Foreword

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Infiltrating Society opens up new and valuable perspectives on three concerns central to serious understanding of modern Thailand. The first of these concerns is the means by which the military in fact involves itself in the country's politics and governance. The second concern is the specific challenge posed to Thai democracy by the military's employment of those poorly understood means. The last concern is Bangkok's relationship with the Thai provinces—and by extension the country's and society's historically fraught quest for and contest over what, with apologies to modernization theorists of yore, it is appropriate to call national integration.

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The closing years of the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej and the opening years of that of his successor King Vajiralongkorn have aroused renewed interest in relations between Thailand's military and its monarchy. Attention has focused above all on the inactivity to which King Bhumibol's infirmity condemned him during the last years of his life and its consequences for the partnership of palace and Army, on the loyalty to the royal institution of the high command of that latter force, on the apparent strength or weakness of various senior officers' ties to King Vajiralongkorn, and on the new king's decision to assume direct control of certain units of the country's military.

Puangthong Pawakapan denies the importance of none of these foci. But she argues in *Infiltrating Society* that an effort to understand the bonds between military and monarchy demands that we look well beyond coup plots hatched among senior officers in Bangkok and those same officers' extravagant poses of loyalty to a notionally timeless and essential Thai monarchy. For the bonds between soldier and sovereign in recent history have in fact owed much to the era of counterinsurgent operations—focused on the perceived security threat of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and undertaken above all in rural and even remote reaches of the Thai provinces—from the 1960s into the 1980s. At levels both institutional and personal, rural counterinsurgency brought monarchy and military into close and sustained collaboration.

While violence and coercion most marked Thai counterinsurgency, it was not in the main their use that gave rise to this collaboration. Violence

and coercion shared prominence with another approach to besting the CPT in the countryside: the military's programme of *kitchakan phonlaruean*, or what are in *Infiltrating Society* termed "civil affairs projects". At the centre of that programme stood military involvement in "development for security" and in the creation of an array of mass organizations. The armed forces of the Bangkok state sought through development projects meant to win "hearts and minds", and through the mobilization of—above all—rural Thais into mass organizations, to prosecute a "political offensive" against the CPT. The state's goal of cultivating royalism notwithstanding, this latter strategy of mobilizing the populace followed the example of communist revolutionary practice. Its adoption reflected an awareness that the Bangkok state faced a political challenge rather than a primarily military threat. This awareness resulted in the politics-first strategy of *kanmueang nam kanthahan*, pursued in the main under the auspices of the Communist Suppression Operations Command (CSOC)—later and still today called the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC).

Infiltrating Society suggests that, in its original Cold War context, much about this approach was essentially fantasy. The Thai military's attempt to wage a political offensive from the mid-1960s and through the 1970s proved largely ineffective. Coercion, including the often heavy-handed use of force, remained the defining trait of counterinsurgency practice. Efforts at popular mobilization through the creation of mass organizations proved a poor fit with the realities of rural society, despite the frequent willingness of local notables to participate in or support those organizations. Those efforts proved one more chapter in the long history of the Bangkok state's and Thai metropolitan elites' sociological misapprehension or mismapping of the provincial hinterlands that they sought to dominate.

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The decidedly indifferent results of the Thai military's civil affairs projects notwithstanding, those projects outlasted the demise of the CPT in the 1980s. The involvement of the Bangkok state's military in internal security became so routine that it rarely drew comment, let alone analysis or criticism. But the survival of an approach to internal security dating from the counterinsurgency era gave that military a repertoire of stratagems that it could remobilize at any time. Puangthong offers the first comprehensive account of just such a remobilization, initially undertaken as a deliberate response to the energetic electoral politics that marked the first decade of the present century in Thailand.

On one level, and not least as it concerns mass organizations, that remobilization has reflected a lack of imagination or of new thinking. It has revealed a decision to double down on the not terribly successful approach of the past to meet the challenges of a very different present. On another level, however, it reveals just how central to the Thai military's understanding of both its political role and its relationship to society internal security and civil affairs projects have remained all along. *Infiltrating Society* offers invaluable perspective on the implications of that understanding for Thai democracy. It argues that counterinsurgency as ostensibly pursued by political means and through civil affairs projects served as a "springboard" for the military's lasting involvement in the socio-economic and political realms. The book thus makes clear that the challenge to democracy and democratic government posed by the military is far more fundamental than a storied propensity to mount coups and install dictatorial rule, naked or otherwise, in the aftermath of those coups.

Central to this point is Puangthong's analysis of two prime ministerial orders promulgated by the government of General Prem Tinsulanonda, himself a veteran of counterinsurgent activities in Northeast Thailand, in 1980 and 1982. The near-universal understanding of these orders as "magic spells" cast to bring about the ultimate defeat of the CPT by political rather than military means has always been puzzling. It is hard to square with the historical record. In *Infiltrating Society*, Puangthong has no time for this understanding, or in fact for this puzzle. The import of these orders, the book points out, has lain far less in their long-exaggerated relevance to the defeat of the CPT than in their crystallizing the military's politics-first, notionally civil-affairs-oriented, approach to counterinsurgency into what proved a robust political vision.

Central to that vision, as it had been implicit in counterinsurgency for much of the fifteen years preceding the promulgation of the two orders, was the integration of the people of a still predominantly rural Thailand—the subjects of the ninth Chakri monarch—into the nation as members of mobilized but pliable masses. That socio-political vision motivated the launch and oversight of mass organizations on the part of the CSOC, then of the ISOC, and also of numerous other organs of the Bangkok state.

The prominence of those organizations went hand in hand with that of "community development" during the counterinsurgency era. Indeed, the mobilization of rural people into mass organizations and the submission of their settlements to community development work were grounded in a single ideological project. Programmes in community development brought at least superficial material benefits to the settlements in which rural Thais lived.

Perhaps more significantly, they also had the goal of reinforcing pseudo-organicist conceptions of the village community. While those conceptions were destined to have a long, strange afterlife in the thinking of putative progressives in Thailand, their significance to the counterinsurgency project was straightforward. Members of the rural masses lived in communities, and those villagers need not concern themselves with public affairs at scales greater than that of the community. Or so the vision had it.

At the core of the vision, as embodied no less in the mobilization of mass organizations than in community development, stood a determination to forge an unmediated relationship between state and society. An energetic sovereign and his consort, willing during the era of counterinsurgency and for some years thereafter to undertake an active programme of visits across provincial Thailand to promote “development” and to link rural people to the kingdom’s exemplary centre, also served this purpose admirably for several decades. Numerous familiar, iconic photographs underline the direct contact with rural people that these visits afforded King Bhumibol. For all their brevity, the photogenic immediacy of such encounters was crucial.

That immediacy was of a piece with the attempts on the part of the Bangkok state’s military to shape and then to manipulate, as if in the management of a vast front organization, a large segment of Thai society. Complemented by royalist ideology—and almost certainly by the progressive resacralization of the Thai monarchy—and touted as democratic, the vision outlined in Prem’s famous orders of the early 1980s prescribed what amounted to an illiberal project of depoliticization, *um integralismo à tailandesa*. Like many corporatist visions, this one afforded ample opportunities for major business concerns. In the Thai case, the interest of such concerns was in penetrating and exploiting the countryside. Puangthong notes the example of the infamous military-backed “Green Isan” project. Initiated in the same decade that saw the promulgation of Prem’s orders, the project sought to foster large-scale commercial forestry on land cultivated by tens of thousands of Northeastern small-holders.

Infiltrating Society makes repeated reference to the apparent obliviousness of the leadership of elected governments and of much of the public to the implications of the expansive internal security role of the Thai military. This obliviousness has led democratic forces in Thailand to forfeit oversight of the military’s deep engagement with—or infiltration of—Thai society. Perhaps more significantly, and for the same reason, those forces have also effectively tolerated the military’s active promotion of a form of state-society relations incompatible with liberal democracy.

The crux of that incompatibility is the role in mediating between state and society that political contestation, elections and parties play in a liberal democratic order. The illiberal and depoliticizing vision that the Thai military of today has inherited from the counterinsurgency era cannot abide either that role or the closely related substantive function of political parties as vehicles for the articulation of competing interests. Recent indicators of this intolerance are abundant, and clear.

The constitutionally binding twenty-year National Strategy published in October 2018 by the National Council for Peace and Order junta assigns—or rather reassigns—a leading role to “communities” as points of interface between state and society. It thus both demarcates a radically constricted sphere of legitimate political participation and ideologically obviates the need, above all among the residents of provincial Thailand, for recourse to political parties as vehicles for the expression of their will. At the same time, and in another distinct echo of the 1980s, the document outlining the strategy would foster metropolitan business interests’ economic domination of the provinces, following a model that two influential Thai political scientists label “hierarchical capitalism”.

Similarly, the three-year National Security Policy and Plan released in November 2019 stresses the importance of building “immunity” to political contestation, and thus to the appeal of political parties and politicians, among individuals and communities and in society as a whole. This same determination to immunize and depoliticize accounted for the dissolution of the maverick new Future Forward Party in February 2020 and the use of the legal system to harass its leadership. That party’s decidedly liberal orientation, its programmatic challenge to the place of the armed forces in the Thai order and to the power of oligopolistic business interests, and its remarkable appeal to young and impatient voters presented an elemental challenge to the political vision of the Thai military.

As these developments unfold, *Infiltrating Society* emphasizes, Thailand continues to witness the reinvigoration of extant state-sponsored mass organizations and the mobilization of new ones. The project to render society pliable carries on. But persistent efforts of Thailand’s “military state within the state” in the realm of internal security have left it above all in the role of spoiler. Events of recent decades make evident that its illiberal and depoliticizing vision is an even poorer fit with contemporary Thai society than with the less complex and sophisticated Thai society of the counterinsurgency era. There is no place in that vision for what scholars have variously called a “middle-income peasantry”, “cosmopolitan villagers” and “urbanized villagers”, let alone for the young people for whom the ideals

of the Future Forward Party had such strong appeal. At the same time, Puangthong observes pointedly, pending the cessation of the military's internal security activities in all their ambitiousness, electoral democracy in Thailand remains condemned to fragility and instability.

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In demonstrating both the chronic ineffectiveness of the Thai military's approach to internal security affairs as a socio-political vision and its effect in undermining the prospects of an alternative, liberal democratic order, *Infiltrating Society* speaks to the central issue in Thai history in the past century and a third. This issue is the quest for national integration in all its dimensions—political, economic, social, cultural, ideological and even linguistic. Contests over who in state or society sets the terms for that integration, whether those terms are exclusionary or aim at inclusiveness, what means of and social bases for that integration are viable and realistic, and how to structure a balanced and just relationship between the great primate city of Bangkok and its broad and varied provincial hinterlands have long defined that quest. They continue to define it today.

A number of the most noteworthy developments in the history of modern Thailand have reflected efforts to set those terms. The 1890s saw Prince Damrong Rajanubhab give momentum to the work of centralizing provincial administration, often at the expense of local lords, under the *thesaphiban* system. Following the end of the absolute monarchy, the 1930s brought the introduction of a parliament featuring members whose explicit function—a remarkable innovation that historians seem to take for granted—was to represent individual provinces and the residents of those provinces. In a related development, that same era saw the promotion of constitutionalism as an integrative ideology across the length and breadth of the country. Beginning a quarter-century later, during the 1957–63 dictatorship of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, the promotion of the Thai monarchy would have the same integrative or unifying aim.

Still other efforts to set the terms of Thai national integration have included the Bangkok state's creation of organs to promote "community development" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, noted above, and the still contested steps towards meaningful administrative decentralization introduced in Thailand's 1997 Constitution. The pair of widely heralded if misunderstood orders promulgated by Prime Minister Prem in the early 1980s were also very much part of the tradition of attempts to effect and to control national integration in Thailand, as is the equally poorly understood but much less discussed 2018–37 National Strategy crafted by the dictatorial National Council for Peace and Order regime.

The vision laid out in the Prem-era orders had an unmistakable influence on that strategy. As Puangthong stresses, that lasting influence reflects the importance of Cold War counterinsurgency as the crucible for the Thai military's internal security activities and the vision that informs them. While the power of that legacy certainly points to stagnation in military thought during the last thirty years, it would be wrong to dismiss it as a matter of mere ideological anachronism. Rather, the Bangkok state's continued recourse to a repertoire of stratagems conceived to counter the CPT reflects an understanding, conscious or not, that the insurgency mounted by that party and the effort to defeat that insurgency together represented one more episode in the long quest for national integration and contest over its terms. That contest predated by many decades the threat posed by the CPT, and the demise of the party in no way signalled its end. Nor did it necessarily indicate the obsolescence of stratagems conceived in the face of that specific threat, as the discussion in *Infiltrating Society* of the Thai military's ever-broader understanding of security illustrates.

Puangthong highlights the preparatory function of the prime ministerial orders of the 1980s that gave explicit expression to the stratagems developed in the Bangkok state's contest with the CPT. Those orders lay the foundation for the Thai military's continued active role in national integration. Among younger historians of Southeast Asia, scholarship scrutinizing the impact of the Cold War on, its long-term legacies for, the region has become fashionable. On one level, today's Thai military and its internal security activities, the Thai monarchy of the reign of King Bhumibol, and the relationship between the two institutions that has so distorted Thai political life for decades would appear to represent just such a legacy. But to restrict oneself to that level of understanding is myopic, and to view those two integrative institutions and the durability of the stratagems for national integration associated with their relationship in a time horizon of just sixty or even eighty years is an historiographic misstep. Those institutions' prominence in the post-1945 era notwithstanding, the story of Thailand's quest for integration and contest over the appropriate and just means to effect it long predated the Cold War. They have outlasted the counterinsurgency era. That attempts on the part of the Bangkok state, no matter how futile, to apply tools forged in that era continue is no surprise. Likewise, in the history of that quest and that contest, the recent prominence of Thailand's soldiers and its sovereigns comprises but a brief chapter—to be followed by other, perhaps very different, chapters, in which other, perhaps very different, actors may figure as the protagonists.

In its treatment of the internal security activities and civil affairs projects of the Thai military, *Infiltrating Society* invites comparison between the example of Thailand and those of other countries, both in Southeast Asia and outside the region. The volume can certainly inform understanding of the long, prominent and continuing “civic action” tradition of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and of the political implications of that tradition, just as that tradition can inform understanding of the Thai experience. The same is true of the socio-political vision associated with the concepts of the “family state” and the “floating mass” in New Order Indonesia. Further, the Thai military’s adoption of a strategy of counterinsurgent mobilization occurred in the same period that saw the governments of the United States and the Republic of Vietnam move to enhance “pacification” efforts in rural southern Vietnam under the broad framework of “Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support”, or CORDS—with its development cadres and determination to match the communists’ revolution with the Saigon government’s own. To turn to comparisons beyond Southeast Asia, the concerns of *Infiltrating Society* overlap with those of scholarship on the “professionalism”—whether “old” or “new”—of Latin American militaries in the twentieth century and on the political attitudes and political involvement associated with it.

Puangthong Pawakapan’s most pressing concern is, however, the state of her own country, the unending involvement of whose military in politics is of more than historical interest. *Infiltrating Society* draws on Puangthong’s historical perspective, her masterful use of sources and, above all, on her deep—and increasingly widely shared—conviction that much in Thailand need not be as it is. Her book makes clear the ineffectiveness of the Thai military’s involvement in internal security affairs as an approach to both political manipulation and national integration, despite the persistence of that involvement. The roots of this chronic failure to build a viable relationship between Bangkok and the society of its provincial hinterlands by militarized means lie in that approach’s long-evident and ever-increasing irrelevance to Thai social realities. This failure has meant that almost all that the military’s civil affairs projects and internal security activities have to show for themselves is the stunting of Thailand’s electoral democracy.

Read with this outcome in mind, Puangthong’s closely considered study amounts to a trenchant argument for giving Thai liberal democracy a chance. It underlines Thailand’s need to double down this time on elections, political parties and contestation among those parties—to bet on representative structures whose design ensures the participation in the national life of

provincial voters and of urban voters whose origins lie in the provinces. This bet holds out integrative possibilities with the flexibility to meet the demands of ongoing and unpredictable social change.

The title of *Infiltrating Society* is apt: Thai national integration must work as a social project, and not just a spatial one. In one of just a few, perhaps unwitting, gestures towards poignancy in her book, Puangthong leaves little doubt about who may stand to benefit from Thailand's taking a genuine chance on liberal democracy. The Bangkok state's mass organizations—with their uniforms and the sense of power and authority that those uniforms convey, and with the possibility of forging connections with influential patrons that participation in those organizations may bring—have long had particular appeal for marginalized Thais of modest means and modest levels of education, Puangthong writes. Membership in those organizations has thus held out at least an imagined refuge from precarity in Thailand's infamously unequal society. Taking a moment to think about the nature of that attraction will break the heart of any reader who knows Thailand. It will also bring home the urgency of replacing the failed, six-decade-old, military-led approach to national integration with one that better matches Thai realities and better meets Thai needs.