Constitutionalizing the Barracks

How Militaries Entrench Power in Thailand and Burma

[Min Kyaw]

Introduction

Across the field of civil-military relations, scholars have long examined how constitutional design shapes democratic transitions and the role of armed forces in politics. A key assumption in transitions and the role of the military is that negotiated guarantees such as amnesty clauses, reserved legislative seats, or formal advisory roles can incentivize militaries to gradually withdraw from direct governance.[1] This pattern has been observed in countries like Indonesia and South Korea, where constitutional arrangements initially preserved the military's political influence but eventually facilitated a transition toward sustained democratic rule.[2] Yet this expectation does not hold universally.

This contrast raises a central question. Why do some countries that constitutionally formalize military authority fail to progress towards durable democratic governance? Two Southeast Asian countries —Burma and Thailand— stand as significant counterexamples. Both countries possess some of the most politically entrenched military institutions in the world, and despite periods of elections and constitutional reform, they have institutionalized mechanisms to reassert political power, consolidate political authority, and justify interventions. Understanding why some militaries maintain such enduring influence requires examining the historical, institutional, and political contexts that shape civil–

1 Juan J. Linz, "Transitions to Democracy," *The Washington Quarterly* 13 (1990): 4-222; Wendy Hunter, "Continuity or Change? Civil-Military Relations in Democratic Argentina, Chile, and Peru," *Political Science Quarterly* 112, no. 3 (1997): 453-75.

2 Lay Cornelis, "Democratic Transition in Local Indonesia: An Overview of Ten Years in Democracy," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik* 15, no. 3 (2012): 207-19; Hun Joo Kim, "Tracing the Development of Peace and Conflict Studies in South Korea," *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding* 11, no. 1 (2023): 33-57, https://doi.org/10.18588/202305.00a337.

military relations.

This paper argues that constitutional mechanisms enabling military persistence do not operate uniformly across cases; rather, their effects depend on distinct political conditions. In Burma, entrenched military economic interests and accelerated civilian reforms generated conditions for intervention, whereas in Thailand, the institutionalized alliance between the monarchy and military, reinforced by deep societal polarization, normalized recurrent coups and obstructed democratic consolidation. To investigate these dynamics, this study adopts a comparative case study approach using constitutional texts, historical records, and existing scholarship to trace how institutional design interacts with broader political conditions.

Theoretical Foundations and Scholarly Debates

Many scholars in this field begin by conceptualizing military regimes and civil-military relations. Civil-military relations, as defined by scholars, particularly from the West, are concerned with the subordination, balance of power, and authority between elected civilian governments and the armed forces, which many regard as the hallmark of a healthy democracy.[3] In regard to military regimes, early typologies distinguished them based on how closely the military controlled executive decision-making.[4] But Huntington argues that we should not just look into executive control but also take into consideration the military's influence on other areas of the government and the public, which would allow us to define military regimes better. Building on that, Perlmutter's definition of military regimes is focused on the idea of centralized executive control by the military, abolishment or full control of the legislature, and the bureaucracy as a blend of civilian and military control. This type of regime was common in Latin America during the second half of the 20th century, where threats from the revolutionary left or fractioning of opposition gave the militaries justification and legitimacy for their involvement in domestic politics.[5] While there were only three military regimes in Latin America during the 1930s, by the 70s, all but four became military or military-dominated regimes after a series of coups. Instead of a distinction between civilian and military rule, almost the entirety of the region experienced a blurred line between the two, with juntas or military-backed governments exercising direct control over legislative, executive, and sometimes even judicial functions.[6]

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3 John Mark Mattox, "The Philosophical Foundations of the Civil-Military Relationship," *National Defense University Press,* July 15, 2025, https://ndupress.ndu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/4244994/the-philosophical-foundations-of-the-civil-military-relationship/; Melissa Crouch, "Pre-Emptive Constitution-Making: Authoritarian Constitutionalism and the Military in Myanmar," *Law Society Review* 54, no. 2 (2020): 487-515.

4 Marie-Eve Reny, "A Typology of Military Regimes," Zhejiang University, 2023, https://researchgate.net/publication/367434182_A_Typology_of_Military_Regimes.

5 Mark J. Ruhl, "Changing Civil-Military Relations in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 33, no. 3 (1998): 257, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0023879100038504.

6 Ruhl, "Changing Civil-Military Relations in Latin America," 257.

Many of these so-called "involvements" came to an end in the last decades of the 20th century as the end of the Cold War, economic recessions, human rights abuses, and losses in warfare undermined their claim to political authority. Argentina's defeat in the Malvinas/Falklands War of 1982, Chile's horrendous human rights track record under Pinochet, and Brazil's lingering economic stagnation during the 80s are some events that contributed to the slow but certain erosion of the military's legitimacy as a governing institution.[7] Hunter then argues that in response, several militaries across Latin America were forced to initiate "controlled transitions," a negotiated process which ceded formal political power while retaining informal influence through constitutional safeguards and political veto powers. These transitions happened through a constitutional framework developed by the militaries themselves, allowing them to shape the rules of the new political order before stepping back from direct governance. Chile, for example, had nine seats in the senate reserved for unelected officials, a military dominated National Security Council, and political veto power for Pinochet and his general.[8] Such arrangements tie back to pacted transitions, a core concept in democratization theory described by Linz and Stepan, where opposition forces and authoritarian elites negotiate mutually acceptable arrangements to manage political change.[9] The role of the militaries in the region gradually diminished as unrestrained electoral competitions gave way to constitutional amendments and were later prosecuted for involvement in several human rights violations [except Chile until 2004].

Building on those findings, scholars then question why militaries, or authoritarian regimes would voluntarily create or endorse constitutional frameworks that might eventually constrain their own power. In other words, the question is not why they transitioned, since there has been extensive literature on the external and internal causes, but rather why they chose constitutionalism as their form of retreat. Negretto argues that militaries choose to write constitutions to facilitate their long-term objectives of political, social, and economic transformation and to enhance their influence over post-transition democratic governments. As unrestrained elections, the direct consequences of the constitution took root and constitutional amendments were introduced, militaries began to lose their direct grip on power. The reason why they were willing to allow this could be the subject of a separate paper and is not the primary focus of this research. The idea is, however, to highlight how regimes use constitutional frameworks and provisions during transitional periods, allowing for the emergence of genuine civilian authority and to show it worked, at least in the case of Latin America. A liberal view of the role of the military in a democracy—military subordination to civilian executive authority—has been solidified.

7 Hunter, "Continuity or Change?" 453-75.

8 Rodrigo Delaveau Swett, "Chile 1980 (Rev. 2021) Constitution" *Constitute Project,* 1980, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Chile_2021.

9 Linz, "Transitions to Democracy," 4-222.

Teo mentioned that it is, however, crucial to comprehend that the core assumption of civil-military rule made in Western literature cannot be easily transplanted to Southeast Asia, especially Burma and Thailand.[10] The notion revolving around the military's subordination to civilian governments and the legitimacy of the civilian democratic rule simply does not work. He challenged the western model by effectively giving three arguments; 1) Southeast Asian militaries do not have institutional legacies of subordination to civilian rule, 2) civilian politicians are not trusted, and 3) religion, ethnicity, history, tradition, and economic preferences all retain considerable political significance. They have played a significant role in the nation's struggle for independence, in the nation's foundation years [Burma], or in the transition from one regime to another [Thailand].[11] These factors fostered a political environment where the military's involvement in governance is normalized rather than contested. In both countries, the armed forces are positioned consistently as the ultimate arbiters of national unity and stability, reinforcing the belief that the military is indispensable to the state.

The two societies are more amenable to deference to authority and paternalism, and as a result, they are more willing to surrender their individual rights in return for community harmony and state security than their counterparts in the West.[12] These factors help explain why Thailand has had at least ten coups since becoming a constitutional monarchy and Burma has undergone four since independence in 1948. But this does not suggest that both Burma and Thailand have not attempted to pursue democratic reforms/transitions. Like their Latin American counterparts, both militaries in Burma and Thailand sought to institutionalize their influence through constitutional and legal mechanisms—Thailand adopted their democratic "Thai People's" constitution in 1997 whereas Burma took steps towards reformation with the 2008 "Nargis" Constitution. The constitution of Thailand was seen as a huge step towards democratization with several features seen in a democratic state, while still allowing the military to retain influence through an oversight mechanism; whereas Burma's was labeled a survival strategy for the military regime rather than a deliberate process of liberalization.[13] Nevertheless, both constitutions were widely accepted to be

10 Marcus Teo, "Constitutional Civil–Military Dynamics in Southeast Asia," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 20, no. 1 (2022): 237-71.

11 Muthiah Alagappa, *Coercion and Governance: The Declining Political Role of the Military in Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780804779234.

12 Mark Beeson, Alex J. Bellamy, and Bryn Hughes, "Taming the Tigers? Reforming the Security Sector in Southeast Asia," *The Pacific Review* 19, no. 4 (2006): 449-72, https://doi.org/10.1080/09512740600984804.

13 Kittipong Kittayarak, "The Thai Constitution of 1997 and Its Implication on Criminal Justice Reform," (2001): 1-11; Aurel Croissant and Jil Kamerling, "Why Do Military Regimes Institutionalize? Constitution-Making and Elections as Political Survival Strategy in Myanmar," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 2 (2013): 105-25, https://doi.org/10.1080/02185377.2013.823797.

a stepping stone towards democratization processes and created structured pathways for the gradual expansion of civilian authority.

However, the transition phases came to a halt when Thailand staged a military coup in 2014, while in Burma, the military seized power in 2021, reversing the results of 2020 general elections. Unlike Latin American cases where the military ceded formal authority while maintaining influence through constitutional mechanisms, both Burma and Thailand saw their militaries fully reassert control. Despite drafting the constitutional frameworks and provisions that provided significant authority, they reverse transitions rather than negotiating a slow and partial retreat. This phenomenon illustrates the extent of their authority and leverage. In fact, Macdonald in his 2018 piece argues that the existence of political allies and cohesiveness of the military, degree of unification of domestic opposition elements against the militaries, and international pressures and influences allows both militaries to become two of the most resilient and enduring politically active militaries in the world.

In brief, despite guarantees of constitutional power, Burma and Thailand saw reversals in their democratic transition process, with both militaries reasserting control when they chose to. There is limited literature on why this occurs, unlike the cases in Latin America where it has been extensively studied. This gap forms the basis of this paper, seeking to understand the conditions and factors that led to the reversal of democratic transitioning processes in the two Southeast Asian countries. This paper aims to shift the focus of civil-military relations studies and democratic backsliding using authoritarian constitutions to Southeast Asia, where two of the most persistent and politically dominant institutions coexist.

While Latin American militaries eventually ceded formal authority and allowed genuine democratic consolidation to emerge through a negotiated constitutional framework, the Southeast Asian experience, especially the likes of Burma and Thailand, followed a unique pathway. Despite similar institutional patterns of constitutional design, Burma and Thailand's democratic transitions were neither the product of external pressure nor a genuine internal commitment to a liberal reform. Rather, it was a carefully orchestrated process by the military itself, designed to safeguard their interests while gaining support both internationally and domestically. Both militaries, unlike their Latin American counterparts, never intended to fully withdraw as political actors. Instead, they constructed a constitutional and political architecture that allowed them to retreat strategically and reverse the democratic transition process at any moment they deem necessary.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design that integrates both historical and contemporary evidence to analyze democratic consolidation and civil-military relations in Burma and Thailand. The analysis draws on credible multilingual news sources in Burmese, Thai, and English from the 1930s to 2025, which includes but is not limited to *Myanmar Now, Reuters, The Times, Bangkok Post, TNN,* and *The*

Irrawaddy. This helps represent domestic narratives of the events and how they are understood not just from the outside but also from within. It also captures local political perspectives that foreign sources might miss or misunderstand. In addition, the research incorporates reports from human rights organizations, civil-society organizations, parliamentary records, constitutional documents, and policy papers. Amnesty International and Justice for Myanmar are two examples whose reporting provides detailed documentation of economic influences, human rights violations, and some classified military resources. To supplement these sources and solidify the evidence, virtual interviews with civil-military experts, members of the opposition, activists, and politicians were conducted. These provided first-hand insight into elite strategies, political decision-making, and professional commentary on civil-military relations.

This study also recognizes the limitations of this methodology. Reliance on news media, reports, and interviews may introduce bias, as these sources reflect particular perspectives or selective reporting. The current conflict in Burma and the political sensitivity surrounding the military in Thailand also limit the availability of consistent datasets. The use of multilingual sources also raises the risk of inaccuracies or misinterpretation of nuanced political language. These constraints could constitute potential gaps in interpretation, and the findings must therefore be understood as informed approximations rather than definitive measurements.

Burma's Unfinished Transition

Understanding the reversal of Burma's democratic transition requires looking beyond institutional design and frameworks. The military, in this case the Tatmadaw, whose extensive economic and institutional power provided it with both the means and motivations to reverse democratization once its interests were threatened. The civilian government's inability to unite diverse political constituencies, coupled with its assertive approach towards reformation, intensified the Tatmadaw's sense of insecurity, thus hastening the collapse of the transition. The Tatmadaw remains one of the largest and most powerful institutional actors not just in the country, but also in the region. They are ranked 36th globally in military strength and 19th in Asia, according to GlobalFirepower's list of 2025. Since Burma's independence in 1948, the Tatmadaw has positioned itself as the guardian of national sovereignty and unity, defending against the retreating Chinese nationalist forces and the Burmese Communist Party during the fifties. This self-perception as the ultimate protector of the nation has allowed the military to legitimize its political involvement and justify recurrent interventions in civilian governance. Their influence extends not just to its coercive capacity and the bureaucracy but also over the economy.

Tatmadaw's Economic Empire

The Tatmadaw owns and operates private companies, such as Myanmar

Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), dominating major sectors of the national economy, including banking, construction, healthcare, insurance, manufacturing, natural resource extraction, trading, and telecommunications. General Nyo Saw, the current head of the government and former quartermaster of the Tatmadaw, serves as the chairperson of MEC, while Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the 2021 coup, is the chairperson of MEHL.[14] International businesses have also partnered directly with these military-owned conglomerates, investing in or conducting joint ventures in key sectors. Companies such as Kirin and JCB from Japan, POSCO from South Korea, and firms from China, Singapore, and Thailand have collaborated with MEHL and MEC, providing the Tatmadaw with financial resources and access to the international market.[15] According to a document from Amnesty International in 2020, these ventures bring in a total of $18 billion in dividends alone, allowing the Tatmadaw to fund its operations independently of civilian oversight and sustain its political dominance.

Despite the vast wealth generated by the Tatmadaw and its conglomerates, their economic power was not explicitly protected under the 2008 constitution in the same way as its political authority. The trajectory shifted significantly in 2015 with the election of a fully civilian government, led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. For the first time in five decades, civilian authorities have the space to influence economic policy and challenge the Tatmadaw's monopolistic control over strategic industries. Non-state actors, including human rights organizations and advocacy groups, started pressuring the government to ensure the Tatmadaw is held accountable and transparent in its ventures. This pressure intensified after the 33rd and 99th light infantry divisions which were embroiled in a series of human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and forced relocation of minorities, were also found to be receiving dividend payments from military-owned corporations.[16]

The civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi began to swiftly investigate the conflicts of interest, marking a rare and bold attempt to challenge the military's entrenched economic influence. The head of the government's anti-corruption committee was revealed to be one of the board members of the

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14 "Myanmar Military's Business Supremo in Spotlight," *The Irrawaddy,* August 17, 2022, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-militarys-business-supremo-in-spotlight.html; "ဦးပိုင်နဲ့ MEC တို့ ဘယ်လို စီးပွားရေးတွေ လုပ်နေလဲ," *BBC News* မြန်မာ, August 7, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma-49272042.

15 "Myanmar Military Gets Billions from Profitable Business: Amnesty," *Al Jazeera,* September 10, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/10/myanmar-military-gets-billions-from-profitable-business-amnesty.

16 Simon Lewis, Clare Baldwin, and Andrew R. C. Marshall, "How Myanmar's Shock Troops Led the Assault That Expelled the Rohingya," *Reuters,* June 26, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-rohingya-battalions/; *CNA,* UN Report Calls for Sanctions against Myanmar Military-Linked Businesses, YouTube video, 4:10, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IaIzVSiZIw.

MEHL, who held significant shares and was receiving dividends yearly. Several port authorities of Burma's most profitable ports and the heads of the Internal Revenue Department were also later discovered to hold directorial positions within the military-led corporations.[17] After several instances of public backlash and immense pressure from the government, they later had to resign from their positions within the corporations. The momentum built up as many non-state actors continued to urge foreign companies to withdraw from joint ventures–arguing that continued business cooperation indirectly funded human rights violations. Two South Korean civil-society coalitions and Myanmar activist groups filed complaints against five South Korean businesses that have commercial ties with the Tatmadaw, including the steel giant POSCO and LOTTE, one of the largest hotels and resort chains in Asia.[18] Similarly, Kirin Beer was criticized for its continued partnership, and several Singaporean companies were questioned by their national parliament about their business activities in Burma publicly.[19] Even powerful local institutions began to reconsider their relationships with the Tatmadaw. KBZ Bank, one of the largest private banks, and its president, being a close ally of the generals, chose to temporarily halt any business activities after public pressure both from the government and the public.[20]

These developments represented one of the few moments in contemporary Burmese history when the military's economic dominance faced meaningful resistance from multiple fronts: the government, the private sector, and civil society. This push revealed not only the scale and reach of the Tatmadaw's economic capabilities but also how the civilian government attempted to use economic pressure as a means of rebalancing civil-military power. However, it would be wrong to assume the military's reverse democratization attempt was largely due to mounting economic pressure. The civilian government moved with unusual swiftness, launching investigations and pressing for results at a pace that unsettled the Tatmadaw. This sense of urgency was also evident in their broader political reform agenda, which sought to restructure key institutions and assert greater oversight over areas historically dominated by the military.

Reform Era with Aung San Suu Kyi

The Burmese constitution drafted by the Tatmadaw explicitly barred anyone with a foreign spouse or children to be the president, an article many

17 Nyan Hlaing Lin and Sa Htun Aung, "ဆိပ်ကမ်းအာဏာပိုင်နှင့် အကောက်ခွန်အကြီးအကဲနှစ်ဦး ဦးပိုင်ဒါရိုက်တာအဖွဲ့ဝင်အဖြစ်က နုတ်ထွက်," *Myanmar Now,* July 17, 2020, https://myanmar-now.org//mm/news/4119/; Hlaing Lin, "အဂတိလိုက်စားမှုတိုက်ဖျက်ရေးကော်မရှင်ဥက္ကဋ္ဌပြင်လျှင် ဦးပိုင်ရှယ်ယာရှင်ဖြစ်နေ," *Myanmar Now,* June 15, 2020, https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/3905/.

18 "တပ်မတော်ပိုင် ဦးပိုင်ကုမ္ပဏီနှင့် လက်တွဲဖျက်ရန် KBZ ကိုပြမ်းနဟောဆို," *Myanmar Now,* September 10, 2020, https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/4473/.

19 "Myanmar Military's Business Supremo in Spotlight," *The Irrawaddy.*

20 "တပ်မတော်ပိုင် ဦးပိုင်ကုမ္ပဏီနှင့် လက်တွဲဖျက်ရန် KBZ ကိုပြမ်းနဟောဆို," *Myanmar Now.*

consider a deliberate mechanism to prevent the widely popular Aung San Suu Kyi from attaining political leadership. But as soon as the civilian government attained power, the parliament activated article 217, which states the parliament shall have the authority to confer functions and powers upon any authoritative body or person to be deemed to transfer to the President functions and powers vested in any administrative body, or person concerned under the existing law.[21] This law allows Aung San Suu Kyi to be instated as the "State Counsellor," a de facto prime ministerial position that effectively has authority over both the executive and legislative branches despite constitutional barriers preventing her from assuming the presidency.

Within their first term, the civilian government initiated a series of bold moves aimed at limiting the military's entrenched power—a tactic some argue was too reckless and short-sighted. Professor Macdonald, a civil-military expert on Southeast Asia at Dalhousie University, mentions that transitions are often long and tedious. The opposition will have to abide by the pre-set rules regardless of their urgency or political ambitions. Failure to do so can provoke institutional backlash and undermine the transition process. Among these efforts were attempts to challenge the system of reserved parliamentary seats allocated to the Tatmadaw and constitutional provisions that restricted who could assume the presidency.[22]

These initiatives were met with persistent opposition from the military, whose representatives frequently stood up in parliament or, in some cases, refused to vote, to voice their dissent. A recurring justification used by the representatives was that the attempt to amend the constitution should take time and not be "exploited."[23] In some cases, speeches and arguments made by military representatives were removed from the official parliamentary records, and certain military members were removed from key parliamentary committees–a move the Tatmadaw claimed to be unconstitutional and an infringement on their

21 "မြန်မာ. "နိုင်ငံ အတိုင်ပင်ခံပုဂ္ဂိုလ် ဥပဒေကြမ်းတင်မယ်," *BBC News,* March 30, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma/2016/03/160330_state_counsellor; Sithu Aung Myint, "နိုင်ငံတော်ရဲ့ အတိုင်ပင်ခံပုဂ္ဂိုလ်ဆိုင်ရာ ဥပဒေကြမ်း ပြဿနာ၊ နောက်ဆက်တွဲ ဘာဖြစ်လာနိုင်သလဲ," ဗွီအိုအေ, *VOA News,* April 4, 2016, https://burmese.voanews.com/a/state-counsellor-dassk/3267463.html.

22 "ဖွဲ့စည်းပုံ အခြေခံဥပဒေ ပြင်ဆင်ရေး ပူးပေါင်းကော်မတီ ဖွဲ့စည်းရန် အရေးကြီးအဆို တင်သွင်းမှု တပ်မတော်သား လွှတ်တော်ကိုယ်စားလှယ် အားလုံး မတ်တတ်ရပ် ကန့်ကွက်ခဲ့သော်လည်း အဆိုကို ဆွေးနွေးရန် မဲခွဲအတည်ပြု," Eleven Media Group Co., Ltd., January 29, 2019, https://news-eleven.com/article/76819; Tun Tun, "တပ်မတော် အာဏာလျှော့ချရန် ဖွဲ့စည်းပုံ ပြင်ဆင်ရေး ဥပဒေမူကြမ်း အဆိုပြုချက်များ," *The Irrawaddy,* February 1, 2020, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/article/2020/02/01/214493.html.

23 Htet Naing Zaw, "တပ်မတော်သားတဦး တာဝန်မှ ဖယ်ရှားခံရမှု တပ်ကိုယ်စားလှယ်များ ကန့်ကွက်." ဧရာဝတီ, *The Irrawaddy,* January 29, 2019, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2019/01/29/181659.html; Htet Naing Zaw, "လႊတ်တော်တွင် ဒီမိုကရေစီ 'အိုးင်္ကင်္ခံရျပန်ပြီ' ဟု တပ်မတော်ပြော." ဧရာဝတီ, *The Irrawaddy,* May 14, 2019, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2019/05/14/191231.html.

institutional rights.[24]

Tensions further escalated with attempts to discuss sensitive issues such as the salary and retirement of the commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing. Government officials argue that this matter fell under the purview of the president.[25] The Tatmadaw framed these developments as instances of institutional bullying and argued the ruling party's parliamentary majority allowed it to pass laws with minimal resistance, destabilizing democratic norms.[26] This brief period illustrated the growing friction between the civilian government's push for reform and the military's insistence on preserving its constitutional privileges. Ultimately, the combination of swift reforms that challenged established authority and growing scrutiny over areas where the military's economic interests were not protected created tensions and worry for the Tatmadaw. While these were not the only pressures shaping Burma's political landscape during the second half of the 2010s, they were perhaps key contributing factors influencing the Tatmadaw's decision to step back from the democratic transition and stage a coup under a fabricated justification in 2021.

Thailand's Interrupted Transitions

Having analyzed Burma, it is instructive to turn to Thailand, where military influence over politics takes on a distinct character. Unlike the Tatmadaw, which largely acts independently, the Thai military shares a longstanding alliance with the monarchy, giving it both legitimacy and strategic advantage in constraining civilian authority. Alongside this, Thailand's political landscape has long been defined by sharp polarization between various factions, such as the royalists, populists, and the reformists. This created openings for the military to intervene several times under the pretext of restoring order, which this paper argues became the reason why Thailand has struggled to achieve sustained democratic consolidation.

Bhumibol and the Generals

The Thai military's major involvement in politics began in the early 1910s, when young military officers tried unsuccessfully to overthrow and replace King Rama VI's Thailand with a Westernized constitutional system.[27] Their eventual success came in 1932, with a bloodless coup that transformed Thailand from an

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24 "မြန်မာ. "တပ်ကဆွေးနွေးချက်အချို့ လွှတ်တော်မှတ်တမ်းကနေ ပယ်ဖျက်," *BBC News,* November 29, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma-50596872; Htet Naing Htet, "တပ်မတော်သား တဦး တာဝန်မှ ဖယ်ရှားခံရမှု တပ်ကိုယ်စားလှယ်များ ကန့်ကွက်," ဧရာဝတီ, *The Irrawaddy,* January 29, 2019, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2019/01/01/29/181659.html.

25 Htet Naing Zaw, "တပ်ချုပ်ရာထူးနှင့် ပင်စင်ကိစ္စ သမ္မတ၏ ဆုံးဖြတ်ခွင့်ဟု ပြည်ထောင်စု ရာထူးဝန် အဖွဲ့ပြော." ဧရာဝတီ, *The Irrawaddy,* June 1, 2018, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2018/06/01/160029.html.

26 Htet Naing Zaw, "လွှတ်တော်တွင် ဒီမိုကရေစီ 'အနိုင်ကျင့်ခံရပြန်ပြီ' ဟု တပ်မတော်ပြော." ဧရာဝတီ, *The Irrawaddy,* May 14, 2019, https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2019/05/14/191231.html.

27 Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead, *The Rise and Decline of Thai Absolutism* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy.[28] Rather than stabilizing the political order, the new regime experienced two additional coups just a year later, each driven by rival factions within the military and political elite. Building on this legacy of successive coups, it established a pattern of path dependency, where successive generations of military leaders internalized the belief that the armed forces were the ultimate guardians of national stability and the monarchy.

A crucial factor in this entrenchment was the military's strategic alliance with King Bhumibol Adulyadej, whose reign lasted from 1946 to 2016, the longest on record of any independent Asian sovereign.[29] Perhaps the clearest illustration of the Thai military-monarchy alignment is how the success or failure of military interventions has depended on Bhumibol's royal endorsement. In 1973, Thanom Kittikachorn, a long-term premier of Thailand, attempted to further consolidate the military's monopoly over political authority and responded with violence towards dissenters and opposition. Bhumibol intervened directly, for the first time in contemporary Thai history, recognizing that Thanom's violent crackdown threatened national stability and the monarchy's moral authority. He summoned the general to the palace and pressed him to resign and later appointed a civilian prime minister Sanya Dharmasakti in his name.[30] Two years later in 1976, the Thai military staged yet another coup under the leadership of the staunch royalist General Thanin—a plot that Bhumibol was aware of and did not oppose.[31] The events of the 1970s in Thailand established a pattern. The king's involvement in the former crisis and the rapid endorsement of the new junta is further evidence of the perception that interventions aligned with royal preferences would inevitably succeed. The military could act as long as it moved in harmony with the monarchy, and in turn, the monarchy relied on the military to uphold the political order it favored.

These interesting dynamics continued into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. When the military's moves diverged from the palace's intentions, it faltered, as seen in the failed 1981 and 1985 coups. When it coincided, the pattern of successful intervention reemerged. For example, in 1992, Bhumibol intervened for the second time after the key 1991 coup leader General Suchinda

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28 Nakharin Mektrairat, "Khwamkhit khwamru lae amnat kanmuang nai kanpathiwat Sayam 247," *Social Science Association of Thailand* 24, no. 2 (1993): 374-77.

29 "Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej Dies at 88," *Al Jazeera,* October 13, 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/13/thailands-king-bhumibol-adulyadej-dies-at-88.

30 Malcolm W. Browne, "Students Gain Control in Thai Uprising," *The New York Times,* October 16, 1973, https://www.nytimes.com/1973/10/16/archives/students-gain-control-in-thai-uprising-bangkok-students-gain.html; "Thailand on Military Alert as Cabinet Resigns," *The New York Times,* May 22, 1974, https://www.nytimes.com/1974/05/22/archives/thailand-on-military-alert-as-cabinet-resigns-no-major-change-in.html.

31 Tyrell Haberkorn, "The Anniversary of a Massacre and the Death of a Monarch," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 2 (2017): 269-81, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911817000018.

decided to become an unelected prime minister.[32] In a widely televised event, he summoned both Suchinda and the opposition leader to the palace, where both men appeared on their knees before him.[33] Within days, Suchinda resigned, the military withdrew from politics, and elections were restored. Again in 2006, for the third time, Bhumibol mediated and acknowledged another military intervention as Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra expanded his influence over state institutions and consolidated unprecedented electoral support.[34] Thaksin's growing influence and political dominance began to threaten the traditional centers of influence, including that of the king. His open challenge towards the "Amart," the established elite networks of politicians, military leaders, and aristocrats, was seen as an effort to undermine the crown's longstanding role as the guardian of national unity and moral authority. Taken together, this series of events demonstrates a pattern as mentioned before and is central to understanding why Thailand has struggled to consolidate democracy. However, this institutional alliance alone does not fully explain the persistence of military dominance. Rather, it interacts with a second factor, Thailand's severe political polarization.

The Politics of Polarization in Thailand

While Thailand's political polarization stretches back to the 1930s, a full account of it would require an entirely separate paper. For the purpose of this study, the analysis will concentrate on the period from 2006 to 2023, beginning with the rise of the Thaksin family and ending with the most recent challenge to the establishment under Pita Limjaroenrat and the Move Forward Party. This 17-year period represents the most intense and consequential phase of Thailand's contemporary polarization. In this paper, the factions are categorized into three different groups: populists, reformists, and royalists. The populists represent the likes of the Thaksin family, a group of people attempting to limit the role of the elites and emphasizing welfare expansions but retaining the status quo—a constitutional monarchy. The reformists are the newcomers like Pita, attempting to reform the entire system which includes but is not limited to the bureaucracy, military, and most importantly the monarchy. The royalists encompass military generals, conservative elites and parts of the urban middle class who see themselves as defenders of the traditional order. The king and the monarchy are the central pillars of national identity and political legitimacy. It is the interaction among these three factions that produce recurring cycles of political deadlocks, and ultimately military interventions.

During his term as prime minister, Thaksin sidelined military officers

32 Kittipong Thavevong, "Times When His Majesty Had to Step In," *The Nation Thailand,* October 31, 2016, https://www.nationthailand.com/in-focus/30298841.

33 "Kneeling before a King: The Moment That Shook a Nation," *BBC News,* October 13, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37650466.

34 Peter Walker, "Thai Military Claims Control after Coup," *The Guardian,* September 19, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/sep/19/thailand.

that aligned with the palace such as Tinsulanonda, a former coup leader and prime minister, and openly challenged the authority of Bhumibol.[35] He also centralized control over the bureaucracy by appointing officials perceived as loyal to his administration and expanding the scope of executive oversight.[36] This intensified elite anxiety that Thaksin was reshaping the political order in ways that marginalized the monarchy's informal authority. Although these were not the only factors, they became one of the justifications for the mass protests and a coup in 2006. The political polarization generated by the rift between Thaksin and the elites also resulted in the emergence of mass-mobilized color-coded movements. Thaksin supporters mobilized as the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship or the "Red Shirts" and his opponents—many of whom were aligned with the elites and the monarchy—formed the People's Alliance for Democracy, or the "Yellow Shirts.[37] These opposing movements were met with violent confrontations and national paralysis and reflected a deep structural rift within Thailand's politics.

Although Thaksin was deposed under a coup, his political party Pheu Thai and his sister Yingluck Shinawatra won the elections just a few years later, but it was met with the same fate, and her government did not last long either.[38] Violent nationwide protests occurred under her rule, and the opposition sees her as an extension of her brother Thaksin. Political deadlock deepened, and clashes between rival protest groups grew more vicious.[39] General Prayut Chan-o-Cha, a firm royalist, staged a coup in 2014, claiming it was necessary to restore order and protect the unity of the Thai people.[40]

The cycle of polarization and military interventions did not end in 2014; it evolved into a new phase with the emergence of a younger reformist generation. This dynamic became apparent with the rise of the Move Forward Party and its leader, Pita Limjaroenrat, a Harvard-educated reformist calling for a comprehensive reconfiguration of Thailand's political order. A key ideology/

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35 Joshua Kurlantzick and Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Prem Tinsulanonda's Legacy—and the Failures of Thai Politics Today," *Council on Foreign Relations,* May 28, 2019, https://www.cfr.org/blog/prem-tinsulanondas-legacy-and-failures-thai-politics-today.

36 Jacob I. Ricks, "Agents, Principals, or Something in Between? Bureaucrats and Policy Control in Thailand," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018): 321-44, https://doi.org/10.1017/jea.2018.17.

37 "Red Shirt v Yellow Shirt: Thailand's Political Struggle," *The Independent,* August 20, 2010, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/red-shirt-v-yellow-shirt-thailand-s-political-struggle-2057293.html; "Profile: Thailand's Reds and Yellows," *BBC News,* May 5, 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-13294268.

38 "Yingluck Royally Endorsed 28th PM of Thailand," *Pattaya Mail,* August 9, 2011, https://www.pattayamail.com/thailandnews/yingluck-royally-endorsed-28th-pm-of-thailand-5350.

39 "Suthep Declares 'People's Revolt'," *Bangkok Post,* November 30, 2013, https://www.bangkokpost.com/ thailand/politics/382361/suthep-declares-people-revolt.

40 Adam Taylor and Anup Kaphle, "Thailand's Army Just Announced a Coup. Here Are 11 Other Thai Coups since 1932," *The Washington Post,* May 22, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/05/20/thailands-army-says-this-definitely-isnt-a-coup-heres-11-times-it-definitely-was/.

policy Pita and his party propose is the amendment of the Lèse-majesté law that criminalizes defamation, insult, or threat against the king of Thailand and complete reform of the Thai military.[41] These proposals strongly resonated with younger and urban voters, many of whom were frustrated with the power struggles between the populists and royalist factions. But the remaining factions viewed Pita's reform agenda as a direct challenge to the established political order. This tension came to a head-on collision during the 2023 general elections, where Move Forward secured a historic number of seats in the lower house and formed a coalition with several smaller parties.[42]

Despite this victory, Pita faced institutional resistance from the military-controlled Senate, which blocked his path to premiership.[43] The nomination to appoint him as the prime minister was struck down twice, and in a later dramatic move, the Thai constitutional court dissolved the Move Forward Party for violating the constitution—a claim criticized by independent observers as absurd.[44] In yet another political stalemate, the primary beneficiaries were the Shinawatra family, where Paetongtarn, the daughter of Thaksin, was able to form a coalition under the agreement with the military and assumed the premiership.[45] This division between the factions and crises often justifies or at least creates the pretext for military interventions or military dominance. When combined with the strategic alliance between the monarchy and the military, these dynamics became crucial to comprehend why Thailand has struggled to achieve sustained democratic consolidation.

Conclusion

The trajectories of Burma and Thailand demonstrate that constitutional guarantees of military authority do not necessarily facilitate a gradual withdrawal from political power nor do they ensure the conditions necessary for democratic consolidation.

This paper argued that two distinct, yet functionally similar dynamics explain these reversals. In Burma, the Tatmadaw's expansive economic interests,

41 Zaheena Rasheed, "Youth Party Galvanises Thai Voters with Promises of Royal Reforms," *Al Jazeera,* May 13, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/13/move-forward-galvanises-thai-voters-with-vows-of-royal-reforms.

42 Jonathan Head, "Thailand Elections: Voters Deliver Stunning Blow to Army-Backed Rule," *BBC News,* May 15, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65567781.

43 "จับตาโหวตนายกรัฐมนตรีเสนอชื่อ พิธา ลิ้มเจริญรัตน์ ครั้งที่ 2 ทำได้หรือไม่," *TNN Thailand,* July 17, 2023, https://www.tnnthailand.com/politics/151261/.

44 "เปิดคำวินิจฉัยฉบับเต็ม ศาลรัฐธรรมนูญ ตัดสิน 'ยุบพรรคก้าวไกล," *Thai PBS,* August 7, 2024, https://www.thaipbs.or.th/news/content/342836; Panu Wongcha-um and Panarat Thepgumpanat, "Thai Court Orders Election Winners to Abandon Plan to Change Royal Insults Law," *Reuters,* January 31, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/thai-court-rule-election-winners-bid-change-royal-insults-law-2024-01-31/.

45 "'แพทองธาร' ติดอับดับ 29 สตรีผู้ทรงอิทธิพลแห่งปี 2024 จาก Forbes," *Thansettakij,* December 15, 2024, https://www.thansettakij.com/politics/614571.

coupled with the rapid pace of civilian reform targeting military monopolies and constitutional privileges, generated security dilemmas within the military elite that ultimately prompted a return to direct rule. In Thailand, democratic backsliding is rooted less in institutional threats and more in a historically constructed alliance between the monarchy and the armed forces, reinforced by deep electoral polarization. Together, these dynamics created a political environment where military intervention is not perceived as exceptional, but rather as a legitimate corrective mechanism.

These findings challenge conventional transition theory, which assumes militaries gradually retreat through negotiated frameworks, and highlight the importance of relative factors such as historical legacies, institutional design, and elite cohesion. Future research should build on these insights in three directions. First, comparative institutional analysis across regions, particularly South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East may reveal whether Burma and Thailand reflect a broader pattern of "reversible transitions" rather than failed ones. Second, interdisciplinary approaches drawing from political economy and security sector governance could deepen understanding of how military-controlled industries function as barriers to democratization. Finally, longitudinal public opinion and elite attitude studies could clarify how nationalism, monarchy, religion, and identity shape societal tolerance for military intervention.