Fragile Democratization When Military Forces Fear Losing Control over Transition: The Cases of Thailand and Myanmar

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Abstract: The journey towards democracy is fraught with fragility and volatility. In this study, a comparative analysis of democracy in Thailand and Myanmar was conducted to found their commonalities. With an introduction to the basic political realities of the two countries, and figures and tables to compare the seats held by the military and democratic camps in the last few elections, the author demonstrate the evolution of pro-military and pro-democratic parties in both countries. It is found that: first, the politics in both countries historically were heavily influenced by military forces. Second, in the recent past, the military in both countries actually tolerated a certain degree of democratization. Finally, when the military found that the democratization process was beyond their control, or more accurately, when democratic forces in military-controlled parliaments gained a large advantage to the point where they could potentially destabilize the military's substantial power, the military tended to intervene to slow down that democratization process. Through a historical and comparative analysis, the study demonstrates the twists and turns that Thailand and Myanmar faced in achieving adequate political and social transformation, and finds the source of such twists and turns - the military's fear of losing power.

Keywords: Democratization; Military Coup; Thailand; Myanmar

1. Introduction

In the 2013 Bangkok local elections in Thailand, the incumbent Pheu Thai Party gained a notable increase in popular support, while such progress appeared to concern the military and its allied party. Then, the military suspended the general elections that were planned for early 2014. Subsequently, the military initiated a coup and took control of the government, echoing their previous intervention in 2006. In Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, a similar scenario unfolded when the military detained the leader of the elected government after a significant civilian victory in legislative elections. Over the years, both of these neighboring countries have been under the influence of their respective

militaries. Both countries indeed undertook several initiatives aimed at democratization and civilianization within the context of authoritarian military rule, hoping for achieving the full democratic transformation. However, this transformation was not smooth. Actually, the classification of these two countries as transitional democracies remains a subject of debate. Slater (2006, p. 3) characterized the Thai military's actions in 2006 as a suspension of democratic processes, while describing the Myanmar military as displaying "unambiguously and unabashedly authoritarian" tendencies. Mérieau (2019, p. 328) defined Thai politics as in "vicious cycle," and "each cycle starts and ends in a military coup." Nguyen (2015), however, classified Thailand as a "consolidated democracy." Overall, it seems more suitable to characterize these two nations as still being ongoing states of transformation, since in both countries, the democratization process is frequently derailed by coups just as it is on the verge of achieving significant advancements. The coups may originate from high-ranking government officials who are attempting to enact democratic reforms in a top-down manner, or they could be instigated by factions with military ties who are acting on directives from senior officials. It appears that, despite the authoritarian powers' willingness to engage in democratization and decentralization reforms in response to pressures from the international community and their own populace, such reforms are permitted only within a predefined boundary and to a limited extent. In essence, to a certain degree, these reforms are merely a survival tactic employed by the military government, a facade of change (Croissant and Kamerling 2013, p. 107). From the vantage point of the authoritarian authorities, the trajectory and progression of democratization must remain under their control, leading to the democracy within a birdcage (Lee 2012).

In fact, democratization transitions have been the subject of extensive scholarly inquiry. The third wave of democratization after 1974 began in Spain, Greece, and Portugal (Huntington 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996), has witnessed the end of quite several authoritarian regimes. However the transition process encountered various challenges. Studies by Shivji (2013) and Morency-Laflamme (2015) on Africa, Slater (2012) on Malaysia and Singapore, and Estévez (2014) on Argentina, Peru, and Ecuador, all shed light on the intricate patterns and challenges encountered during transitions from authoritarianism to democracy. Among the spectrum of authoritarian regimes, military juntas are recognized as the most severe form, distinguished by the replacement of civilian politicians with military personnel, often leading to militarism (Nguyen 2015, p. 9). Despite a general global trend towards the decline of military governance (Alagappa 2001), instances of military attempts to retake power are not unheard of, as seen in Mali in 2012, Egypt in 2013, Thailand in 2014, Burkina Faso in 2015, Turkey in 2016, Zimbabwe in 2017, and Myanmar in 2021 (Seo 2023). These attempts are typically not through the legal

electoral process but coups, which bring heavy damage on the ongoing process of democratization. Jackson (1993) defines a coup as a sudden and forceful seizure of government, typically orchestrated by a small group employing force or the threat thereof to supplant the existing administration. This study aims to delve into the subtle psychological shifts within the military during democratic reforms and to scrutinize the dynamics at the critical juncture when democratic transformation falters—specifically when the democrats' influence nearly surpasses that of the military and they possess the capacity to bring about substantial change. At such times, the military often feels an urgent need to stage a coup. This urgency arises from the understanding that democracy necessitates not only the participation of civil society in governance but also the civilian oversight of the military (Dahl 2005). In these moments, the attitudes of authoritarian elites could significantly influence outcomes of democratization (Mainwaring et al. 1992). The military is aware that this may be its final opportunity to retain control before the populace claims victory and converts their electoral success into political authority. Thus, when democratic forces grow sufficiently to consolidate their power, democracy becomes most precarious.

The subsequent sections are organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the political history of Thailand and Myanmar. Section 3 discusses the precipitating factors for military coups, highlighting the urgency felt by the military to act. We then demonstrate, through the experiences of Thailand and Myanmar, that coups often occur when democratic parties are on the brink of a decisive triumph. This section also examines the common rationale used by the military for staging coups: allegations of electoral fraud. Section 4 presents our conclusions. Collectively, the research presented herein underscores the vulnerability of democratization, particularly as success draws near, reflecting the military's acute sense of crisis and its desperate measures to retain some semblance of power.

2. The Political Background in Thailand and Myanmar

2.1. Thailand

The fundamental political landscape of Thailand is shaped by the ongoing conflict between parties that support the monarchy and those advocating for reform. In practice, the pro-monarchy factions tend to have close affiliations with the military, having been involved in the execution of numerous military coups. The intricate relationship between Thailand's military government and the monarchy's authority is a subject of significant interest. The power dynamics among the pro-monarchy parties, and the military with the democratic forces are not solely dependent on the monarchy's influence but often serve to preserve the partnership between the royal family and the

military establishment. Currently, the situation is further complicated by the change of Thai King. For the purposes of the subsequent discussion, we refer to the pro-monarchy elements and parties that maintain close ties with the military regime as "royalists." In contrast, the opposing forces advocating for reform are termed "reformists," who are sometimes also known as "democratic parties." It is important to note that the non-monarchists are not entirely opposed to the monarchy, and non-democratic parties are not entirely against democracy. However, these labels provide a general indication of the fundamental stances of the respective groups.

In 1932, Thai military officers, in collaboration with the People's Party, carried out a coup with the intention of establishing a military-civilian coalition. This coalition sought to transition from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy, a move that resulted in King Rama VII assuming a role with more symbolic than actual power. Within this coalition, the military and civilian bureaucracy held differing views on governance, with the military preferring a junta and the civilians advocating for an elected government. This discord has largely foreshadowed the subsequent political strife within the nation. Upon King Bhumibol Adulyadej's accession to the throne following the reign of Rama VIII, the military regime under Phibun was strategically replaced in 1957. This transition was supported by King Bhumibol and led by General Sarit, who introduced the concept of the "Trinity of Nation, Buddhism, and King," which was reflected in constitutional changes that reinforced the King's role. King Bhumibol's great personal charisma and political wisdom skillfully balanced the situation to increase his authority, and rebranded of the Thai army to the Royal Thai Army. In the 1970s, a pro-democracy movement emerged to challenge the military regime's leadership, particularly that of Prime Minister Thanom Kittikachorn, and successfully led to his ouster. King Bhumibol, who was widely respected for his long-standing royal authority and his position as a patron of Buddhism, was not the primary focus of this movement. Following a period of unstable and short-lived governments in the 1970s, in the 1980s, Thailand again failed into the military rule of Prem Tinsulanonda. However, democratization efforts did not stop there. The first democratic elections in 1988 were won by a party led by Chatchai Choonhavan. This elected government's tenure was brief, as the 1991 military coup indicated the military's desire to reestablish authoritarian control, which led to significant public backlash and protests. Then, it was through King Bhumibol's mediation that Thailand was able to enter a period of more sustained democratic progress (Sopranzetti 2016). Overall, in the 1990s, Thai politics was observed to have "the slowness in achieving greater democratization and decentralization despite growing demand for political change" (Songsamphan 1995, p. 327). The evolution of Thailand's political landscape was marked by a balance between the military's influence and the aspirations of the civilian

population for greater democratic representation. Although it may seem contradictory, the pervasive influence of the military in Thailand continues to present the option of coups as a feasible means of political engagement for certain sectors of the population (Farrelly 2013).

In the context of Thailand's political evolution, the military, the monarchy, and associated political entities have been instrumental in shaping the nation's governance (McCargo 2005; Riggs 1966; Sombatpoonsiri 2017). While traditional scholarship on authoritarianism may label nominally democratic structures within dictatorships as "parchment institutions" (Carey 2000), the Thai military and royal establishment appear to utilize their authority in a more nuanced and sophisticated manner, embedding it within institutional frameworks. They have enacted a range of legislative measures and institutional developments to consolidate their power and safeguard their vested interests (Kharabi 2010). Chambers and Waitoolkiat (2016) have characterized the dynamic between the monarchy and the military as a "parallel state," where periodic military interventions are utilized to reinforce the monarch's legitimacy. To preserve this alliance, the monarch sanctioned the creation of the constitution. The 2007 constitution was designed to institute a form of tutelary democracy, allowing the entrenched elites—the military and the monarchy—to maintain their dominance in the face of democratic challenges and the ascendance of elected officials. The 2017 constitution further established a system aimed at the self-interested preservation of elite hegemony, shielding the policy preferences of the tutelary powers from the uncertainties of electoral politics (Mérieau 2019, p. 328). Concurrently, the king and the military, have set up an array of regulatory and judicial entities, as well as oversight bodies and civil society organizations, tasked with overseeing, assessing, and penalizing elected officials and political parties (Hewison 2007). The military even used perceived disrespect towards the royal family as a reason to convict their political opponents and to intervene in the political sphere (Handley 2006). This structure, crafted by the union of Thailand's traditional political elite and the monarchy, was intentionally constructed to shield the dominance of the established authoritarian rulers. In essence, "In Thailand, the tutelary powers, identified as the monarchy and the army, can veto decisions of elected politicians whenever needed, while allowing some degree of electoral politics to play out" (Mérieau 2019, p. 328). Consequently, civilian personnel and governments must navigate military affairs with extreme caution, avoiding any intrusion into their internal matters. Missteps in this regard could precipitate a governmental overthrow (Songsamphan 1995, p. 334). Despite the civilian government's prudence, Thailand has witnessed thirteen successful military coups and seven unsuccessful attempts, along with the

formulation of twenty constitutions and charters between the years 1932 and 2016 (Chambers 2015).

Looking at examples from the 21st century, recurrent coups in Thailand are often justified by allegations that the ruling party shows a lack of respect towards the royal family (Kanchoochat and Hewison, p. 2016). "The lèse-majesté law, which punishes anybody who criticizes members of the royal family with detention for between three and fifteen years, has been used with unprecedented frequency to attack political opponents...the actions that count as criticism of the royal institution have been expanded widely to include criticizing the law itself, liking pictures on Facebook, and even mocking the king's dog" (Sopranzetti 2016, p. 6). The Thai Rak Thai Party, under Thaksin Shinawatra, came to power in 2001 and was later subject to a military coup in 2006, facing allegations of disrespect for the royal (Farrelly 2013). Similarly, Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, and leader of the Pheu Thai Party which succeeded the Thai Rak Thai Party, won the 2011 general election but was also removed from office by a coup (Mérieau 2019). On may 20, 2014, the Royal Army imposed martial law on Thailand, with the declared purpose of restoring order to the people (Sopranzetti 2016). The Constitutional Court, which has always been controlled by the Thai royal family and the military, also ruled that Yingluck's executive powers were illegal and therefore agreed to remove Yingluck from office. Behind the veil of allegations regarding the desecration of royal dignity, it is plausible that the military and the monarchy are motivated by a quest for power (Donghi 1968), along with genuine economic considerations (Pathmanand and Connors 2021, p. 286). This is evidenced by the fact that the economic interests of the military were compromised by the reforms introduced by the democratically-elected Yingluck administration (Hewison and Kanchoochat 2018). For example, the Thailand central government's efforts in 2011 to centralize power and resources to address flooding raised concerns among the military (Maier-Knapp 2015), the latter viewed it as a move by the central government to seize the economic interests held by the military.

King Bhumibol, who reigned from 1946, passed away in 2016. His reign was distinguished by two major political milestones: the establishment of royal hegemony and the institution of a democratic government with the King as its head (Tejapira 2016, p. 226). The year 2016 marked a pivotal juncture in the history of the Thai monarchy with the transition from King Bhumibol Adulyadej to King Maha Vajiralongkorn. Soon after his coronation, King Vajiralongkorn enacted a new "permanent" constitution in April 2017. As the 2018 elections approached, the military-led government eased certain political restrictions, permitting the registration of political parties and the holding of political assemblies, suggesting a new chapter in Thai political evolution.

However, the pro-democracy Future Forward Party, which had emerged as the third-largest party in the 2019 elections, was disbanded in 2020, followed allegations of lese-majesty against its leader. The demand for reforms, coupled with perceived failures, and a growing skepticism towards the new king, has led to a gradual shift in the public's view of the monarchy with a more critical stance (Li 2016). The traditional role of the king as a unifying figure and the previous cultural deference towards the monarchy, influenced by King Bhumibol's personal charisma and spiritual authority, began to change. The government's response to the Covid-19 further increased people's mistrust of the government and concerns of corruption, while corruption and the perceived abuse of power are pre-conditions to the formation of robust political opposition movements (Slater 2012). In 2020, a renewed democracy movement in Thailand called for reforms in the country's governance. After three years of complicated political changes, the electoral landscape in Thailand for the year 2023 has been fraught with unexpected developments. The so-called democratic parties and the military government appear to have arrived at a consensus to establish a coalition government. This development has sparked considerable debate, leading to a significant public outcry. Nevertheless, conflicts persist within the governing coalition. By the time the article was penned in 2024, Thaksin's youngest daughter, Phaethongthan Chinnawat, had begun assuming the role of Prime Minister. Describing the intricacies of Thai politics after 2023 is a monumental task and is not the central theme of our discussion. As such, our analysis will concentrate on the political evolution of Thailand prior to the year 2023.

2.2. Myanmar

Similar to Thailand, Myanmar experienced a challenging journey in its transition towards democratization. After Myanmar proclaimed its independence in 1948, it embarked on the establishment of a multi-party democratic parliamentary system. However, the country faced numerous challenges, including socio-economic disparities, weak centripetal forces, and a complex tapestry of separatist movements among various ethnic groups (Steinberg 2021), that since its founding, the country has never achieved political unity (Nilsen 2013). The northern regions of Myanmar have historically been home to diverse armed groups, including remnants of the Republic of China (ROC) Taiwan, the People's Republic of China (PRC)-backed Communist Party of Burma, and other separatist factions (Taylor 2009; Wells 2018). The renaming of the country from Burma to Myanmar in 1989 symbolizes the nation's deep-rooted ethnic and ideological complexities. "Burma" was traditionally a geographical term for the Irrawaddy Valley region, while "Myanmar" is an ethnic term that has been adopted to reflect a growing sense of national identity. Historically, ethnic tensions, social-ideological divisions and political rivalries can often

contribute to the occurrence of coups (Hamrita et al. 2016; Jenkins and Kposowa, p. 1992). Because whenever internal conflicts go beyond the control of civilian government, or, at least in the view of the military, the military come out and take over power (Alagappa 2001). Indeed, in the face of chaos and complexity, General Ne Win, who served as the commander-in-chief for an extended period, seized power in 1962, leading to the formation of a military junta in conjunction with the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) (Nguyen 2015; Steinberg 2013). While the governance of the early military regime did provide a measure of stability, the negative repercussions soon became evident (Croissant and Kamerling 2013; Ganesan 2017). The military's influence began to extend beyond what was manageable, culminating in the emergence of what would later be recognized as "the most durable military regime worldwide" (Bünte 2011, p. 7).

The one-party system during Ne Win's government conducted extensive campaigns against opposition groups, such as the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League and the United Workers Party. In 1974, a new constitution was implemented, seeming to preparing for the formation of a democratically elected government. However, even Ne Win stepped down as president in 1981, he still remained at the helm of the ruling party. The prolonged period of military governance ultimately reached a tipping point for the populace in 1988, a year distinguished by considerable political turmoil in Myanmar. In July, extensive protests broke out, resulting in the resignation of Ne Win. He was succeeded by General Sein Lwin, who had earned the moniker "Butcher" due to his stern and oppressive methods of governance. But Sein Lwin faced even larger demonstrations known as the "8888 Revolt" in August of the same year (Holliday 2010). These protests eventually led to the military junta reluctantly transferring power back to a civilian administration. However, this transition was short-lived, as another military force, led by General Saw Maung, seized control within a month. The new military government dissolved the existing governing party and announced its intention to hold nationwide multiparty elections, of course under the control of the military. However, the electoral autocracy are particularly vulnerable to direct military takeovers (Clark 2007). Despite the imprisonment of Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy (NLD), which she led, won a majority in the 1990 legislative elections. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the military-controlled body at the time, contested the election results. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from arrest on several occasions, only to be detained again shortly after. She remained under restrictions until 2010, when the military administration initiated a process "that gained momentum as President Thein Sein announced his reform agenda after taking office in March 2011 [representing] the best opportunity in half a century to bring peace and progress to the troubled country" (Nilsen 2013, p. 115).

The military leadership in Myanmar seemed to begin to promote a series of democratic reforms, which included allowing opposition parties to participate in the electoral process. In the 2012 by-election, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, secured a resounding victory (Croissant and Kamerling 2013), winning 43 out of 45 available seats. The NLD's momentum continued in the 2015 parliamentary elections, where they won 136 out of 224 seats in the House of Nationalities (the upper house), and 255 out of 440 seats in the House of Representatives (the lower house). Under the constitution crafted by the military-led administration, Aung San Suu Kyi was barred from assuming the presidency due to her marriage to a non-national, and was instead designated as the State Counselor (Burrett 2017). The NLD further solidified its majority in the 2020 election by gaining an additional three seats in each legislative house (Kipgen 2021). Despite the military retaining a constitutionally mandated 25% of the seats in both chambers (Holliday 2010), they only managed to secure 33 seats through the electoral process. The military raised concerns regarding the election results, citing suspicions of fraud and irregularities. In January 2021, they indicated that the election lists required further scrutiny and stated the possibility of a coup if their concerns were not adequately addressed. The commander-in-chief of the armed forces, Min Aung Hlaing, proposed that the military might revise the current constitution to enhance its standing and respect within the nation's governance framework. After the Election Commission rejected the military's allegations of electoral fraud, negotiations between the democratic and military factions reached an impasse. Leading NLD figures were detained by the military on 1 February 2021, accompanied by a suspension of television broadcasts, a disruption of telephone lines to the capital, and a blackout of internet services in major urban areas (Kipgen 2021). As of the year 2024, Aung San Suu Kyi, now aged 78, still faced a sentence of 27 years in fixed-term imprisonment due to the military government's ongoing judiciary actions.

Throughout much of Myanmar's post-independence history, the government adopted a form of socialism, characterized by the establishment of a state-owned economy and a redistributive system intended to mitigate internal disparities. However, the lack of market-oriented processes and competitive mechanisms "discouraged productivity of nationalized industries as well as limited people participation in decision-making" (Nguyen 2015, p. 14). In a pivotal shift in 1988, the then-new military administration revised the economic strategy to encourage international investment, an approach that was taken while still preserving significant state monopolies. In fact, official corruption, unlawful commerce, and nepotism are said to be widespread, which, in the context of persistent economic inefficiency, have reportedly

enabled the military to consolidate its control over the country's limited resources. The illegal trade in natural resources, including timber and minerals, was severe, with some military figures allegedly benefiting from this trade. It is reported that General Min Aung Hlaing has been engaged in efforts to broaden the economic advantages for his family across various sectors, a pattern of conduct that has been ongoing for an extended period (Jordt et al. 2021). In the case of widespread corruption, it is clear that top military leaders benefit more from it. Selth (1996) analyzed internal conflicts within the military in Myanmar, noting the discontent among rank-and-file soldiers towards higher-ranking officers who are assigned to more profitable roles. McCartan (2012) also touched upon the issue of analogous disparities in distribution and treatment in Myanmar military. This inequality may also have further exacerbated the political situation in Myanmar. While the structural deterrents within a military institution may reduce both the ability and the propensity of the military to engage in the overthrow of a government, the internal conflicts (Belkin 2006), on the other hand, exacerbate the risk of civil wars and coups to rebalance the distribution of resources.

Moreover, the military's entanglement with certain industries and economic interests can make it reluctant to relinquish power, and lead to its suppression of democratically elected governments to maintain its economic monopoly. Additionally, the northern region, which is subject to the influence of various warlords, was associated with the drug trade, with the government's stance on this issue being a matter of debate. Shee (1997) documented the involvement of prominent junta leaders in drug trafficking operations. Meehan (2015) reported that General Ne Win was implicated in authorizing pro-government narcotics smuggling as a countermeasure against insurgency. The area where Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet, known as the "Golden Triangle," was historically notorious for its role in the drug trade, with estimates suggesting that in the 1990s, it supplied 60% - 70% of the global drug market (UNODC 2006). Military authorities also levied a "whitening tax" on foreign currencies obtained through the opium and methamphetamine trades (Callahan 2005). In more recent times, scholars such as Christensen et al. (2019) investigated the endeavors of Burma's military junta to exert control over the jadeite industry amidst the push for democratization. It is evident that the use of violence is considered a viable method in this endeavor (Keen 2014).

3. The Junta Coup: Anxiety about Losing Power

3.1. Democracy within Birdcage and the Urgency to Coup

The precariousness of democratic transitions has been a topic of extensive scholarly debate. However, the question remains: how does this fragility

manifest, and at which point in the process is it most susceptible? This article endeavors to address these questions. Indeed, in response to international criticism and domestic pressure for democratization, authoritarian leaders, including military regimes, are compelled to initiate democratic reforms, as seen in countries like Portugal, Spain, and Greece (Huntington 1991). Yet, in some nations, the fall of military dictators and the rise of early democratic parties do not signify a successful democratic transition. Instead, these events are followed by a sequence of coups, military rule, and authoritarian governance, as evidenced by the cases of Haiti post-Duvalier, South Korea following Park Chung-hee in 1979, numerous instances from Latin America, and the cases of Thailand and Myanmar discussed in this article. It is challenging for an authoritarian regime to willingly relinquish power. When the trajectory of reforms remains within their control, military governments may exhibit a facade of tolerance and democracy to alleviate international pressure, permitting a form of democracy that operates within strict limits, often referred to as birdcage democracy (Lee 2012). For instance, during the early Third Republic period, South Korea's Park Chung-hee government staged democratic elections that were, in reality, manipulated. However, once his power was securely entrenched, Park Chung-hee enacted a new constitution in 1972 that effectively solidified the authoritarian status of his military regime.

Once initiated, the process of democratization often escapes the control of the military government. Democratic forces have a tendency to rapidly expand their influence among diverse groups and entities, swiftly securing broad-based support. The military junta may have envisioned a controlled democracy, a democracy under surveillance, or at the very least, a gradual transition to full democracy, thereby prolonging their tenure in power. Yet, the unfolding of democratic processes frequently surpasses the expectations of the military government, leading to a heightened sense of urgency and apprehension regarding the impending loss of power at a critical historical juncture. This anxiety stems not only from a reluctance to relinquish existing political and economic prerogatives (Seo 2023), but also from concerns for personal safety. Democracy necessitates not just representation but also civilian control over the military (Dahl 2005), a prospect that the military may find intolerable. Those benefiting from the existing order may view the demands of emerging actors as threats to their privileges (Davies 1962; Gurr 2012). Consequently, when reforms advance to a critical stage and begin to impinge upon their core interests, and when democratic forces have grown sufficiently potent to effect substantial political change, the military government's urgency to counteract these changes compels them to resort to immediate action—a coup d'état—to preserve their eroding power.

In 2006, "the fear that Thaksin could establish both political and economic domination did much to generate support for the 2006 coup" (Kanchoochat and Hewison 2016, p. 372). The actuality of Thailand's democratization and the aspiration for a controlled and orderly democratic system created strains that led the military and the royal family to perceive a loss of control. Thaksin's widespread popularity, his approach to electoral politics, and his intent to secure authority across the nation posed a challenge to the monarchy (McCargo 2006, p. 43). Similarly, in Myanmar, the National League for Democracy (NLD) secured substantial electoral victories in 2012 and 2015, which significantly agitated the military government. Ultimately, the NLD's persistent success in the 2020 elections shattered the military government's psychological defenses, prompting them to fear an imminent transition from authority to subjugation to judicial scrutiny. Consequently, the military swiftly declared substantial electoral irregularities and reclaimed power. When confronted with international pressure, neither the Thai nor the Myanmar military contested the importance of democratization. However, the apprehension of relinquishing power made them vigilant regarding the democratization process. This mindset aligns with theorists' earlier assertions regarding why nations undergoing democratic transition are more susceptible to instability and civil conflict, and why a limited electoral framework can swiftly devolve into military rule. The foundation of this transformation rests on the tolerance and compromise between the ruling authoritarian government and the democratic forces, while the compromise is evidently not sustainable indefinitely.

3.2. Anxiety of the Thai Military

In 2006, the military ousted the civilian administration of Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai Party, with charges of lese-majesty being officially cited. However, underlying this excuse may be the military's intolerance for the escalating influence of elected officials. The military's waning political power, as the electoral system consistently delivered overwhelming majorities for Thaksin's party, made the military raise questions about the legitimacy of electoral democracy (Kanchoochat and Hewison 2016). Additionally, Thaksin's administration was seen as posing threats to the military monopoly of economic interests (Sombatpoonsiri 2017). Nonetheless, ostensibly, "the core justification for the 2006 coup" was still "defending the 'institution' (sataban) of the monarchy" (Farrelly 2013, p. 282). These factors collectively led to the overthrow of Thaksin's government through a coup. In 2008, Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, reorganized the Pheu Thai Party after Thai Rak Thai Party and subsequently led it to a resounding electoral win in 2011, securing her position as Prime Minister. Yet, shortly after her election, Suthep, a former member of the Democratic Party with close ties to the military and the monarchy, initiated protests against Yingluck's government.

Yingluck faced accusations of disrespect towards the Thai king, but these appeared to be a pretext, as it was reported that Suthep had been conspiring with General Prayuth, the head of the junta, since 2010, with the purported goal of eliminating Thaksin's political affiliates and successors from the political landscape (Suksamran 2014). Suthep once advocated for an unelected council to oversee the government. As Yingluck's term neared its end, the discord between the parties intensified. Since 2013, there had been notable incidents of political unrest in Thailand, with confrontations between pro-government and anti-government demonstrators leading to a number of casualties. The anti-government rallies were reportedly backed by the opposition Democrat Party and are said to have received covert support from military elements. Towards the end of 2013, then-Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra dissolved the House of Representatives and called for new elections, which were subsequently disrupted in various regions (Sopranzetti 2016). Anti-government protesters fiercely boycotted the election and launched attacks on other voters (Kongkirati 2016). This period of political tension culminated in a military coup in May 2014, led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who assumed control of the government. In the lead-up to the coup, General Prayuth is quoted as having addressed members of the Democrat Party, acknowledging their efforts and stating that it was the army's responsibility to carry forward the mission to restore the order (Campbell 2014). In 2019, despite the absence of its key leaders, the Pheu Thai Party, associated with the Shinawatra family, again managed to secure a significant number of seats, becoming the largest party in the parliament. However, the outcome of the 2019 election resulted in the re-election of junta leader General Prayuth as Prime Minister, by a coalition government formed under the influence of military-backed parties. Aside from a few interludes of civilian governance, General Prayuth held the position of Thailand's Prime Minister continuously from 2014 until 2023. Following this tenure, power reverted to an elected government in the year 2024. The intricacies after 2023 Thai elections, however, are too elaborate to be detailed within the confines of this article.

Overall, the 2014 coup in Thailand occurred amidst a rise in support for Shinawatra groups, which were perceived to be challenging the authority of the military-led government. As we mentioned before, Thai political dynamics are characterized by the presence of two primary and enduring factions: the conservative pro-junta and royalist forces, and the reformist forces, or maybe we can label them the pro-democracy forces. Table 1 presents the main parties representing both democratic and military factions in Thailand from 2001 to the present. It should be noted that the distribution of parliamentary seats among these parties will show variation, as several parties have undergone dissolution and reconstitution under different names.

Table 1. Major Political Parties in Thailand*.

Thailand				
	The democratic forces		The military forces	
Year	Party	Note	Party	Note
2001	Thai Rak Thai Party	Established in 1998 under the leadership of Thaksin Shinawatra. A populist and nationalist political group with a center-right stance. The party's agenda included advocating for the economic empowerment of the common people, particularly in rural areas, combating drug trafficking, and implementing a comprehensive health care coverage system for all citizens. However, their efforts to exert influence over military appointments and initiate other significant reforms led to growing dissatisfaction within the military ranks. This tension culminated in a military coup in 2006, which resulted in the party being stripped of its governing authority. Subsequently, in 2007, the party was officially disbanded.	Democrat Party	Founded in 1946, is considered a royalist and conservative party that has long benefited from the support of the monarch and the military. It led the campaign against Thaksin's government in 2005-2006 political crisis. In 2019, it formed a coalition government with the military party.
2005				
2006				
2007	People's Power Party	The successor to the Thai Rak Thai Party. Most of Thai Rak Thai members joined the People's Power Party. This party won the 2007 election and was dissolved by the military in 2008.		
2011	Pheu Thai Party	Founded by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and led by his sister Yingluck Shinawatra. It is considered the successor to Thai Rak Thai Party and People's Power Party. The party won the 2011 election., and its governance was overthrown in a military coup when the results of the 2014 election were not known. The party got the majority in parliament again in 2019, but failed to take power due to military intervention.		
2014				
2019				
2023	Future Forward Party	Founded in 2018, aims to limit the power of the military and restore civilian government. It repeatedly criticized Thai Monarch's policies. It became the third largest party in the 2019 general election, but was dissolved by the military in 2020.	Palang Pracharath Party	Established in 2018. It is a military, pro-monarchy, conservative party. Led by General Prayut. In the 2019 election, a coalition government was formed with the Democratic Party.
	Move Forward Party	The successor of Future Forward Party. The biggest party in the election in 2023 but failed to form government.		
	Pheu Thai Party	Formed a broad coalition with various parties, including the military	United Thai Nation Party	Registered in 2021. Then Prime Minister Prayut joined the party in 2023 as its candidate.

* The table offers an overview of the parties that have represented the democratic and military junta factions within Thai politics. It is essential to acknowledge that the democratic parties in Thailand have experienced a dynamic history, with instances of dissolution and subsequent reorganization. This fluidity makes it challenging to identify a single, consistent

representative for the democratic forces over time, as different parties have emerged and evolved in response to the political environment.

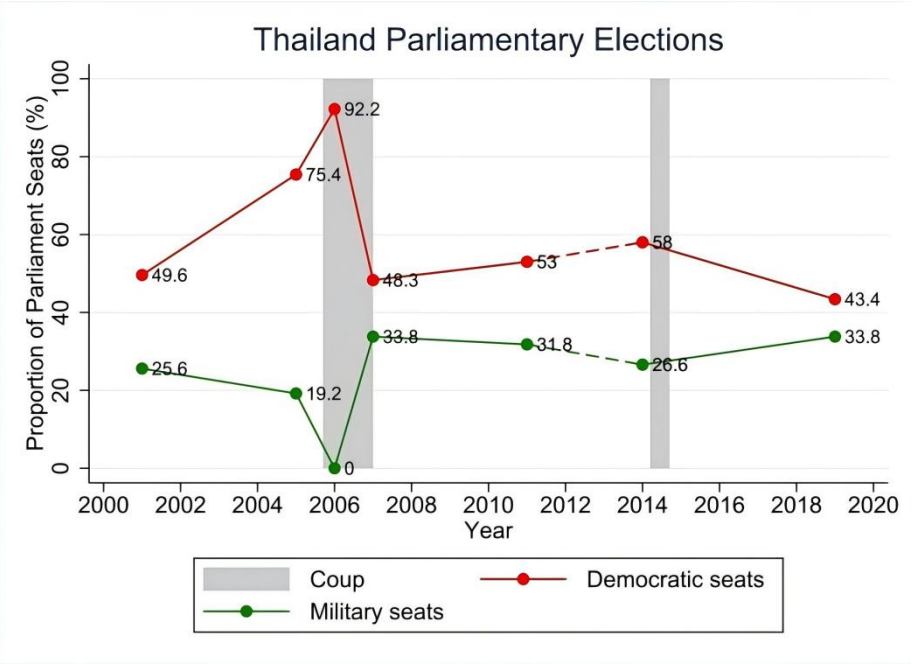

Figure 1. Changes in Thailand Parliamentary Seat Proportion. The figure provides a visual representation of the distribution of parliamentary seats in Thai elections from the year 2000 to 2020. In the instances where specific years are not labeled, it indicates that no elections were conducted during those periods. The green solid line within the diagram traces the changes in the number of seats held by the military or military-backed parties over the observed years. The presence of a grey block area within the chart signifies the occurrence of military coups in 2006 and 2014. The chart primarily includes data for the major political parties, which means that the combined seat totals for democratic and military factions may not sum up to 100 percent. This is due to the exclusion of seats held by smaller parties that are not classified as major players within the Thai political landscape.

Notice that owing to opposition resistance, the 2014 election did not proceed well. Yet, based on the outcomes of the 2013 Bangkok gubernatorial election, we can anticipate the 2014 vote. By comparing the growth rate of votes for democratic parties compared to military-backed candidates in Bangkok, we can estimate that if this ratio is extrapolated nationwide, democratic parties could hope to secure over 290 seats, up from 265 in 2011, accounting for more than 58%. Meanwhile, the military's seats would decrease from 159 to 133.

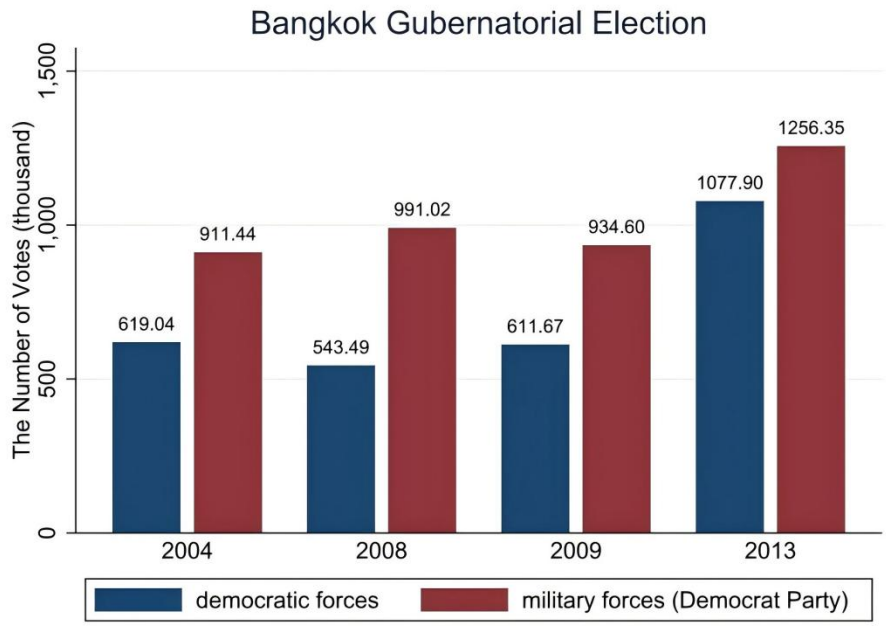

Figure 2. Bangkok Gubernatorial Election, from 2004 to 2013. The figure presents a graphical analysis of voting patterns in the Bangkok governor elections in Thailand. It highlights the historical dominance of military-backed and royalist-leaning candidates in the Bangkok area, despite the national trend of democratic movements securing majorities at the national level. The year 2013 marked a notable shift with a significant increase in support for democratic candidates, a development that drew the attention of the military establishment. This change in the political landscape reflects the evolving dynamics of voter preferences and the distribution of political influence within the region.

The growth in influence of the pro-democracy movement in Thailand is reflected in the electoral outcomes, which have indicated a rising sense of urgency within the military administration. The People's Power Party, a successor to the Thai Rak Thai Party, secured 48.1% of the parliamentary seats in the 2007 election, surpassing the junta-supported Democrat Party, which obtained 33.8%. However, the People's Power Party was dissolved the following year. Continuing this pattern, the Pheu Thai Party, which succeeded both the Thai Rak Thai Party and the People's Power Party, achieved a decisive victory in the 2011 election, winning 53% of the seats. This result was a substantial lead over the Democrat Party's 31.8%, presenting a notable challenge to the Thai military's governance. Despite the military's strategy of dissolving parties that were seen as oppositional, it recognized the difficulty in hindering the resurgence of democratic forces through such measures.

3.3. Anxiety of the Myanmar Military

Since 2010, there has been a notable shift in Myanmar's political landscape following the military's decision to release Aung San Suu Kyi and to allow for

limited parliamentary elections. With a significant rise in its influence, the National League for Democracy (NLD) got its electoral success in the 2012 by-elections, where they secured 43 out of 45 seats, and in the 2015 general election, where the party garnered approximately 60 percent of the vote across both the upper and lower chambers of the parliament. Despite the military maintaining a fixed 25 percent of non-electoral seats in the legislative body (Holliday 2010), the substantial victory of the pro-democracy forces in the contested seats exerted considerable pressure on the military establishment. Myanmar's democratic journey was initially founded on a delicate truce that hinged on trust and equilibrium, rendering it highly unstable (Slater 2014). The National League for Democracy's (NLD) overwhelming victory in the 2020 general election intensified this instability, and provoked a swift military reaction, culminating in a coup in the early stages of 2021. Despite being guaranteed a substantial portion—namely, a quarter—of the parliamentary seats, the military observed itself being soundly surpassed by the democratic forces at the polls. This significant underperformance by the military in the face of the NLD's electoral success precipitated a prompt and decisive military intervention. For a comprehensive understanding of the key players in Myanmar's political evolution from 1974 to 2021, Table 2 provides an overview of the major parties representing both democratic and military factions.

Table 2. Major Political Parties in Myanmar*.

Myanmar				
	The democratic forces		The military forces	
Year	Party	Note	Party	Note
1974 1978 1981 1985	None	No free election.	Burma Socialist Programme Party	A totalitarian military dictatorship party. Founded in 1962. It was led by General Ne Win and remained in power in 1964 and 1988. The party participated symbolically in elections and remained in power with 100% of the vote. In 8888 Uprising, the party was dissolved during the Democracy Movement.
1990	National League for Democracy	Established in 1988 with Aung San Suu Kyi as its leader. Under external pressure following the 8888 Uprising, the military was compelled to permit democratic elections. The National League for Democracy (NLD) secured a sweeping victory in the 1990 general election, yet the military authorities refused	National Unity Party	Founded in 1988. It is the successor to the former Burma Socialist Programme Party. It was defeated by the democratic forces in the 1990 general election., and currently considered a non-mainstream faction of the military, with a both cooperative and competitive with the current government.
2010	Prohibited		Union	A military political party.

2015		to acknowledge the outcome and labeled the NLD as an outlawed entity. However, in 2011, amid mounting domestic and international pressure, the military junta granted the NLD permission to participate in the electoral process once more. Subsequently, the party achieved resounding victories in both the 2015 and 2020 parliamentary elections.	Solidarity and Development Party	Established in 2010. It ran as a representative of the military government in the 2010 elections and won a majority under conditions where its main rival was barred from participating. The party's two leaders, Thein Sein and Than Htay, are both former army generals. The party was formerly known as the Union Solidarity and Development Association which is also founded with the aid of Myanmar's ruling military junta in 1993.
2020	National League for Democracy			

* The table provides an overview of the parties that have represented the democratic and military junta factions in Myanmar over various periods. The political landscape can evolve, and as such, the parties advocating for democratic principles and those aligned with the military junta may undergo changes or reconfigurations in response to the shifting political dynamics within the country.

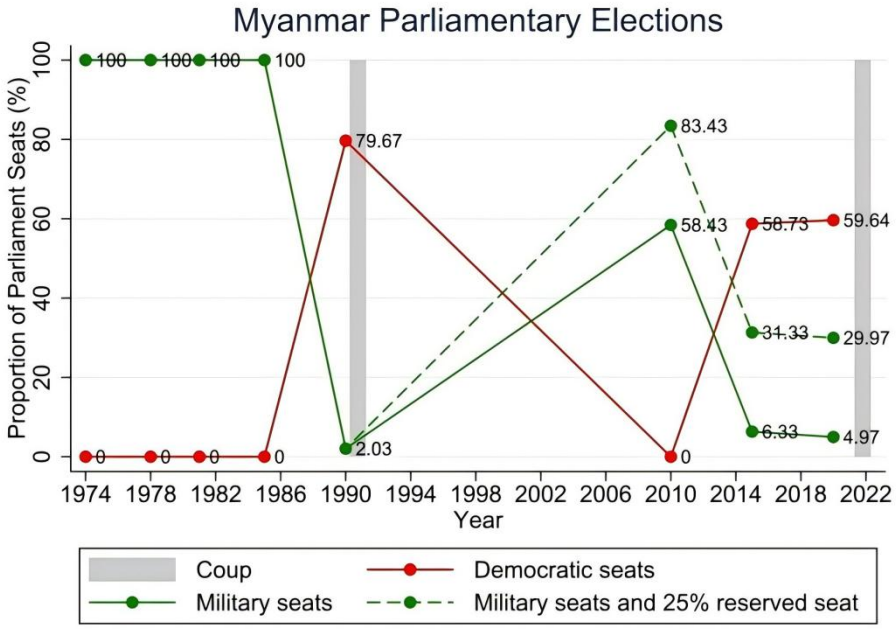

Figure 3. Changes in Myanmar Parliamentary Seat Proportion. The provided figure offers a detailed overview of the distribution of seats in Myanmar's legislative elections, spanning from the year 1974 to 2022. It is important to note that the years without labels indicate periods during which no elections were held, specifically from 1991 to 2009. For reference, in the elections of 2010, 2015, and 2020, the military was allocated a fixed 25 percent of the seats in both the upper and lower legislative houses. The graph employs a green solid line to denote the changes in the number of seats secured by the military in the elected portion of the legislature. Additionally, the green dashed line represents the cumulative total of seats available to the military, factoring in both the reserved and elected seats. The presence of a grey blocky area

on the graph indicates the occurrence of military coups in the years 1990 and 2021. It should be clarified that the total sum of seats attributed to democratic and military forces may not reach 100 percent, as the graph primarily focuses on the major parties and does not account for the numerous minor parties that also participate in the elections. In the 2010 elections, parties affiliated with the military secured 83.43 percent of the seats, with the remaining seats being distributed among almost 20 smaller parties.

As depicted in the preceding figure, the National League for Democracy (NLD) secured an absolute majority of the freely elected seats in the 2015 elections. Given that the military reserves 25% of the parliamentary seats and significant legislative actions, such as constitutional amendments, necessitate a 75% approval threshold, the military's influence in the political system remains substantial and is not easily mitigated through constitutional reforms. In the 2015 polls, the NLD claimed 135 out of 224 seats in the upper house and 255 out of 440 seats in the lower house. The 2020 elections saw the NLD increase its majority by an additional three seats in both chambers (Maizland 2021; Seo 2023). Conversely, the military's representation decreased by four seats in each house, which may have contributed to a heightened sense of concern and vigilance on their part. In 2019, the NLD initiated efforts to amend the constitution, aiming to remove the 75% threshold for constitutional changes, triggering a great deal of fear and resentment in the junta and a sense of urgency that a coup was necessary. The military's rejection of this proposal further underscored the ongoing dynamic of trust and apprehension between the two branches of government. The NLD's push for constitutional reform reflects the party's commitment to addressing structural challenges, while the military's stance illustrates its role in safeguarding the existing balance of power. This tension eventually evolved into a military coup, which culminated in the re-imprisonment of the NLD's leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi.

3.4. Junta's Excuse: Electoral Fraud

Concerns regarding election legitimacy, conformity, and transparency are often cited as an excuse for military interventions. In the contexts of the 2014 coup in Thailand and the 2021 coup in Myanmar, the military raised questions about the integrity and validity of the electoral process. When the military faced an unfavorable electoral outcome, they expressed doubts about the election's normalcy and legitimacy—and that had they been victorious, there would have been no contestation of the results. Following the Thai military's defeat in the 2014 local elections in Bangkok, the heightened tensions propelled the military to commence preparations for a coup. There were even whispers of the military allegedly instructing the opposition to take to the streets on election day to demonstrate against the perceived injustice of the election, irrespective of the results. At that juncture, it was

inconceivable to ascertain whether the Yingluck administration had indeed engaged in electoral fraud, given that the 2014 election concluded without any official results following the government's overthrow. As for Myanmar, the 2021 military coup underscored perceived defects in the electoral process (Kipgen 2021), with the military lodging accusations of vote miscounting and fraud against the National League for Democracy (NLD). Furthermore, the military contended that the NLD did not adhere to the coronavirus limitations on gatherings, which stipulated that no more than five individuals could assemble together. This, they claimed, positioned the NLD at an advantage during the election campaign, whereas military-backed parties were constrained by these regulations (Kipgen 2021, p. 3), despite the military's inherent structural advantages, such as reserved parliamentary seats and considerable sway over the media and law enforcement. It was also later reported by the media that a woman named Khin Thet Maw was allegedly coerced by the military to accuse the NLD of vote-buying (Kipgen 2021, p. 8). The military further alleged that the election's outcome could have been influenced by external interference, insinuating that purported electoral fraud and foreign collaboration posed a menace to the nation's sovereignty and the sanctity and autonomy of its Constitution. Based on the collective reasons cited by the military, they declared to have "found 8.6 million irregularities in 314 townships in all states and regions across the country, without providing actual evidence to support this claim of fraud" (Kipgen 2021, p. 9). In light of these assertions, the military maintained that it was incumbent upon them to assume governance. Nevertheless, both international and domestic monitors reported no significant electoral irregularities were identified (Kipgen 2021, p. 6).

The military's dissatisfaction with the election outcomes also points to a potential divergence between the military's self-perception and the actual sentiments of the electorate. This disconnect may stem from a phenomenon where leaders, particularly those exhibiting negative narcissistic traits, can become isolated and develop a skewed perception of their popularity and support (Glad 2002). Coup initiators often hold the belief that their actions will benefit not only themselves but also the wider society and the nation as a whole (Bennett et al. 2019). Without robust systems of authority checks, effective communication, and accurate information, such leaders might find themselves in an echo chamber, surrounded by individuals who reinforce their beliefs and create a false image of widespread approval. When confronted with the actual election results that truly reflected public opinion, the coup initiators were taken aback and found it hard to accept the reality of their low support rates. They were convinced that the only plausible explanation was that the elections had been rigged by the so-called democrats. For military regimes, this sense of self-righteousness and blindness may be

particularly pronounced. The military's internal hierarchical culture seldom encourages the open dissent and debate required for building and sustaining coalitions with civilian groups (Stepan 1971). In Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, a democratically elected leader, significantly curtailed the influence of the traditional political elites, most notably the military. Thaksin's re-election was so intolerable to the military that they felt justified in launching a coup. However, the military leadership struggled to establish legitimacy after the 2006 coup, given the enduring public support for Thaksin. Following the 2007 elections, which saw Thaksin's party win another majority (Farrelly 2013, p. 288), the royalist and military factions remained steadfast in their rejection of Thaksin and the election results (Kanchoochat and Hewison 2016). This led to another attempt to dislodge Thaksin and his party in late 2008, during which Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Democratic Party was elected Prime Minister through a series of obscure political maneuvers related to the military.

Conversely, this situation also exposes the inherent limitations of top-down reform initiatives (Nilsen 2013). Such reforms inherently assume the existence of a central power base. The reform process essentially involves redistributing power from this central authority to other sectors. However, it remains uncertain whether these sectors can smoothly undertake the reform process. Reforms that occur under the dominion of the power center are often limited to superficial adjustments that do not affect core interests, making it difficult to address the root issues. For military dictators, relinquishing power is not merely about losing their exclusive control over political and economic resources; it also entails facing genuine threats to their personal safety. This is because the government that emerges from democratic reforms will need to address corruption within the economic and social spheres and grapple with the numerous abuses perpetrated by the preceding administration. Such actions are bound to encroach upon the interests of the military group that has been in power for an extended period. Consequently, the military's attempted coups can also be seen as efforts to preserve preferential treatment for military-linked corporations and to secure judicial or criminal immunity for military personnel (Bennett et al. 2019). As a result, despite facing international criticism and pressure, the junta's progress towards democratization was still fraught with instability.

4. Conclusion

As Huntington (1991) noted, the establishment of democracy entails numerous achievements, which include, but are not limited to, conducting two successive free and fair elections and the peaceful transfer of power from the ruling party to the opposition. In Thailand, power rotation and transfer have taken place on multiple occasions; however, the significant obstacle to its democratization process remains the formidable military power. Myanmar's

journey towards democracy remains largely speculative, with its military being too powerful to brook the emergence of a fully civilian government. By scrutinizing the 2006 coup in Thailand, the 2014 coup, and the 2021 coup in Myanmar, we can discern the tension between the controlled democratic experiments under military oversight and the military government's acute sense of crisis as democracy gains momentum. Authoritarian military governments, often permit a certain level of electoral freedom and democratic reforms in response to international pressure and internal demands for change. Yet, when the scope of these reforms and the democrats' growth surpass a certain threshold, the military government feels an immediate urgency to stage a coup. The subsequent coup, in turn, decimates the previous efforts towards democratization.

The military often employs the tactic of questioning the legitimacy of democratic elections and procedural compliance. Acknowledging defeat is anathema to the military, as it implies not only a loss of political power but also the forfeiture of the associated economic monopolies. Consequently, they frequently engineer complex political systems to ensure their continued involvement in the democratic process and to maintain control over the democratization trajectory. According to the latest developments, Thailand's democrats and monarchists appear to have arrived at a compromise of sorts, while Myanmar's path to political reconciliation remains distant. Despite the democratization process being fraught with setbacks, both the populace and political elites continue to learn from their experiences. Faced with the pressures of the international community and the demands of its own citizens, and regardless of how intricate the system design or how severe the violent deterrence, a military regime that resists the progress of democratization will live in constant fear of losing power.

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