

Impurifying Thaksin: The Politics of Elite Desecularization in Thailand

Mathis Lohatepanont

UC Berkeley Political Science

**Council on Thai Studies 2020 — Best Undergraduate Paper Award**

## I. Introduction

Why have Thailand's elites driven state desecularization since the 1990s? In this paper, I argue that the rise of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra since 2001 posed a threat to the power of the conservative Thai establishment. This led to the promotion of desecularizing processes which bolstered the moral authority and political legitimacy of establishment leaders while simultaneously "impurifying" the religious standing of Thaksin and his allies.

I define desecularization using the conceptual framework developed by Vyacheslav Karpov, as a process in which "religion reasserts its societal influence in reaction to previous...secularizing processes"<sup>1</sup>. In Thailand's public sphere, desecularization has taken many forms. Successive iterations of the constitution since the 1997 constitution has included progressively stronger language on the patronage of Buddhism, the share of the budget devoted to the civil service's religious bureaucracy has increased since the 1990s<sup>2</sup> and there is even tacit state support for non-Buddhist folk beliefs<sup>3</sup>.

Where the pressure to desecularize came from is not immediately obvious. Firstly, desecularization would imply an increase in religiosity, but the reverse seems to have been the case, with the number of Buddhist monks decreasing by half in the last thirty years. Secondly, this development has arisen despite few immediate threats to Buddhism as 94% of Thais are Buddhist. Instead, this risks provoking greater discontent in the restive Muslim provinces. Although the three southernmost provinces voted in referenda to accept the 2007 constitution, they rejected the 2017 constitution, which included a clause specifying state patronage for Theravada Buddhism<sup>4</sup>. Third,

---

<sup>1</sup> Vyacheslav Karpov, "Desecularization: A Conceptual Framework." (Journal of Church and State 52, no. 2): 250.

<sup>2</sup> Tomas Larsson, "The Political Economy of State Patronage of Religion: Evidence from Thailand." (International Political Science Review 40, no. 4, 2018): 576-90.

<sup>3</sup> Peter A. Jackson, "The Supernaturalization of Thai Political Culture: Thailand's Magical Stamps of Approval at the Nexus of Media, Market and State." (Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia 31, no. 3, 2016): 826-739.

<sup>4</sup> Eugénie Mérieau, "Buddhist Constitutionalism in Thailand: When Rājadharmā Supersedes the Constitution." (Asian Journal of Comparative Law 13, no. 2): 297.

given that events leading up to the 1932 revolution had led to the steady secularization of the state — secular law based on Western models replaced old Buddhist codes, and the first constitution made no mention of Buddhism<sup>5</sup> — that desecularization should now be occurring, especially in the early 1990s to the present day, is a puzzle.

I begin this paper with a literature review, surveying the body of scholarship on religious politics and desecularization in Thailand. I have chosen to organize the available scholarship into three main groups. Firstly, I review the literature on religious legitimacy and how the state has been pressured to desecularize in order to protect the position of Theravada Buddhism in Thai society and ensure that it still maintains moral authority. This body of literature focuses overtly on politics as a servant of religion. Secondly, I review the body of literature on legal legitimacy, which explores the relationship between Buddhist concepts and Thai legal thought since the 1932 revolution. I find that this grouping does not shed enough light on the political causes of desecularization. Finally, I analyze the literature on political legitimacy, which discusses the use of Buddhism by political actors to build up their own political stature and legitimacy. I propose that this grouping has the most explanatory power and I explain how I use further extend this line of argument to directly address desecularization.

Afterwards, I outline my argument that the rise of Thaksin was a key catalyst that prompted state desecularization. Thaksin's personal popularity with his rural base and efforts to establish his own independent power network threatened what Duncan McCargo terms a "network monarchy." This was a network of conservative actors including the Privy Council, military and royalist establishment politicians. Thaksin's threat forced the establishment it to lean towards traditional forms of legitimacy to buttress their own position. To counter Thaksin's democratic legitimacy, members of the network monarchy built up a perception that he is a uniquely immoral politician who did not fit into the mold of a "good person" who upholds Buddhist morals. By tying Thaksin to

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 286.

the notion of moral bankruptcy while buttressing their own religious legitimacy, the establishment used desecularization to protect their own political standing vis-a-vis Thaksin.

In the next section, I conduct an analysis of how Thaksin was painted as a religious threat; in other words the “politics of impurification” surrounding Thaksin. Political “purification” is a concept I borrow from Tomas Larsson, although I invert it to show religion can be used to not only bolster but also damage the standing of political leaders. Firstly, I discuss how Thaksin’s enemies accused him of seeking to overthrow the monarchy, which was sacrilegious due to the religiously charged nature of the throne. Secondly, I analyze the links between Thaksin and the Dhammakaya sect, which provided fodder to his opponents who were able to demonstrate that Thaksin was a threat to mainstream Theravada Buddhism. I also examine the case that Thaksin was accused of being extremely corrupt and thus an immoral person.

I then discuss the methods in which moralist and religious politics were used as a roadblock to ensure Thaksin could not return to power, while simultaneously bolstering the moral authority of establishment leaders. I do this first by analyzing the 2015 draft constitution and legal mechanisms it was supposed to introduce, such as the National Morals Assembly. I then discuss the rhetoric of “good people” and how this was used to turn people against Thaksin. I then turn to state patronage of Theravada Buddhism under the National Council for Peace and Order (the military junta which overthrew former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra). I also look at these tools’ effectiveness.

Finally, I examine other Thai political leaders who achieved high office or a mass following since the 1990s to evaluate whether they also prompted similar desecularizing processes. I choose two leaders: Banharn Silpa-archa and Chamlong Srimuang. I find that Banharn was seen as morally corrupt but did not pose a threat to the elites, and thus did not prompt desecularization. Chamlong, on the other hand, prompted secularization to a lower degree but was subject to the same moralist rhetoric. Overall, these case studies help shed light on the proposition that rise of leaders who were threats to the Thai conservative traditional establishment led to desecularization.

In the final section of my paper, I provide a summary of my argument and evidence. I also discuss the limitations of my argument, such as its inability to explain all aspects of desecularization. Finally, I discuss next steps, including using quantitative surveys to garner further evidence and conducting a more in-depth study of the effects of the rise of the Future Forward Party in 2019.

## **II. Literature Review**

### *Literature overview*

This literature review examines the existing scholarship on religious politics and moral authority in Thailand. In this section, I argue that explaining desecularization in Thailand through the lens of political legitimacy has the most explanatory power. I begin this section by discussing the three groups of literature that I have selected: religious legitimacy, legal legitimacy and political legitimacy. Finally, I evaluate the literature as a whole and show how my argument will build on the body of literature on political legitimacy.

In conducting this literature review, I have chosen to organize the available scholarship into three main groups. The first discusses how desecularization has been used to build what I have chosen to call religious legitimacy. With heightened concerns that Buddhism is in decline due to a variety of reasons, many interest groups have pressured the state to further desecularize in order to protect the religion and ensure that Buddhism continues to be a morally legitimate force in society. A limitation of this group is its focus on politics as a tool to further religious legitimation rather than the reverse. The second body of literature explores the extent to which Thai law and constitutional thought have been affected by desecularization, showing that Buddhist concepts have been used to justify legal decisions that are not necessarily in line with the post-1932 Westernization and secularization of law. One of this group's pitfalls is that it lacks explanatory power in showing why legal desecularization occurred without a larger focus on politics. The third group of literature argues that Buddhism has been used as a political tool, co-opted by the Thai state as a legitimating

force, which provides a motivation to desecularize. While this body of scholarship provides a powerful line of reasoning for desecularization since 1997, it tends to treat Buddhism as a monolithic force and has too narrow a focus on political rhetoric and elite machinations.

#### *A. Religious legitimacy*

This first group of scholars argues that there is a popular perception that Buddhism is in a state of disarray and decline in Thailand. As such, in order to arrest this slide into impurity, the state has a pressing need to reassert control over the Thai sangha (the Buddhist monastic order), deviant sects and even non-Buddhist beliefs — in effect decreasing the separation between church and state.

The relationship between the Buddhism and the state is discussed by Yoneo Ishii, who emphasizes that the Thai state has tightly regulated the monastic order<sup>6</sup>. Prime Minister Plaek Phibulsongkram tried to democratize the sangha but this led to intensifying sectarian disputes, leading Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat to pass the Buddhist Order Act of 1962, which reasserted the authority of the Thai Supreme Patriarch and in turn consolidated the power of the state over the Buddhist church.

Duncan McCargo (2012) shows that divisions within Thai Buddhism, both sectarian (between the Thammayut and Mahanikai sects) and secular (between Thailand's key political camps of yellow and red), have continued to the present day<sup>7</sup>. The aging sangha supreme council is unable to provide moral leadership, including an inability to enforce the ban on monks engaging in political activity, allowing many monks to openly express their sympathies for the anti-establishment red shirt movement; many of these red monks played key roles in campaigns to make Buddhism Thailand's state religion.

---

<sup>6</sup> Yoneo Ishii, "Church and State in Thailand." *Asian Survey* 8, no. 10 (1968): 864–71.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan McCargo, "The Changing Politics Of Thailand's Buddhist Order." *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2012): 627–42.

McCargo also argues in another piece (2009) that a sense of Buddhist marginalization and encirclement in Thailand's Muslim southernmost provinces has led to an increase in chauvinism and intolerance<sup>8</sup>. He notes that at the same time that Buddhist communities in the south responded to the perceived Muslim threat by arming themselves, the Pattani Sangha Council called for Buddhism to become Thailand's national religion, thus showing that the fear of Buddhism being swallowed by Islam may be driving the process of desecularization in Thailand.

Like McCargo, Arnaud Dubus documents how the *sangha* has been affected by political division in Thai society, but he also extensively explores how deviant sects such as the Dhammakya temple and the Santi Asoke movement outside of the sangha hierarchy have become increasingly popular and gained large followings<sup>9</sup>. Dubus shows that the influence of these influential groups, when juxtaposed with the sangha's weakening, creates a sense of insecurity that has led to a push to strengthen Buddhism's link with the state and to redefine Buddhism in increasingly narrow terms.

This body of literature has powerful explanatory power in that it shows how religious legitimacy, or more accurately a sense of decline in religious legitimacy, has driven the state's need to desecularize. Echoed across all the works are similar themes of sectarian division within the sangha, the growth of non-mainstream groups outside of the official state-sanctioned Buddhist hierarchy, and the increasing loss of faith in the monastic leadership by monks lower in the religious pecking order. Conflict, whether between Thammayut and Mahanikai or between establishment and reformist groups, has contributed to an increasing sense that Buddhism was in the decline and required greater state support in order to retain its religious legitimacy.

However, in this discussion of desecularization, one limitation of this group of scholarship is its overt focus on political actors as a tool of religion — there is extensive discussion of religious actors attempting to influence politics in order to “purify” Buddhism, but ignores the reverse

---

<sup>8</sup> Duncan McCargo. “The Politics of Buddhist Identity in Thailand's Deep South: The Demise of Civil Religion?” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 1 (July 2009): 11–32.

<sup>9</sup> Arnaud Dubus. *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*. Bangkok: IRASEC, 2017.

relationship of religion being used as a tool of the state. This is an important distinction because of the questions it raises regarding the motivations of political actors. Were they driving to desecularize primarily because they were guided by religious fervor, or was religious fervor a useful mechanism in an arsenal of weaponry to be deployed against political rivals? Given that there are likely to be electoral rewards for pursuing desecularization — to be accused of heretical religious activity is more likely to harm than to hurt a politician — more secular motivating principles cannot be ignored. In particular, this scholarship would be, when used to answer this particular question of desecularization, strengthened if it also studied whether or not there are electoral rewards to attempts to reverse religious decline, as this would be a more compelling motive than yearning for religious purity alone.

### *B. Legal legitimacy*

A number of scholars have discussed desecularization in the context of Thai law, showing that Buddhism has been reintegrated into constitutional thought and legal doctrine. This can be seen as a desecularizing effect as it reverses the secularization achieved in 1932 by removing Buddhist references from Thailand's first constitution.

Ran Hirschl, in a comparative study of religion and constitutional law, explains that there are three main configurations of state-religion relations in Asia: constitution secularism co-existing with religious pluralism, preferential constitutional treatment of a particular religion, and varieties of Islamic constitutionalism<sup>10</sup>. Hirschl notes that Thailand, despite not establishing Buddhism as the state religion, has clearly patronized Buddhism through constitutional provisions that enshrine the special status of Buddhism.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ran Hirschl, "Comparative Constitutional Law and Religion in Asia." *Comparative Constitutional Law in Asia*.

Tomas Larsson argues that despite the clear distinction in Theravada Buddhism between the religious and the secular, state ideology has ensured that the secular remains dominated by the religious<sup>11</sup>. This has had implications for legal thinking: royalism, for example, has been infused with conceptions of Buddhist virtue, ensuring that royal disrespect is punished harshly, while public policy frameworks have been merged with Buddhist concepts.

Similarly, Eugénie Méribeau demonstrates that despite the abandonment of references to *dharma* in Thai law, Thai constitutional discourse still draws heavily from Buddhist doctrine, especially in support of royal prerogatives<sup>12</sup>. This coincided with the increasing endorsement of Buddhism in successive constitutions, culminating in the enshrinement of Theravada Buddhism specifically as a favored religion in the 2017 constitution.

Björn Dressel draws upon Thailand's traditional trinity of state institutions — nation, religion and monarchy — to argue that these elements constitute an inviolable state ideology that have been used to undermine democracy and the rule of law<sup>13</sup>. He illustrates how Buddhism has increasingly permeated the discourse on the rule of law with a discussion on the debate over whether to translate the rule of law as *nitirat* or *nititham*; *nititham*, with its strong Buddhist connotations was eventually favored over *nitirat*.

This body of literature makes it extremely clear that desecularization has affected multiple facets of legal thought in Thailand, ranging from the limits of constitutionalism to the concept of good governance. Such desecularization often conflicts with other paradigms of secular legal thought, as is illustrated by the juxtaposition of the secular *nitirat* and the Buddhist *nititham*. It also shows how constitutions have been used to convey preferential treatment for Theravada Buddhism.

---

<sup>11</sup> Tomas Larsson, "Secularisation, Secularism, and the Thai State." *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, 2019: 278–90.

<sup>12</sup> Méribeau, "Buddhist Constitutionalism in Thailand": 283-305.

<sup>13</sup> Björn Dressel, "Thailand's Traditional Trinity and the Rule of Law: Can They Coexist?" *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (2018): 268–85.

While these pieces are very useful in demonstrating how desecularization is occurring in Thai law, their explanatory power for why this desecularization has occurred is limited without being read in conjunction with other works less focused on legal theory. From a strictly legal perspective, it can be seen that Thai law has increasingly endorsed Buddhism and drawn on Buddhist concepts such as dharma, often to justify political priorities such as royal authority and rule by law. Yet a fuller picture of why these priorities are necessary can only emerge with a fuller analysis of the political context in which legal desecularization has been situated. It is also unclear from this literature alone whether these theoretical legal arguments have had a wider desecularizing effect on other parts of areas of politics and society, and thus a more integrative approach will be needed.

### *C. Political legitimacy*

This body of literature delves into the connection between Thailand's political turmoil in the late 1990s and the early 21st century to religion. With a sense, at least amongst a segment of the population, that politicians lack in virtue and morality and that only "good people" can rule, Buddhist beliefs have been used to reinforce political legitimacy. Some scholars have also noted that even non-Buddhist beliefs are being co-opted by the state for the purposes of strengthening political legitimacy.

Larsson explores how funding for Thailand's religious bureaucracy has increased by three hundred percent between 1989 and 2008<sup>14</sup>. He notes that interestingly, expenditure on the religious bureaucracy has seen the most significant increases under democratic governments, while sharp falls can be seen under authoritarian governments, indicating that elected governments must demonstrate greater support for religion in order to shore up their electoral support.

---

<sup>14</sup> Larsson, "The Political Economy of State Patronage of Religion": 576–90.

Aim Sinpeng argues that a behavioralist approach to reform has dominated Thai political discourse, especially after the ascension to power of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was seen by his opponents as incomparably corrupt<sup>15</sup>. This led to the rise in the discourse of “dharmic democracy” and a perception that Thaksin had to be opposed not merely for secular reasons, but because of his innate immorality.

However, Thaksin Shinawatra himself was prone to usage of religious rhetoric to affirm his Buddhist credentials and hence his Buddhist legitimacy, according to Chris Baker and Pasuk Pongpaichit<sup>16</sup>. They show that Thaksin often cited Buddhist thinkers such as Buddhadasa in support of his own political agenda to create an apolitical society that would not question his authoritarian style of leadership.

Peter Jackson demonstrates that Buddhism was not the only religion to be co-opted by the state for the purposes of political legitimacy; prosperity cults and supernatural thought were also given greater political support by the state<sup>17</sup>. This shows that the state remains the ultimate arbiter of what is considered mainstream belief, and that the power of these supernatural beliefs can be harnessed to enhance the monarchy’s charismatic authority.

This grouping has excellent explanatory power in that it clearly makes the link between how religion has been co-opted to serve political purposes, which drives along the process of desecularization. It also takes into account the effects of various developments in Thailand’s politics and economy since the dawn of the 21st century; for example, Jackson’s discussion of prosperity cults draws upon the effects of economic growth and the new power of broadcast media, while Sinpeng links the rise in Buddhist rhetoric to the polarization that has afflicted Thailand since Thaksin’s ascension to the premiership.

---

<sup>15</sup> Aim Sinpeng, “Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand.” *Asian Politics & Policy* 6, no. 4 (2014): 523-538.

<sup>16</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit, and Chris Baker. *Thaksin*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> Jackson, “The Supernaturalization of Thai Political Culture.”: 826-739.

However, there are also limitations to this body of work. Firstly, many of these authors tend to treat Buddhism as a monolithic legitimating force when other works of scholarship have shown that Buddhism in Thailand is diverse. This matters in the context of desecularization because we need to know which Buddhist groups exactly were favored so that we are better able to explain the root of why that form of desecularization occurred. One way to further extend the analysis of how Buddhism has become a legitimating factor in politics is to analyze how some sects of Buddhism in Thailand has provided greater legitimacy over others, which are perceived as heretical.

In addition, this body of literature has focused mainly on rhetoric, symbolism and state expenditure. It would also be helpful to address the purposes of legal desecularization, particularly how patronage of Buddhism in the Thai constitution may have helped shore up the political legitimacy of the government. Finally, more analysis on the popular response to desecularization would be helpful in determining whether or not there is legitimate reason to believe that what we perceive as desecularization has had the intended effect in terms of building political legitimacy.

### *Literature evaluation*

Together, the body of scholarship that has been reviewed is able to explain quite clearly how desecularization has helped enhance legitimacy in various forms: the religious legitimacy of establishment Buddhism, the legal legitimacy of Thai constitutional thought and the political legitimacy of the state, individual politicians and the monarchy. Both the use of the state as a tool of religion, and the use of religion as a tool of the state are addressed in the literature.

However, there remains some important gaps in this literature when analyzing them in the context of desecularization. In their own way, the three groups of literature have focuses that make a bigger picture understanding more difficult. The literature on religious legitimacy focuses on politics as a servant of religion, with less discussion of religion as a tool of politics. Those on legal legitimacy lack enough focus on the political conditions that led to legal desecularization. Finally,

the literature on political legitimacy, while powerful, is limited by its tendency to treat Buddhism as a monolithic force and its narrow focus on rhetoric and elite machinations, while ignoring popular responses.

This literature is often limited in its ability to help us understand desecularization is because most of the literature was not written with the intention of directly addressing the desecularization of the Thai state. The result is that while they have some explanatory power, a single, cohesive view of desecularization has not yet emerged. Why is this the case? One reason for this lack of scholarly study could be that it is not immediately obvious that Thailand has desecularized — instead, *secularization* seems to have happened at the popular level as religiosity has fallen. But the fact that desecularization at the elite level has occurred as previously explained in the introduction shows why a fuller discussion of desecularization is needed.

I believe that the literature on political legitimacy has the most explanatory power in determining why elites chose to initiate desecularization processes. Sinpeng's piece on the discourse of corruption was especially useful as it provided a specific cause for desecularization: Thaksin Shinawatra. As such, I believe that a further extension of this analysis in terms of moral authority and a deeper dive into how Thailand's polarization since the emergence of Thaksin Shinawatra to the political scene in the early 2000s would do much to help answer the question of what has pushed along desecularization since the 1990s. This is an argument which I will elaborate further on in the next section.

### **III. Thaksin and the Network Monarchy**

I argue that one of the main driving factors of elite desecularization in Thailand was the ascension to power of Thaksin Shinawatra, which proved to be a threat to the Thai establishment. I begin this section with historical context about the nature of Thailand's conservative establishment and network monarchy. I then outline how Thaksin posed a threat to this preexisting balance of

power. Finally, I explain the use of the politics of purification and impurification in order to legitimate and delegitimize political actors in Thailand.

From 1980 onwards, the Thai state is best conceptualized as a “network monarchy”, according to Duncan McCargo. The monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, acted as the “ultimate arbiter of political decisions in times of crisis” and “the primary source of national legitimacy”<sup>18</sup>. McCargo argues that although the king did not rule directly, as the absolute monarchy had been transitioned to a constitutional monarchy in 1932, he was able to exert decisive influence in politics via a number of royalist proxies such as the Privy Council and the military. Prem Tinsulanonda, who became President of the Privy Council after serving as prime minister, was a key figure in this system. He “served effectively as Thailand’s ‘director of human resources’, masterminding appointments, transfers and promotions”<sup>19</sup>. While this power was never absolute, the establishment was still able to influence politics subtly but effectively .

This balance of power was upset, however, with the rise of the billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin became prime minister after defeating the governing Democrat Party, which had been tarnished by its administration of the IMF-backed austerity policies in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, at the 2001 election. Unlike previous elected premiers, Thaksin became an enduring influence in Thai politics. Despite his overthrow in a military coup in 2006, he remained a key political player, with pro-Thaksin governments winning elections again in 2008 and 2011. Although it was known that there were previous leaders in the past who had not been especially favored by the palace, Thaksin’s political longevity came to represent a unique threat to the conservative establishment as he sought to establish his own independent power base. This

---

<sup>18</sup> Duncan McCargo, “Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand.” *The Pacific Review*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2005: 501.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 506.

“eventually brought the whole array of conservative, hierarchical, and authoritarian forces together in opposition to Thaksin personally and to his government”<sup>20</sup>.

The causes for opposition to Thaksin were twofold. Firstly, Thaksin was (and remains) extremely popular in the less affluent northern and northeastern regions of Thailand, where proposed policies such as universal healthcare and a debt moratorium for farmers resonated. Thaksin’s popularity was not merely the product of a honeymoon era; instead he became the first Thai prime minister in history to be re-elected. The development of this personal popularity represented a challenge to the network monarchy’s own charismatic authority<sup>21</sup>. Secondly, Thaksin aggressively consolidated power and attempted to establish a power base independent of the network monarchy. Although the 1997 constitution had attempted to provide a check on the power of elected politicians, Thaksin succeeded in neutering the power of independent organizations that were meant to provide oversight over the executive, providing him with overweening power. Thaksin “set about systematically to dismantle the political networks loyal to Prem in a wide range of sectors, aiming to replace them with his own supporters, associates and relatives”<sup>22</sup>. For example, he meddled in military reshuffles by promoting relatives and allies in an attempt to turn the army into a Thaksinite power base, which represented a challenge to Prem’s authority<sup>23</sup>.

However, the conservative establishment was disadvantaged while seeking to oppose Thaksin in that Thaksin always had electoral legitimacy conferred upon him by repeated victories at the ballot box. The opposition Democrat Party proved repeatedly inept at winning elections and provided no serious challenge to Thaksin’s parties. Thus a dilemma emerged: Thaksin was unacceptable to the conservative elite, but remained far too popular with large swathes of the electorate to be dislodged. Therefore, the establishment was left seeking alternative ways to bring

---

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Hewinson, “Thaksin Shinawatra and the Reshaping of Thai Politics.” *Contemporary Politics*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2010: 128.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> McCargo, “Network Monarchy”, 512.

<sup>23</sup> McCargo and Pathmanand. *The Thaksinization of Thailand*, 137.

him down, culminating in a military coup in 2006 against Thaksin, another coup in 2014 against his sister (who was elected premier in 2011), and other judicial interventions that felled two other pro-Thaksin prime ministers. But coups, military or judicial, suffer from the disadvantage of reeking of illegitimacy; since the 1990s, elections had acquired greater sanctity as a legitimating process<sup>24</sup>. Thus, absent the aura of righteousness provided by election victories, traditional concepts of moral authority and Buddhist religious legitimacy were used to legitimate the actions of anti-Thaksin forces.

This use of moral authority occurred in two ways. Firstly, there was the use of religion and moralism to legitimate the establishment. In a forthcoming piece on the royal succession, Tomas Larsson describes what he terms the “purifying” purpose of the Thai sangha. The case study he uses is how King Vajiralongkorn, since his ascension to the throne in 2016, has sought to build his moral authority by purifying the sangha of what is perceived as its corrupt elements, which can then in turn be used to purify his rule as well<sup>25</sup>. I borrow this concept and extend it to pre-coronation politics: there were similar efforts to “purify”, or strengthen the moral authority of anti-Thaksin forces. Examples of this have been documented in the literature review: efforts to increase state patronage of Buddhism, counter the rise of deviant Buddhist sects and even promote acceptable non-Buddhist religious beliefs can be interpreted as attempts to bolster the religious legitimacy of establishment politicians.

Conversely, there was also the use of moralist politics to *delegitimize* Thaksin Shinawatra and his allies; in other words, to *impurify* him. Charges were leveled that Thaksin was a unique moral threat to society and that he did not respect Theravada Buddhism. As Sinpeng notes, Thaksin was seen as corrupt “not because of what hee did, but who he was”<sup>26</sup> — an innately immoral

---

<sup>24</sup> Prajak Kongkirati, “The Rise and Fall of Electoral Violence in Thailand: Changing Rules, Structures and Power Landscapes, 1997-2011.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 36, no. 3, 2014: 387.

<sup>25</sup> Tomas Larsson, “Royal Succession and the Politics of Religious Purification in Contemporary Thailand.” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, forthcoming.

<sup>26</sup> Sinpeng, “Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand.”, 535.

person. By depriving him of his moral legitimacy, his opponents were able to effectively “desecrate”, in the eyes of some at least, Thaksin’s democratic legitimacy. In addition, Thaksin’s opponents sought to use moral and religious authority not simply as a means to combat the former prime minister, but to also prevent him from regaining power.

#### IV. Desecrating Thaksin: The Politics of Impurity

It is to how moralist politics was used to defile Thaksin’s electoral mandate that we now turn to. In this section, I argue that Thaksin was subject to a wide range of religiously-charged rhetorical accusations that was used to taint his legitimacy as an elected leader. I begin this section with a discussion of the perception that Thaksin posed a threat to the monarchy. Afterwards, I analyze the perception that Thaksin supported religiously deviant sects. Finally, I discuss the criticism that Thaksin was innately “corrupt”.

Both during and after his tenure as premier, Thaksin was widely accused of seeking to overthrow the monarchy. A key example of this line of criticism is from Luangta Maha Bua, a highly revered monk widely believed to have attained the level of *arahant* (the final stage before enlightenment) in traditional Buddhist belief. Luangta Maha Bua initially publicly assisted Thaksin, helping to collect donations for the government to help rescue the nation from the 1997 financial crisis<sup>27</sup>. However, the monk later became convinced that Thaksin was aiming to abolish the monarchy. In one of his widely-publicized sermons, Luangta Maha Bua accused Thaksin of “seeking to become president” and warned that he risked meeting a fate like Devadatta’s, a monk who according to Buddhist legend sought to murder the Buddha and was later swallowed whole by the earth for his sins<sup>28</sup>. In another sermon, Luangta Maha Bua proceeded to call Thaksin a *maha yaksa* — a great demon — and declared that he had the duty to speak in a straightforward manner

---

<sup>27</sup> Alan Klima, “Thai Love Thai: Financing Emotion in Post-Crash Thailand.” *Ethnos* 69, no. 4 (2004): 450.

<sup>28</sup> “‘หลวงตา’ ลั่นขวางประธานาธิบดี-เดือน ‘ทักษิณ’ จบแบบ ‘เทวทัต.’” *Manager Online*, September 27, 2005. <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9480000132575>.

and point out “evil.”<sup>29</sup> The sermon demonstrates the extent to which the image of Thaksin seeking to create a republican Thailand is seen as a moral threat.

Why was the accusation that Thaksin sought to abolish the monarchy so religiously charged? Under King Bhumibol, the monarchy had come to be strongly identified with morality and virtue. The Thai monarchy has long been closely identified with orthodox Buddhism; the king is traditionally seen as the patron of Buddhism, and royal ritual is extensively used in support of religion<sup>30</sup>. But King Bhumibol in particular became a semi-religious figure. As Jackson discusses, from the 1970s the sacral image of the monarchy has been increasingly strengthened, spread by modern media. King Bhumibol is widely seen as a great possessor of *barami* — a virtuous charismatic authority —<sup>31</sup> and the monarchy itself is seen in ancient tradition as “virtually divine”<sup>32</sup>. His decades of service was seen in the eyes of Thais as accumulating Buddhist merit. Therefore, to be accused of overthrowing the monarchy under King Bhumibol was to be painted in the eyes of many Thai as seeking to challenge the nation’s pinnacle of virtue and morality. This was not confined to just Thais in royalist heartlands such as Bangkok; even those firmly in the Thai periphery such as Karen villagers believed that Thaksin had challenged a charismatic leader with indisputable *barami* in the person of King Bhumibol<sup>33</sup>. For this reason, just the intention of establishing a republic was seen as sacrilegious.

Thaksin was also accused of religious impurity and of endorsing religious heresy. The most prominent example is his support for the Dhammakaya sect. Dhammakaya has long been seen by many as religiously deviant; among other things, the temple boasts an extravagant UFO-shaped

---

<sup>29</sup> “หลวงตาม้ารื้อนาครต เปรียบ ‘ทักษิณ’ ยักษ์ผีทำลายชาติ ศาสนา พระมหากษัตริย์ (ชมคลิป).” Manager Online, November 7, 2013. <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9560000138813>.

<sup>30</sup> Björn Dressel, “The Struggle for Political Legitimacy in Thailand.” *Political Legitimacy in Asia*, 2011: 451.

<sup>31</sup> Sukhumbhand Paribatra, “Some Reflections on the Thai Monarchy.” *Southeast Asian Affairs 2003* 2003, no. 1 (2003): 291–309.

<sup>32</sup> Peter A. Jackson, “Markets, Media, and Magic: Thailand’s Monarch as a ‘Virtual Deity.’” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (2009): 362.

<sup>33</sup> Mikael Gravers, “Thaksin, the Orphan and the King.” *NIAS NYTT Asia Insights*, December 2007: 19.

stupa and commercialized religious teachings outside of the Theravada mainstream<sup>34</sup>. Thaksin began to intensify ties with the Dhammakaya sect in 2005<sup>35</sup>, and he was alleged to have pressured plaintiffs to withdraw an embezzlement case against Phra Dhammachayo, the abbot of Dhammakaya. Thaksin's opponents seized on his connections with the sect to demonstrate that he was intent on destroying, or at minimum seizing control of, religious life in Thailand as well. An article in the anti-Thaksin Manager newspaper, for example, insinuated that Thaksin and Phra Dhammachayo may be cooperating to conquer both the "secular world" and the "religious world"<sup>36</sup>. Such claims added to the perception that Thaksin was partnering with an aberrant religious sect that would pervert Buddhism for his own goals.

In the same vein, Thaksin's meddling at the heart of Thai Buddhism has also led to opponents painting him as a religious threat. In 2005, the then-supreme patriarch (who is the head of Thai Buddhism) Somdet Phra Nyanasamvara's failing health led Thaksin to appoint another monk, Somdet Kiaw, as acting supreme patriarch<sup>37</sup>. This move infuriated Thaksin's opponents, as it was seen as a challenge to royal powers. It marked an absorption of the king's prerogative to appoint the supreme patriarch. In addition, Somdet Kiaw hailed from the Mahanikai sect of Thai Buddhism, which historically has not been favored by the royal institution; this contrasted with Somdet Phra Nyansamvara who not only came from the royally sanctioned Thammayut sect but was also the king's personal spiritual mentor<sup>38</sup>. This issue was later exacerbated when Somdet Kiaw died in 2013 and Somdet Chuang was nominated by the Supreme Sangha Council as his successor. Somdet Chuang is associated with the Dhammakaya Temple, ensuring his appointment would be virulently opposed by anti-Thaksin groups<sup>39</sup>.

---

<sup>34</sup> Dubus, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*: 48-49.

<sup>35</sup> McCargo, "Changing Politics of Thailand's Buddhist Order", 640.

<sup>36</sup> วีรวรรณ สุรวิชช์. "สายสัมพันธ์ทักษิณ-ธัมมชโย สองประสานเพื่อยึดครองประเทศ." Manager Online, March 3, 2017. <https://mgronline.com/daily/detail/9600000021998>.

<sup>37</sup> McCargo, "The Changing Politics Of Thailand's Buddhist Order.", 636.

<sup>38</sup> Mérieau, "Buddhist Constitutionalism in Thailand", 298.

<sup>39</sup> Dubus, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*: 14-15.

Finally, Thaksin's opponents painted him as a hopelessly corrupt politician. Through Thaksin's tenure and after, several corruption charges were leveled against him, many of which he were found guilty of in the courts. The Democrat Party, for example, listed 34 cases of corruption by Thaksin in their campaign materials<sup>40</sup>. Although politicians in Thailand already generally have the reputation of being corrupt, Thaksin was elevated as corrupt even beyond others. Of importance here is not whether Thaksin was actually guilty of corruption, but the point that the perception Thaksin is corrupt was effective in making the removal of a democratically-elected leader acceptable<sup>41</sup>. Thaksin no longer fit the mould of a "good person" who was fit to rule Thailand; instead, in the eyes of his opponents, his moral bankruptcy disqualified him from the premiership.

The perception of Thaksin as corrupt created the long-lasting argument that elections cannot be respected because they allow immoral politicians in general to assume power. Unwilling to recognize the agency of rural voters, Thaksin's opponents declared that they were being duped by Thaksin into voting for him. As a yellow-shirt protester against Thaksin said, "The evil man [Thaksin] was happily fooling people and duped them, the stupid buffaloes."<sup>42</sup> In 2014, when the People's Democratic Reform Committee protestors were angling to remove Thaksin's sister Yingluck out of office, they demanded that reforms to the electoral system were conducted *before* the next set of elections were held. For instance, protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban said if elections were held, "we would once again get evil people in parliament, and an evil government, who will then become corrupt. Enough of this!"<sup>43</sup> Thus, the anti-Thaksin movement succeeded in tainting not just Thaksin's legitimacy but the legitimacy of the democratic process itself.

---

<sup>40</sup> Thak Chaloeontiarana, "Distinctions with a Difference: The Despotic Paternalism of Sarit Thanarat and the Demagogic Authoritarianism of Thaksin Shinawatra." *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no. 1 (2007): 85.

<sup>41</sup> Michael K. Connors, "Liberalism against the People: Learning to Live with Coups d'État." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 16.

<sup>42</sup> Sinpeng, "Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand.", 534.

<sup>43</sup> Suthep Thaugsuban. December 22, 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXyh4d3N\\_-o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXyh4d3N_-o).

Given all of these efforts, the anti-Thaksin movement succeeded in permanently tarnishing Thaksin's image, at least in the eyes of their followers, as an acceptable premier. If the ballot box had emerged in the 1990s as ever-more sacrosanct process that bestowed a clear mandate to govern on an elected leader, the wide array of morally-charged ammunition that was deployed against Thaksin ensured that the mandate would be seen, at least by those opposed to Thaksin, as illegitimate. Furthermore, as the next section will illustrate, moral authority and religious politics would be used to prevent Thaksin's return to power after his ouster in 2006.

## **V. Religion and Moral Authority as Opposition**

Moralist politics was not only used to damage Thaksin's standing. In this section, I argue that desecularization was a key tool that the Thai anti-Thaksin establishment deployed to actively prevent his return to power and to preserve the standing of the establishment. I begin by discussing legal mechanisms, particularly the 2015 constitution, which although never enacted can be used as a case study par excellence of how moralism became a tool in trying to decrease the power of politicians and an implicit tool against Thaksin. I then examine the mobilization of religious figures such as Buddha Issara against Thaksin. In addition, I recap other forms of desecularization and symbolic politics that were used to reaffirm the religious credentials of Thaksin's opponents. Finally, I analyze whether these efforts had an impact on the Thai electorate.

The draft constitution of 2015 is an excellent case study in how moralism was infused with legal mechanisms to be deployed to combat the influence of "corrupt" politicians. After the 2014 military coup, the NCPO created a constitution drafting committee to complete a new charter for the nation. Its goals were explicitly moralist: the draft aimed to create effective mechanisms to "uphold the rule of law (*nititham*), promote morality (*khunnatham*), ethics (*jariyatham*) and good

governance (*thammaphiban*).”<sup>44</sup> (Note the use of *tham* — dharma — in all of the terms’ constructions.) Bowornsak Uwanno, chairman of the committee, explicitly told foreign diplomats that a big problem facing Thailand was politicians who lack morality and ethics; the examples he provided were instances of corruption under Thaksin’s sister, Yingluck<sup>45</sup>. Thus the 2015 draft constitution was written with explicitly moralist goals and strong religious overtones against corrupt politicians such as Thaksin.

The concrete legal mechanism that the drafters chose to accomplish their goal was the creation of a National Morals Assembly. Its purpose, according to the charter, would be to promulgate a code of ethics for politicians and bureaucrats, and to investigate them for moral failings according to this code. The assembly was even to have the power to recommend to the Electoral Commission that an office-holder be removed<sup>46</sup>. The draft charter itself laid out certain minimum moral guidelines, including a prohibition on violating important moral principles. The charter was never enacted due to opposition from the military-appointed parliament. But should it had been promulgated, it would have represented a major case of desecularization. Such moralist language was always bound to be highly religiously charged and any code of ethics would have been heavily informed by Buddhist principles. It was to be, in effect, a means for the state to supervise the morality of politicians produced by the ballot box: the creation of a dharmic democracy.

Despite the fact that moralism as a legal mechanism did not become reality, it was still consistently used as rhetoric to promote the virtue of the anti-Thaksin movement. Mériéau notes that the use of discourse on *rajadhamma* — a Thai conception of the doctrine of righteous royal authority — intensified in the lead up to the military coups of 2006 and 2014<sup>47</sup>. Also notable is the use of the term *khon dee* — “good people”. The term is often used to denote people with moralist

---

<sup>44</sup> “2015 Draft Constitution of Thailand,” [https://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/content\\_nrc2557/d042058-01.pdf](https://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/content_nrc2557/d042058-01.pdf): 15.

<sup>45</sup> “Bowornsak Explains Need for 20th Constitution.” <https://www.nationthailand.com>, March 27, 2015. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30256944>.

<sup>46</sup> 2015 Draft Constitution of Thailand,” 22.

<sup>47</sup> Mériéau, “Buddhist Constitutionalism in Thailand”, 301.

virtue and an immunity to self-interest who should be allowed to take the reins of the state<sup>48</sup>. “Good people”, however, acquired increasingly an increasingly partisan connotation as the term was heavily used to promote the anti-Thaksin opposition, in contrast with Thaksinite politicians who are denoted as *khon mai dee* (bad people) or *khon lew* (evil people).

A particularly powerful instance of the term’s use came in the run-up to the 2019 general elections. In February, the pro-Thaksin party Thai Raksa Chart had nominated King Vajiralongkorn’s elder sister Princess Ubolratana as the party’s candidate for prime minister. It was an explosive move that the king lost no time in blocking through a dramatic televised statement the next day. But it was not to be the only instance of public cooperation between Princess Ubolratana and Thaksin; on March 22nd, a photo of the two hugging in Hong Kong was released. The following night, King Vajiralongkorn made another statement, invoking a speech by King Bhumibol that it was imperative to “support goodness, so that good people govern the country and restraining bad people from having power in order not to create confusion.”<sup>49</sup> Whether the timing was coincidental or not is debatable — the king’s broadcast occurred on the final day before the election — but it was immediately interpreted as a sign of the throne’s opposition to Thaksin and the invocation of morality to once again delegitimize Thaksinite politicians.

In addition, the military government after 2014 took concrete steps to bolster its own religious credentials and legitimacy *vis a vis* their Thaksinite opponents. One was the inclusion in the 2017 constitution of Section 67, which requires that the state “promote and support education and dissemination of dharmic principles of Theravada Buddhism”<sup>50</sup>. This was the strongest language that has ever been used in any Thai constitution to affirm the state’s patronage of

---

<sup>48</sup> Funahashi, Daena Aki. “Rule by Good People: Health Governance and the Violence of Moral Authority in Thailand.” *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (2015): 108.

<sup>49</sup> “Support Good People to Rule This Country,” Says King of Thailand On.” Prachatai English, March 24, 2019. <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7990>.

<sup>50</sup> “2017 Constitution of Thailand.” Constitutional Court of Thailand. [http://www.constitutionalcourt.or.th/occ\\_en/download/article\\_20170410173022.pdf](http://www.constitutionalcourt.or.th/occ_en/download/article_20170410173022.pdf).

Buddhism, and the first time that Theravada Buddhism is specifically mentioned. The move was beneficial for two reasons. Firstly, it placated Thailand's "redshirt monks" (pro-Thaksin monks) who have long argued that Buddhism should be made Thailand's state religion<sup>51</sup>. Secondly, it served as an implicit attack on the Dhammakaya temple, which religious nationalists argue do not properly practice Theravada Buddhism<sup>52</sup>. The NCPO was thus demonstrating that they, unlike Thaksin, could properly preserve orthodox Theravada Buddhism from heretical influence.

These efforts would go beyond just the letter of the law. In the run-up to the national referendum a member of the Thai Sangha threatened to mobilize monks to defeat the draft constitution in a national referendum, which echoed the Thaksinite line, leading the junta to initiate a purge of monks in the Thai Sangha with connections to Thaksin's Pheu Thai party<sup>53</sup>. In particular, several monks who belonged to the now-deceased Somdet Kiaw's circle were arrested and defrocked. Then, in 2017, the junta took direct aim at the Dhammakaya temple. The temple's abbot, Phra Dhammachayo, was charged with money laundering and a police operation besieged the temple in search of the fugitive monk<sup>54</sup>. The junta's involvement in these affairs reasserted the state's role in managing Thailand's religious life in a way that promoted its religious legitimacy over possible opponents.

Did these efforts work to turn Thais against Thaksin and towards the establishment?

Empirical evidence can help shine some light on the answer. On one hand, Thaksin remains strong electorally, with his Pheu Thai party winning the most seats in the 2019 general election, showing that his base has not deserted him. On the other hand, there is evidence that a large segment of the pro-military/anti-Thaksin electorate has internalized the perception that Thaksin is unfit to rule the

---

<sup>51</sup> McCargo, "The Changing Politics Of Thailand's Buddhist Order.", 635.

<sup>52</sup> Kulabkaew, Katewadee. "The Politics of Thai Buddhism under the NCPO Junta." *The Politics of Thai Buddhism under the NCPO Junta*, 2019: 13.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>54</sup> Teeranai Charuvastra, "Cops and Monks Clash at Wat Dhammakaya." *Khaosod English*, February 20, 2017. <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2017/02/20/cops-monks-clash-wat-dhammakaya/>.

country, despite the fact that he and his successors were elected legitimately. 44% of PDRC (anti-Thaksin) protestors, for example, told an Asia Foundation survey that the best way to resolve political tensions during the crisis of 2013-14 would be to appoint an unelected “people’s council”<sup>55</sup>, which protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban had insisted would be composed only of “good people” who would reform the country and eradicate corruption. Only one percent of pro-Thaksin protestors were willing to accept this solution. In addition, zero percent of the PDRC were willing to accept the Yingluck government’s electoral mandate, and only 26% wanted to dissolve parliament and hold a new election. While these results cannot be solely attributed to the effects of desecularization, it is still striking that a large number of people were no longer willing to participate in the democratic process and instead were keen on an ambiguously-defined unelected council of morally uptight reformers.

It is thus clear that a wide array of religious tools were weaponized to weaken Thaksin’s political standing both prior and after his removal. But why was there such a need to mobilize such resources, both rhetorical and material, against one leader? These questions will be examined in the next section.

## **VI. Case Studies: Banharn Silpa-archa and Chamlong Srimuang**

Did other Thai politicians receive similar treatment as Thaksin? In this section, I argue that desecularization occurred because Thaksin was simultaneously a threat to the elite and also seen as morally deficient. I begin by introducing the other political figures that I will use as case studies: Banharn Silpa-archa and Chamlong Srimuang. I explain the rationale behind their selection, then use them to show that a combination of being a threat to the elite and moral deficiency was needed to prompt state desecularization.

---

<sup>55</sup> “Profile of the Protestors: A Survey of Pro and Anti-Government Demonstrators in Bangkok on November 30, 2013.” Asia Foundation, <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/FinalSurveyReportDecember20.pdf>.

Thaksin has become almost uniquely vilified in Thai politics as morally bankrupt because he was both electorally popular and a threat to the establishment, which forced them to find other means to delegitimize him. But even though Thaksin is far from the only figure to have been demonized in this way, why was he met with such religious attacks? Two figures have been selected for comparison: Banharn Silpa-archa, who served as prime minister between 1995 and 1996, and Chamlong Srimuang, who served as Bangkok governor between 1985 and 1992 and was later instrumental in orchestrating anti-Thaksin protests during the 2000s.

Banharn Silpa-archa serves as an example of a politician who, despite a widespread view that he is morally deficient, was pliable to the elite and did not prompt the same desecularizing weaponization that Thaksin did. Banharn served as prime minister between 1995 and 1996 and came from an untraditional background: he was a school dropout who then built a business empire and built up a heavy local presence in the province of Supanburi. Despite his attempt to build a reputation as a savvy strategist focused on development (with the nickname “Deng Xiao-harn”), he is better known as a “slippery eel” for his constant changing of sides and lack of ideology<sup>56</sup>. Even more damaging, however, was the nickname “Mr. ATM” that Thais used to dismiss him as the “personification of dirty-money politics” and a highly corrupt rural boss<sup>57</sup>.

Thus, like Thaksin, Banharn was a morally tainted figure who hardly matched traditional Buddhist notions of goodness. Yet, there are two key differences between Banharn and Thaksin. Firstly, the former did not challenge the network monarchy. Instead, as Yoshinori Nishizaki argues, Banharn was pliable to and supported the royalist elite. Since the 1960s, Banharn assisted the monarchy’s prestige-building activities in his local base of Supanburi, which created a mutually beneficial relationship<sup>58</sup>. Thus, Yoshinori says, Banharn was neither a morally deficient threat (in the way Thaksin is) or a “good person” firmly in the network, but belonged to a grey area. The other

---

<sup>56</sup> Remembering Banharn.” 2Bangkok.com. <http://2bangkok.com/remembering-banharn.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Yoshinori Nishizaki, “The Moral Origin of Thailand’s Provincial Strongman.” *South East Asia Research* 13, no. 2 (2005): 186.

<sup>58</sup> Yoshinori Nishizaki, “The King and Banharn.” *South East Asia Research* 21, no. 1 (2013): 69–103.

key difference between Banharn and Thaksin is that Banharn was relatively easy to dispose of; there was no need to desecrate his electoral legitimacy in the way that was needed for Thaksin. The Banharn administration's own corruption scandals eventually forced him to resign, and his political fortunes never fully recovered afterwards<sup>59</sup>.

Chamlong Srimuang's image is the precise opposite of Banharn's: he is seen as a righteous figure who adheres to Buddhist fundamentalism. Chamlong follows the "eight precepts" of Buddhism (ordinary laymen are only expected to follow five), including sexual abstinence, and only eats one vegetarian meal a day, leading to him being named "half-monk half-man"<sup>60</sup>. But in power, Chamlong was tainted with religious heresy. He was closely aligned with the Santi Asoke group, a sect which promotes originalist and strict interpretations of the Buddha's teachings. Santi Asoke strongly backed Chamlong, helping him win the 1985 gubernatorial elections in Bangkok, a favor that Chamlong repaid by appointing Santi Asoke practitioners to city hall<sup>61</sup>. Chamlong later created the Palang Dharma ("moral power") party which was strongly associated with Santi Asoke.

But as Chamlong grew in popularity and power, his ties to Santi Asoke became increasingly problematic. Fears arose that Santi Asoke could rival the traditional Thammayut and Mahanikai sects, culminating in a proposal that Photirak, the leader of Santi Asoke, be defrocked. In 1993, an anti-Chamlong election poster wrote that choosing Palang Dharma would lead to a "sexually abnormal" prime minister and Photirak as the head of a new Buddhist order<sup>62</sup>. Alarm at the rising power of Santi Asoke and the influence it had in politics led to intensifying demands to strengthen the religious bureaucracy and make Buddhism the national state religion<sup>63</sup>, much like the impact Dhammakaya and Thaksin had.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>60</sup> Charles F. Keyes, "Buddhist Politics and Their Revolutionary Origins in Thailand." *International Political Science Review* 10, no. 2 (1989): 121.

<sup>61</sup> Dubus, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Mackenzie, Rory. "New Buddhist Movements in Thailand," 2007: 122.

<sup>63</sup> Larsson, "The Political Economy of State Patronage of Religion", 586.

Yet despite the fact that Chamlong prompted some calls for desecularization, he was not met with the same use of moral politics and certainly not the same extent of rhetorical attack that Thaksin prompted. One reason is certainly attributable to the fact that Chamlong's personal religiosity made that line of attack untenable, even if he was affiliated with the possibly heretical Santi Asoke sect. But Chamlong also did not pose a threat to the network monarchy or elite establishment. Chamlong had initially been friendly to Thaksin, and indeed Thaksin had originally succeeded him as leader of the Palang Dharma party. In later years he emerged as a key figure in the movement against Thaksin. Chamlong began to condemn Thaksin when he toyed with the idea of buying the Liverpool football club, condemning it as an excess, and Chamlong later led the Santi Asoke movement into the anti-Thaksin protests<sup>64</sup>.

From the use of these case studies, it becomes clear that several factors are required to prompt desecularization. Being seen as a "morally corrupt" figure is not enough; Banharn did not evoke the same extent of religious and moralist opposition as Thaksin did, despite being seen as a shady figure. Instead Chamlong, who was universally known as morally uptight, and Thaksin, who was painted as morally dubious, were both attacked for their relationships with sects that did not conform with Thai Buddhist orthodoxy. But more importantly, Thaksin came to pose a threat to the conservative establishment in ways that Banharn and Chamlong never did. First was their willingness to work within the network monarchy, something Thaksin was unwilling to do: Banharn was disliked but pliable, while Chamlong indeed later emerged as a key figure in fighting the network monarchy's main opponent. Second was Banharn and Chamlong's limited electoral staying power; the influence of the Palang Dharma party was not durable, while Banharn's premiership was short-lived. Thaksin, on the other hand, continues to wield decisive influence on Thai politics after even a decade and a half after his ouster in the 2006 military coup, and his political parties have

---

<sup>64</sup> Dubus, *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*, 32.

won the most seats in every election between 2001 to now. This leaves the establishment little recourse but to continue to find ways to dent his electoral legitimacy.

## **VII. Conclusion**

In this paper, I posed the question of why Thailand's elites have driven desecularization since the 1990s. Desecularization, which has been exemplified through increasingly strong language on religious patronage in successive constitutions, increased use of moralist rhetoric and the rise in the religious budget, is puzzling because Thai society on the whole has become increasingly secular. I argued that the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra was a key catalyst that prompted desecularization. By posing a threat to the dominant power network of Thailand, yet being too difficult to dislodge electorally, Thaksin's opponents chose to pursue desecularization in various forms in order to bolster their own standing while "desecrating" Thaksin's electoral legitimacy.

In my literature review, I examined scholarship on religion and politics in Thailand, grouped around the themes of religious legitimacy, legal legitimacy and political legitimacy. I had concluded that the theme of political legitimacy offered the greatest explanatory power for why desecularization in Thailand was happening. I indicated that an in-depth study of the relationship between Thaksin and moralist politics would be helpful in further studying how desecularization has helped build moral authority for anti-Thaksin leaders while delegitimizing Thaksin's own standing.

I then provided a summary of Duncan McCargo's paradigm-shifting theory of network monarchy. I showed how Thaksin sought to displace this power network and build a network of his own, while also becoming electorally invincible, which posed a new and unprecedented threat to the conservative establishment. Due to this, the politics of purification and impurification — a concept that I borrow from Tomas Larsson — was utilized to attack Thaksin.

Afterwards, I outlined the ways in which Thaksin's standing was hurt through moralist arguments. I highlighted three main accusations: that Thaksin was seeking to abolish the monarchy,

that Thaksin is religiously impure, and that Thaksin is extremely corrupt. Due to these attacks, the anti-Thaksin movement succeeded not only in tainting the former prime minister but also the electoral process which produced him, thus undermining the sanctity of elections while promoting the legitimacy of extraconstitutional processes such as military coups.

Subsequently, I demonstrated the ways in which moralist and religious politics was used to prevent Thaksin's return to power while bolstering the religious credentials of junta leaders. I examined three methods: the use of legal mechanisms such as the 2015 draft constitution, the use of the rhetoric of "good people" and intensified state support for orthodox Theravada Buddhism. In doing so, a clear picture emerges that desecularization was a useful tool for establishment leaders to combat Thaksin and what they perceive as his malign influence.

Finally, I examined two case studies of two other Thai politicians who captured national attention in the 1990s: Chamlong Srimuang and Banharn Silpa-archa. In analyzing these two figures, I showed that the accusation of moral bankruptcy did not necessarily prompt desecularization, as was not the case for Banharn, while affiliation with a group outside the Theravada mainstream was a more important factor, which both Thaksin and Chamlong shared. More importantly, however, I pointed out that Thaksin, unlike both of these figures, was a threat to the network monarchy.

My argument has a number of shortcomings that I was unable to address. Firstly, I was unable to demonstrate that increased funding for the religious bureaucracy, which is a prime example of desecularization, correlated with Thaksin's rise. Indeed, Larsson's argument that variation in such funding is best explained by regime type continues to be the most persuasive. This demonstrates that only *some* aspects of desecularization can be explained using the rise of Thaksin.

Secondly, while my argument sheds important attention to the relationship between Thaksin and religious politics, it does ignore other factors that prompt state desecularization which are unrelated to elite-level politics. For example, I have not discussed the influence of Buddhist chauvinism in the face of the insurgency in Thailand's deep south. I have also discussed in

insufficient detail pressure from Buddhist groups such as the Buddhist Protection Center of Thailand, which other scholars such as Katewadee Kulabkhaew address. A further study with a larger focus on non-elite political actors would be helpful in providing a more complete picture of why desecularization occurred.

Third, due to constraints on resources and access, this study was completed without interviews with actors in elite networks. As such, this paper required by necessity reliance on secondary sources and my assumptions about the motivations of key political players. If further study were to be conducted, interviews and the collection of empirical evidence would help shine further light on motivations for desecularization. In addition, while I used the Asia Foundation's survey results to show that Thaksin's opponents were less willing to accept democratic processes and believed in the rhetoric of "good people," I have not been able to demonstrate conclusively that the cause was desecularizing tools and rhetoric. Further surveys of the electorate would be helpful in this regard.

Lastly, I have not yet addressed the issue of the rise of the Future Forward Party and its leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit in 2019. Thanathorn's rise as an unabashedly progressive leader who is extremely keen on democratizing Thailand and challenging the power of the military junta has immediately prompted comparisons with Thaksin. After all, Thanathorn like Thaksin is a billionaire who is now seen as a "fresh face" in Thai politics. And like Thaksin, Thanathorn faces accusations of seeking to overthrow the monarchy and showing insufficient respect to Thailand's traditional culture and religion. As such, Thanathorn's similarities with Thaksin would provide an excellent case study on whether the theory that desecularization occurs when popular leaders who threaten old power networks must be delegitimated holds. Indeed, given that the current student movement has touched directly upon the issue of the monarchy, how conservatives seek to re-fortify their own legitimacy will be important to watch. This merits further study.

## Works Cited

- วีรวรรณ สุริวิชัย. “สายสัมพันธ์ทักษิณ-ธัมมชโย สองประสานเพื่อยึดครองประเทศ.” *Manager Online*, March 3, 2017. <https://mgronline.com/daily/detail/9600000021998>.
- “2015 Draft Constitution of Thailand,” n.d. [https://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/content\\_nrc2557/d042058-01.pdf](https://library2.parliament.go.th/giventake/content_nrc2557/d042058-01.pdf).
- “2017 Constitution of Thailand.” Constitutional Court of Thailand. Accessed April 5, 2020. [http://www.constitutionalcourt.or.th/occ\\_en/download/article\\_20170410173022.pdf](http://www.constitutionalcourt.or.th/occ_en/download/article_20170410173022.pdf).
- “Borwornsak Explains Need for 20th Constitution.” <https://www.nationthailand.com>, March 27, 2015. <https://www.nationthailand.com/news/30256944>.
- Chaloemtiarana, Thak. “Distinctions with a Difference: The Despotic Paternalism of Sarit Thanarat and the Demagogic Authoritarianism of Thaksin Shinawatra.” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19, no. 1 (2007): 50–94.
- Charuvastra, Teeranai. “Cops and Monks Clash at Wat Dhammakaya.” *Khaosod English*, February 20, 2017. <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2017/02/20/cops-monks-clash-wat-dhammakaya/>.
- Connors, Michael K. “Liberalism against the People: Learning to Live with Coups d’État.” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 24, no. 1 (2018): 11–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2019.1548087>.
- Dixon, Rosalind, and Tom Ginsburg. *Comparative Constitutional Law in Asia*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2014.
- Dressel, Björn. “The Struggle for Political Legitimacy in Thailand.” *Political Legitimacy in Asia*, 2011, 61–84. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137001474\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137001474_4).
- Dressel, Björn. “Thailand’s Traditional Trinity and the Rule of Law: Can They Coexist?” *Asian Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (2018): 268–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2018.1445196>.
- Dubus, Arnaud. *Buddhism and Politics in Thailand*. Bangkok: IRASEC, 2017.

- Funahashi, Daena Aki. "Rule by Good People: Health Governance and the Violence of Moral Authority in Thailand." *Cultural Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (2015): 107–30. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca31.1.06>.
- Gravers, Mikael. "Thaksin, the Orphan and the King." *NIAS NYTT Asia Insights*, December 2007, 19–22.
- Hewison, Kevin. "Thaksin Shinawatra and the Reshaping of Thai Politics." *Contemporary Politics* 16, no. 2 (2010): 119–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569771003783810>.
- Hirschl, Ran. "Comparative Constitutional Law and Religion in Asia." *Comparative Constitutional Law in Asia*, n.d., 316–38. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781002704.00020>.
- Ishii, Yoneo. "Church and State in Thailand." *Asian Survey* 8, no. 10 (1968): 864–71. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.1968.8.10.01p04203>.
- Jackson, Peter A. "Markets, Media, and Magic: Thailand's Monarch as a 'Virtual Deity.'" *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (2009): 361–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649370902949366>.
- Jackson, Peter A. "The Supernaturalization of Thai Political Culture: Thailand's Magical Stamps of Approval at the Nexus of Media, Market and State." *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 31, no. 3 (2016): 826–79. <https://doi.org/10.1355/sj31-3d>.
- Karpov, V. "Desecularization: A Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 2 (January 2010): 232–70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/esq058>.
- Keyes, Charles F. "Buddhist Politics and Their Revolutionary Origins in Thailand." *International Political Science Review* 10, no. 2 (1989): 121–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251218901000203>.
- Klima, Alan. "Thai Love Thai: Financing Emotion in Post-Crash Thailand." *Ethnos* 69, no. 4 (2004): 445–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0014184042000302335>.

- Kongkirati, Prajak. "The Rise and Fall of Electoral Violence in Thailand: Changing Rules, Structures and Power Landscapes, 1997-2011." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 36, no. 3 (2014): 386–416. <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs36-3c>.
- Kulabkaew, Katewadee. "The Politics of Thai Buddhism under the NCPO Junta." *The Politics of Thai Buddhism under the NCPO Junta*, 2019, 1–1.
- Larsson, Tomas. "Buddhist Bureaucracy And Religious Freedom In Thailand." *Journal of Law and Religion* 33, no. 2 (2018): 197–211. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2018.27>.
- Larsson, Tomas. "The Political Economy of State Patronage of Religion: Evidence from Thailand." *International Political Science Review* 40, no. 4 (2018): 576–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512118770178>.
- Larsson, Tomas. "Secularisation, Secularism, and the Thai State." *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, 2019, 278–90. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315151328-22>.
- Larsson, Tomas. "Royal Succession and the Politics of Religious Purification in Contemporary Thailand." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, n.d.
- Mackenzie, Rory. "New Buddhist Movements in Thailand," 2007. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203966464>.
- McCargo, Duncan. "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand." *The Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 499–519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512740500338937>.
- McCargo, Duncan. "The Politics of Buddhist Identity in Thailand's Deep South: The Demise of Civil Religion?" *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 40, no. 1 (July 2009): 11–32. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022463409000022>.
- McCargo, Duncan, and Ukrist Pathmanand. *The Thaksinization of Thailand*. NIAS, 2010.
- McCargo, Duncan. "The Changing Politics Of Thailand's Buddhist Order." *Critical Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (2012): 627–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2012.738544>.

- Mérieau, Eugénie. “Buddhist Constitutionalism in Thailand: When Rājadharmā Supersedes the Constitution.” *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 13, no. 2 (2018): 283–305. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asjcl.2018.16>.
- Nishizaki, Yoshinori. “The Moral Origin of Thailand’s Provincial Strongman.” *South East Asia Research* 13, no. 2 (2005): 184–234. <https://doi.org/10.5367/0000000054604489>.
- Nishizaki, Yoshinori. “The King and Banharn.” *South East Asia Research* 21, no. 1 (2013): 69–103. <https://doi.org/10.5367/sear.2013.0140>.
- Paribatra, Sukhumbhand. “Some Reflections on the Thai Monarchy.” *Southeast Asian Affairs* 2003 2003, no. 1 (2003): 291–309. <https://doi.org/10.1355/seaa03r>.
- “Profile of the Protestors: A Survey of Pro and Anti-Government Demonstrators in Bangkok on November 30, 2013.” Asia Foundation. Accessed April 27, 2020. <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/FinalSurveyReportDecember20.pdf>
- Phongpaichit, Pasuk, and Chris Baker. *Thaksin*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009.
- “Remembering Banharn.” Remembering Banharn | 2Bangkok.com. Accessed April 5, 2020. <http://2bangkok.com/remembering-banharn.html>.
- Sinpeng, Aim. “Corruption, Morality, and the Politics of Reform in Thailand.” *Asian Politics & Policy* 6, no. 4 (2014): 523–38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12139>.
- ““Support Good People to Rule This Country,” Says King of Thailand On.” Prachathai English, March 24, 2019. <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7990>.
- Thaugsuban, Suthep. December 22, 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXyh4d3N\\_-o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXyh4d3N_-o).
- ““หลวงตา‘สิ้นขวงประธานาธิบดี-เดือน‘ทักษิณ‘จบแบบ‘เทวทัต.’” Manager Online, September 27, 2005. <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9480000132575>.
- “หลวงตาบัวรื้ออนาคต เปรียบ ‘ทักษิณ’ ยักษ์ผีทำลายชาติ ศาสนา พระมหากษัตริย์ (ชมคลิป).” Manager Online, November 7, 2013. <https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9560000138813>.