elites, but also to a segment of the public that no longer has faith in civilian-led institutions. Constitutional fragility, institutional decay and political polarization together generate a self-reinforcing cycle: weak institutions cannot contain conflict; conflict undermines institutions even further; and each crisis creates a space in which non-elected actors can intervene. A politician with direct experience in parliamentary affairs confirmed this dynamic: “We tried to make parliament work, but every time we approached a resolution, one side would walk out or the courts would intervene. After a while, even those of us inside the system began to doubt whether civilian institutions could actually hold.”(Informant B2, politician).

Such features of political instability ultimately normalize extra-constitutional avenues of political change and, in doing so, reinforce the structural foundations for the endurance of military authoritarianism in Thailand. However, recent scholarship suggests that generational change may be gradually reshaping these dynamics. Sinpeng (2021) demonstrates that younger Thai citizens, particularly those mobilized during the 2020–2021 pro-democracy protests, exhibit significantly lower tolerance for military coups compared to older generations. Kongkirati & Kanchoochar (2018) similarly observe that digitally connected youth movements have begun to disrupt traditional patterns of deference to military authority. These findings indicate that while the structural factors sustaining military authoritarianism remain firmly in place, the sociocultural foundations of public acquiescence are gradually eroding among younger cohorts—a development that may alter the long-term trajectory of civil–military relations in Thailand.

2. The Absence of Trusted Conflict-Mediation Mechanisms and the Vacuum of a Legitimate Neutral Institution

Among the structural conditions that continue to sustain this regime of military dictatorship in Thailand is the absence of a legitimate and trusted conflict resolution instrument to redirect political disputes to the constitutional arena. Within political systems characterized by credibility and neutrality in the democratic institutions, tensions can be absorbed in the systems already existing and resolved through the methods used such that conflict can take place in the constraints of electoral processes, parliamentary agreements, or judicial arbitration. Thailand's case is the exception, not the rule. Powerful institutions — parliament, parties, the constitutional courts, independent bodies and oversight — all have been unable to come around to being objective decision-makers during various political seasons. Therefore, when crises occur, no institution has the widespread trust to negotiate a peaceful solution: The institutional vacuum that has sustained itself has continued to exist, creating patterns and pathways for the return of the military, once again as ostensibly neutral arbiter. It is obvious that the erosion of institutional legitimacy has been occurring since the mid-2000s. The 2006 election provides a clear illustration. Accused of unfair electoral advantages and an opposition boycott, the general election didn't settle the political dispute in a healthy democratic way. Rather, it was the election process itself that became controversial. Public disillusionment mounted when elections were subsequently annulled, and it hardened an impression for the establishment that constitutional remedies did not stand up to a destabilizing environment. Political tensions quickly turned into protests on a countrywide scale and a form of countermobilization, demonstrating why the lack of an accepted conflict resolution mechanism can propagate social splintering. Although there were institutions that served within their formal mandates, none enjoyed the trust of each side. This failure set the stage by which military intervention became conceivable, and eventually acceptable, to some factions. Interview data provided further empirical grounding for this finding. One academic informant observed, “Thailand lacks what I would call a political shock absorber. When crises hit, there is no institution that both sides trust enough to accept its ruling. So, every conflict escalates until someone outside the system steps in.” (Informant A1, political scientist). A legal scholar with experience in constitutional litigation reinforced this point: “We had the legal tools—constitutional courts, independent commissions, election tribunals—but none of them functioned as genuine mediators. Each ruling was immediately politicized, and the losing side treated the decision as evidence of institutional bias rather than legitimate adjudication. The legal system became part of the conflict rather than a means of resolving it.” (Informant E2, legal scholar).

A similar pattern emerged during the 2013–2014 political confrontation. As mass demonstrations escalated and counter-mobilizations intensified, parliamentary processes ceased to function as viable mechanisms for compromise. Political parties, increasingly polarized along entrenched divisions, experienced a decline in perceived legitimacy, while judicial decisions were interpreted through partisan lenses—accepted or rejected depending on political alignment. Efforts to dissolve parliament and call for new elections failed to restore public confidence. Instead, the crisis was marked by escalating violence, prolonged reliance on judicial and administrative processes, and a gradual erosion of institutional credibility. In the absence of consensus regarding which institution could effectively mediate the conflict, the political vacuum deepened. Groups aligned with the protest movement increasingly framed the situation as beyond the capacity of civilian institutions to resolve, at times implicitly and at other times explicitly advocating for external intervention. These developments signaled to the broader public that conventional political mechanisms had lost their effectiveness. This erosion of institutional authority helps explain why, when the military intervened in May 2014, segments of the population responded with relief rather than resistance. Contemporary reports noted public gatherings in which individuals expressed support for the military's actions, driven in part by shared political affiliations and, more broadly, by a perception that democratic processes had failed to resolve the crisis. The military, in turn, justified its intervention by asserting that the situation had deteriorated to a level that threatened public order and national security. Such claims were accepted by some segments of society, largely because no civilian institution was perceived as retaining sufficient legitimacy to command national trust. This pattern illustrates how the absence of credible mediation mechanisms can reinforce public perceptions of military intervention as an effective solution, despite its potential to undermine democratic governance and weaken institutional foundations over the long term.

A politician with direct experience in the 2013–2014 crisis confirmed this dynamic: “In those months, we tried every channel—parliamentary negotiation, judicial rulings, even informal dialogue behind the scenes. Nothing worked because neither side believed the mediating institution was neutral. By the end, even people who opposed the military privately admitted that no civilian solution was left on the table.”(Informant B2, politician). A retired military officer involved in national security planning offered an insider perspective: “From our position, we did not seek to intervene. But when civilian institutions collapsed and violence escalated with no resolution in sight, the military was the only organization with the capacity and discipline to restore order. Whether that was right or wrong is another question, but at the time, no one else stepped forward.”(Informant D1, retired military officer).

Thailand has seen a number of mass mobilizational movements over two decades with very different and quite polarized identities—Yellow Shirt, Red Shirt, which has ultimately morphed into the PDRC—with each claiming moral or popular legitimacy and questioning the legitimacy of the other actors or institutions. When each side sees itself as protecting the nation, the constitution, or the monarchy — while perceiving the other as fundamentally illegitimate — the opportunity of compromise evaporates. In such circumstances, neutral facilitation of institutions are made to be objects of ideological arguments. The parliament is accused of serving particular political factions; the courts are attacked as interventionist or partial; independent entities are often seen as selectively implementing the law. It removes from institutions the neutral air they need to mediate conflict. Furthermore, when institutions continually fail to address crises, collective memory solidifies expectations that it will again fail to resolve these eventual crises. The notion of civilian mechanisms as never working becomes entrenched in political behavior. In subsequent crises, those fighting sides are more likely to refuse institutional decision-making “pre-emptively”, anticipating bias before any outcome is even declared. This was evident before the 2014 election, especially with pro-government and anti-government groups alike expecting that institutions would fail to hand down a fair outcome. Political actors disentangle from procedural mechanisms when they lose faith in them—this causes an even wider decline in system function, which in turn is a self-fulfilling prophecy of institutional collapse.

Furthermore, the institutional paralysis is often driven by competition among political, economic, bureaucratic, military elites. The public loses legitimacy when factions in the ruling system drag the state institutions in opposite directions. That elite fragmentation was evident beforehand, even before the 2006 and the 2014 coups, when the divisions within state agencies and competing networks undermined the ability of institutions to function as a more cohesive or neutral force. At the same time, the public's view that the state apparatus was an agent of warring elites instead of mediating in the public interest has only solidified the narrative that civilian structures could not regain that sense of stability after a conflict. The long-term impact is the normalization of extra-constitutional intervention. When institutions are fragile and distrust proliferating, military meddling is not viewed as an aberration but rather as an ongoing corrective act. This feedback loop drives the process deeper: each coup disrupts institutional growth, and each break leaves institutions even less equipped to mediate future wars. In this regard, a lack of a trusted neutral institution is not just a matter of political instability but a core structural feature that perhaps accounts for the persistence of military dictatorship in Thailand. And when there are no institutions that can mediate, absorb, or resolve conflicts, the situation of the political system constantly escalates to confrontations that cannot be resolved by civil people. Either way, in every case, the military is in the unclaimed space at the heart of power. The political dynamics of crisis, intervention and the resurgence of authoritarian governing practices will continue to play out in Thailand as long as this institutional void, wherein no parliamentary body, court or independent agency enjoys universal legitimacy, remains a reality.

3. National Security Constructions and the Mobilization of Nationalism as Sources of Military Legitimation

Another condition that further propels and maintains the longevity of military rule in Thailand is the flexible and politically convenient framing of national security that is closely linked to nationalism. Within the context of Thailand, “national security” has been perceived to involve much more than mere external defense, encompassing internal dissent, public protests, student activism, and calls for political reform. According to such a broad definition, a number of civil society as well as political activities could be defined as a danger to the nation. This framing provides significant leeway in this regard, granting security agents—namely, the armed forces—considerable latitude to intervene in territory traditionally controlled by civilian organizations. Empirical evidence from interviews illuminated this dynamic. A political scientist explained: “The genius of the security narrative is its elasticity. Anything—student protests, constitutional amendments, even academic seminars—can be framed as a threat to national security when it suits those in power. Once that label is applied, the military no longer needs to justify intervention; the threat itself becomes the justification.” (Informant A2, political scientist). A retired military officer confirmed how this security framing operates within the institution itself: “We were trained to see the nation as a body that must be protected from internal threats. Political instability, protests, and demands for radical reform were briefed to us as symptoms of a nation under threat. That mindset does not disappear when you reach a command position.”(Informant D2, retired military officer). The narrative of security goes increasingly broad as political tension increases, and that is when a state of concern turns to militaristic justification; it can present as a preventive policy, rather than something the military needed to demonstrate as necessary to protect national unity.

The dynamics of this phenomenon are well-documented in history. Over the course of the protracted protests in 2013–2014, which eventually paralyzed Bangkok and undermined discussions between the PDRC movement and the elected government, security officials invariably framed the escalation of tensions as an existential threat that was beyond constitutional oversight. Unidentified armed groups that attacked peaceful protest sites increased public anxiety, while civilian authorities' failure to stabilize the situation became a principal justification for the military's intervention. On 22

May 2014, the armed forces invoked the urgency of restoring “peace and order” to justify the coup, characterizing their action as an inevitable result of the government's alleged failure to effectively address a national security crisis. The televised announcement described the crisis as life-threatening, chaotic, and threatening to the safety of “the entire nation”, thus constructing a moral imperative for intervention. These security narratives are amplified by nationalist sentiment portraying the military as the defender of the nation. Loyalty to the monarchy and the idea of national unity have served as a framework to shape the public's conception of legitimate authority during periods of political conflict. This was evident in the 2006 coup when the coup-makers defended their seizure of power by claiming that the elected administration was eroding national institutions and endangering the stability of the monarchy.

The Council for Democratic Reform's pronouncements stressed the importance of “protecting the monarchy” and defending national integrity as well as suggested that civilian rule had failed to protect the nation. Such appeals resonate powerfully with sectors of the public for whom nationalism is intimately linked with respect for the monarchy and disillusionment with political diversity. A politician who witnessed the deployment of nationalist rhetoric during both the 2006 and 2014 coups confirmed this pattern: “When the military invokes the monarchy and national unity, it is almost impossible to argue against them publicly. Anyone who questions the intervention is immediately labeled as disloyal to the nation. That framing silences not just activists but even politicians who privately disagree with the coup.” (Informant B1, politician). A constitutional law scholar provided a legal perspective on this dynamic: “The broad and undefined scope of national security in Thai law is itself the problem. When security is not clearly delineated in constitutional terms, it becomes a blank cheque that any authority can invoke. There is no effective legal boundary between legitimate security concerns and political convenience, which means the military can always find a legal pretext for intervention.” (Informant E1, legal scholar) This intersection of security narratives and nationalist discourse is also manifest in civic life. Dissent—a demand for constitutional reform, a call for decentralization, a challenge to entrenched institutions—tends to be characterized as a threat to national unity. In times of reformist mobilization, opponents of change often portray protesters as undermining the nation itself, creating a moral panic that elevates the military to the position of the sole institution able to protect the state. This framing is reinforced when civilian governments do not have the capacity to respond decisively to crises; under those circumstances, certain segments of the public begin to view military intervention as a necessary and legitimate corrective. The coup in 2014 was accompanied by displays of public approval, with some protest groups openly praising the military's takeover as the only viable solution to restoring order and protecting national integrity.

Such patterns point to a broader structural phenomenon: a political environment in which national security and nationalism become indistinguishable, which gives the military a basis to cast itself both as protector and arbiter of political order. If national security is no longer viewed as a matter of protecting democratic institutions but as preserving social harmony or public order on behalf of the state—that is, as a national emergency that demands extraordinary intervention—then any political conflict can be reframed as an emergency. Civilian officials, already constrained by weak institutions and limited legitimacy, are poorly positioned to confront these narratives. Thus, security discourse serves as a mechanism by which the military's political power becomes legitimized through its repeated assumption of authority, reinforced by a combination of social consensus within certain segments of society. The cumulative effect of national security discourse and nationalist ideology ultimately establishes a self-perpetuating cycle in which military intervention is normative. The military, by characterizing threats in broadly resonant terms and invoking patriotic sentiment, obtains a lasting source of legitimacy that civilian institutions are not capable of effectively challenging. This is how coups become possible, and how the military retains its enduring hold over the political order, perpetuating structural conditions that make it difficult to consolidate democratic governance and maintaining the notion of military guardianship over the nation's political life.

The three sets of findings do not operate in isolation but form a mutually reinforcing cycle. Institutional fragility creates governance vacuums that cannot be resolved through legitimate mediation, as no institution commands sufficient public trust. This mediation vacuum escalates crises to the point where security narratives become persuasive, enabling the military to justify intervention. Each intervention then further weakens democratic institutions, perpetuating the cycle. To synthesize these dynamics, a conceptual model was developed inductively through selective coding and validated through triangulation of documentary and interview data (Figure 2).

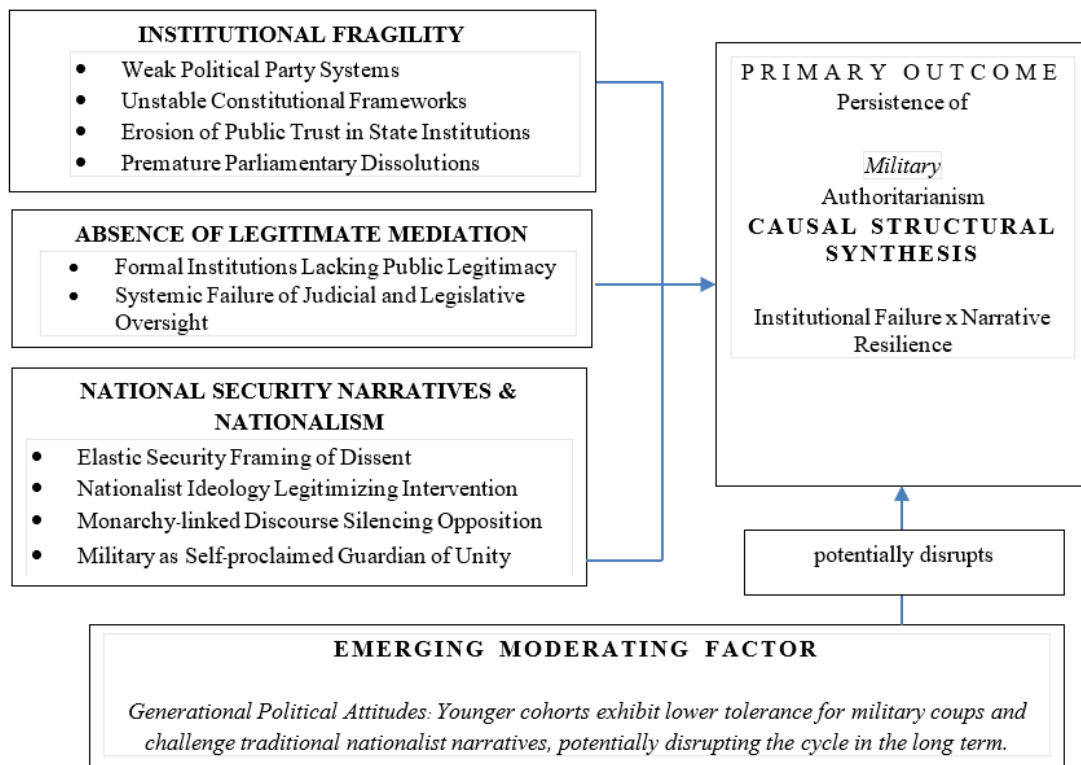


Figure 2 Conceptual Model: Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Military Authoritarianism in Thailand

The model illustrates the causal structural synthesis of military authoritarianism in Thailand. The three factors on the left—institutional fragility, absence of legitimate mediation, and national security narratives combined with nationalism—each contribute directly to the primary outcome: the persistence of military authoritarianism, driven by the interaction between institutional failure and narrative resilience. All three factors converge upon this outcome through separate but reinforcing causal pathways, indicating that the persistence of military rule is produced not by any single determinant but by their compounding effect. However, generational political attitudes are identified as an emerging moderating factor that potentially disrupts the cycle. This reflects evidence that younger cohorts increasingly challenge traditional nationalist narratives and exhibit lower tolerance for military coups (Sinpeng, 2021; Kongkirati & Kanchoochat, 2018). The upward dashed arrow from this factor to the primary outcome indicates that generational shifts may weaken the legitimacy foundations upon which military authoritarianism rests. However, this moderating influence remains emergent rather than fully realized; the structural conditions sustaining the cycle are still firmly in place.

Discussion

As noted earlier in this study, the continued occurrence of military authoritarianism in Thailand cannot simply be traced to episodic political crises but rather has its roots in deep-seated structural, political, and socio-cultural conditions that reproduce opportunities for military intervention on a non-stop basis. There is clear evidence of the absence of legitimacy and capacity of Thailand's constitutional and oversight institutions to restrain or regulate executive authority or extra-constitutional actors. This trend echoes Suwanprasith's (1997) claim that constitutional arrangements of political periods have sustained nebulous power blocs, allowing unelected actors—especially the military—to maintain influence behind formal systems. These results corroborate the assertion of Almond & Verba (1963) and Schedler (1998), that organizations deprived of civic legitimacy or societal legitimacy operate on symbolic rather than functional ground. In similar manner, Sereerungsan's (2020) concept of Thailand as an "electrical circuit" lacking insulators articulates the chronic malfunction of parliament, courts, political parties, and oversight agencies that results in gridlock, loss of trust and political space for the military.

The findings also suggest that political polarization and elite cleavages are entrenched causes of institutional dysfunction. Huntington (2006) proposed that political decay happens when mobilization moves beyond institutionalization, which is evidenced in Thailand's series of cyclical mass protests, legislative inaction, and bureaucratic deadlock. Rekkalap's (2008) research on intra-elite conflict also finds that competition among political, bureaucratic, and military blocs has led to a series of weakened civilian governments that have made them vulnerable to military intervention. Indeed, Detwattanayotin (2022) notes that successive coups in Thailand have arisen from the structural domination of the armed forces over civilian institutions that are still competing against them in terms of organizational development and resource advantages. These findings together support the conclusion that unresolved structural fault lines and elite contestation systematically generate openings for military intervention. Apart from the

factors of structure and politics, sociocultural orientations are critical to maintaining military rule. The results indicate that certain segments of society accept military involvement in times of crisis as a legitimate response, a characteristic that aligns with Almond & Verba's (1963) theory of subject political culture. This interpretation is supported by another piece of evidence that Niyomwetch (2016) supports: People used to power structures with hierarchical authority tend to see the military as a neutral and reliable dispenser of legitimacy when civilian institutions are perceived as dysfunctional. (Henry et al.'s, 2015) finding that democratic idealism can coexist with a willingness to strong military guardianship is another indication of how cultural predispositions serve to intensify legitimacy gaps in civilian institutions.

The results also echo closely with Thinbangtiao's (2020) critique of the NCPO's power-grabbing through an 'authoritarianism clothed in democratic legitimacy', hinting at purposeful plans to concentrate decision-making, moralize governance, and institutionalize military power within legal norms and systems of governance. His findings lend support to the argument in this study in that institutional weakness is not a legacy but can be reproduced by a new order of mechanisms that reshape political legitimacy. And finally, the role of nationalism and security discourse emerges as a vital mechanism for legitimizing military intervention. This dynamic is compatible with both Huntington's (1957) idea of the military as a custodian entity, and Pye's (1966) finding that political development stalls when security interests take precedence over normative democratic norms. And the results closely correspond with Baker's (2016) discussion of the 2014 coup that highlighted the ways the military has drawn upon long-standing themes of national solidarity, risks against the monarchy and societal unrest to rationalize its involvement. Baker demonstrates how these narratives are not coincidental, but are historically built-in rhetorical frames through which the military can masquerade as the defender and the reformer. His narrative supports the conclusion of this paper that nationalist and security-oriented narratives act as a lasting source of legitimacy for military authoritarianism in Thailand.

Nevertheless, alternative explanations merit consideration. Some scholars argue that the persistence of military authoritarianism in Thailand is driven primarily by economic interests, whereby military elites maintain political power to protect extensive business networks and budgetary autonomy (Hewison, 2014). Others emphasize the role of monarchical legitimation, contending that the military's close institutional relationship with the monarchy provides a unique source of authority that transcends the structural and sociocultural factors examined in this study (Chambers & Waitookiat, 2016). While these explanations are not incompatible with the findings presented here, this study's focus on the interplay of institutional erosion, mediation vacuums, and security narratives offers a complementary rather than competing framework. Future research may benefit from integrating economic and monarchical dimensions into the model to produce a more comprehensive account.

Comparative cases from the region further contextualize these findings. Myanmar's military has similarly employed national security and ethnic unity narratives to justify prolonged authoritarian rule, and the absence of credible civilian institutions has perpetuated a cycle of intervention strikingly parallel to Thailand's experience (Bunte, 2022). In Pakistan, the military's self-constructed role as guardian of national integrity, combined with weak party systems and recurring constitutional crises, mirrors several structural conditions identified in this study (Siddiq, 2007; Shah, 2014). However, notable differences exist: Myanmar's military exercises direct economic control to a degree unmatched in Thailand, while Pakistan's federal and ethno-linguistic complexities introduce additional fracture lines absent in the Thai context. These comparisons suggest that while the mutually reinforcing cycle identified in this study may represent a broader pattern in military-dominated polities, the specific configuration and relative weight of each factor vary across national contexts.

Limitation

Two limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative nature of the research and the relatively small number of interview participants limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, although the study incorporates perspectives from multiple sectors, the analysis primarily reflects elite-level interpretations of political developments. Future research may benefit from incorporating broader survey data to examine public attitudes toward military intervention across different social groups.

Suggestions

1. A constitution drafted through genuine public consensus should be pursued to restore political legitimacy to state institutions and ensure that the foundations of authority derive from the collective will of the people. Such a process would strengthen democratic credibility and reduce contestation over the source of political power.

2. A widely accepted system of checks and balances and conflict-management mechanisms should be established to ensure that political disputes can be resolved through trusted, constitutional procedures. Creating neutral and credible institutions for mediation would help prevent crises from escalating into extra-constitutional interventions.

3. Policies aimed at reducing inequality, promoting fairness, and strengthening social cohesion should be prioritized to address structural grievances that contribute to political division. Enhancing social justice and inclusive development would help rebuild public trust and reinforce the stability of democratic governance.

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Author

Wisetchai

Email

shanasuck@pnru.ac.th

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