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## <Book Review>

Duncan McCargo

**Pavin Chachavalpongpun, ed. *Good Coup Gone Bad: Thailand's Political Developments since Thaksin's Downfall*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014, xv + 290p.**

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

mentators to become as selectively idealist as they often do when it comes to understanding politics and politicized violence in the Muslim world. That said, as vital as any such corrective must be, it is also limited by its own will to correct. After all, there would be nothing to correct if Islamic politics was, indeed, no more than the politics of Muslim actors. A more head-on interrogation of how the practice of dissent and power in the Muslim-majority world has, does, and will likely continue to be “determined” also by the Islamic or purportedly Islamic content of its practitioners’ ideas remains necessary. While no single edited volume can address all issues, it would be a mistake to imagine that the volume under review—as valuable as it is—suffers only from the limits of space. So too, the reader should remain aware, are certain limits imposed, and relevant questions that are unlikely to go away obscured by its preferred explanatory approach.

Faisal Chaudhry

*Department of South Asia Studies, University of Pennsylvania*

***“Good Coup” Gone Bad: Thailand’s Political Developments since Thaksin’s Downfall***

PAVIN CHACHAVALPONGPUN, ed.

Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014, xv + 290p.

Come back, General Sonthi—all is forgiven! The 2006 coup may have turned bad, but compared with the 2014 coup it now looks positively benign. This useful edited volume appeared just in time to serve as a primer for what went wrong in the wake of the previous military seizure of power. But apart from one chapter on the military, the focus of the book is not on the coup itself, but on a range of related actors and issues. The book is divided into four sections of two or three chapters: the impact of the coup on Thailand’s political landscape; the military and the monarchy; the emergence of yellow and red politics; and crises of legitimacy. In a sparse field, the volume is an invaluable addition to reading lists (I have already assigned it to my students), but some chapters are stronger than others, and several of them go over ground that the same authors have already covered in previous writings. To my mind the first two sections are much the most useful, and Thongchai Winichakul’s chapter on monarchy and anti-monarchy stands out as the centerpiece of the book.

Thongchai’s argument can be distilled into one provocative and important assertion: the Thai monarchy, far from serving as a source of stability, lies at the core of the country’s persistent instability and regular recourse to mass bloodshed, as seen in the four violent crackdowns of 1973, 1976, 1992, and 2010. Offering a brilliant exegesis of a provocative speech by redshirt leader Nattawut Saikua in 2008 about the contrast between the earth and the sky, Thongchai demonstrates

how a combination of hyper-royalism and suppression has helped produce a large-scale “awakening” of anti-monarchist sentiments. Most dangerously of all, widespread popular denial about the problematic role of the monarchy and the impending succession means that many Thais are living in a kind of alternate reality. However dark the period since September 2006 has been for Thailand’s politics, worse is yet to come.

Thongchai’s paper is bookended by two others: James Ockey on the military, and David Streckfuss on Thailand’s *lèse-majesté* laws (on which Streckfuss is the world’s leading authority). Streckfuss provides detailed evidence of the steep climb in Article 112 cases brought since the coup, and especially since the arrival of the unelected Abhisit Vejjajiva government in late 2008. Citing historical examples from France and Germany, Streckfuss argues that heavy-handed use of such laws undermines the legitimacy of the monarchy and so runs precisely counter to their stated aim of protecting the royal institution. The chapter should whet readers’ appetites to tackle Streckfuss’s 2011 book *Truth on Trial in Thailand*, in which he explores these arguments at much greater length. Ockey’s chapter argues that developments such as the assassination by a fellow soldier of pro-Thaksin Major General Khatiya Sawasdiphol at the height of the 2010 redshirt demonstrations illustrated deep-seated divisions in the Royal Thai Army. Ockey asserts that the politicization of the military into color-coded factions has left the institution “broken, divided and dangerous both to itself and to others” (p. 72). This is a bold claim: to date, the latest coup has shown the capacity of the Eastern Tigers/Queen’s Guard faction to dominate the army and subordinate internal contestation to the will of the top brass. Ockey’s calls for the “restoration of military corporateness” suggest that such corporateness genuinely existed in earlier decades. It might instead be argued that the Thai military has always been profoundly politicized—in other words, that it was broken from birth.

Federico Ferrara offers some historical context for the arguments advanced in these chapters. In a highly persuasive article, he suggests that “the recent recourse to bullets and emergency rule” (p. 38) and the associated rise in Article 112 cases are signs of desperation, as the yet-to-be *ancien régime* experiences a sharply declining moral authority. As of this writing, the themes of Thainess, Thai-style democracy, and unity in hierarchy are very much back in fashion—at least among the alarming numerous supporters of Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha and the current junta. That Thailand is, in Ferrara’s words, “running on empty” can scarcely be disputed. But I remain to be convinced that the future of the monarchy itself hangs in the balance.

The later chapters of the book address various additional perspectives on Thailand’s politics. Michael Nelson’s discussion of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the “Vote No” campaign makes a couple of important points: the anti-Thaksin movement was not synonymous with the PAD, and with or without the PAD, the “societal infrastructure and its political culture” (p. 160) was still in place for a resurgence of anti-Yingluck Shinawatra protests. The emergence of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) in late 2013 proved Nelson completely

correct, and was to prove the undoing of the Yingluck government. Nick Nostitz's chapter on the redshirt movement provides a useful summary of his views, though there are few surprises for those who follow his regular online commentary pieces on these issues. Andrew Walker's article "Is Peasant Politics in Thailand Civil?" answers its own question in his second sentence: "No." He goes on to provide a helpful sketch of the arguments he has made at greater length in his important 2012 book *Thailand's Political Peasants*.

The book concludes with two chapters ostensibly focused on crises of legitimacy. In his discussion of the bloody Southern border conflict, Marc Askew fails to engage with the arguments of those who see the decade-long violence as a legitimacy crisis for the Thai state, and omits to state his own position on this central debate. He rightly concludes that "the South is still an insecure place" (p. 246), but neglects to explain exactly why. Pavin Chachavalongpong offers a final chapter on Thai-Cambodia relations, but does not add a great deal to his brilliant earlier essay on Preah Vihear as "Temple of Doom," which remains the seminal account of that tragi-comic inter-state conflict.

I would have liked more gender balance among the contributors: there are a number of female scholars who could and should have been included. Overall, this is an extremely valuable book which will be widely read and assigned to students.

Duncan McCargo

*School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds*

### ***Taming People's Power: The EDSA Revolutions and Their Contradictions***

LISANDRO E. CLAUDIO

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013, 240p.

People power is the foundationalist myth of the ruling Aquino regime which began with the presidency of Corazon ("Cory") C. Aquino who replaced the fallen dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos in 1986 and which continues under the presidency of her son, Benigno ("Noynoy") S. Aquino, III, which will end in mid-2016. The Aquinos and their "yellow" crowd elite supporters claim legitimacy based on a divinely sanctioned popular uprising against an evil dictator re-establishing a righteous democracy. "People power" also gained international prominence as one of the first televised revolutions, with the plucky Cory Aquino defeating the wily dictator Marcos, leading to a heroic transition to democracy. That this piece of political folklore has lost appeal for most Filipinos who remain poor and are now often disillusioned with this once new political order is evidenced by the dwindling crowds at the annual official celebration of people power. The people themselves seem to have abandoned the idea of "people power."