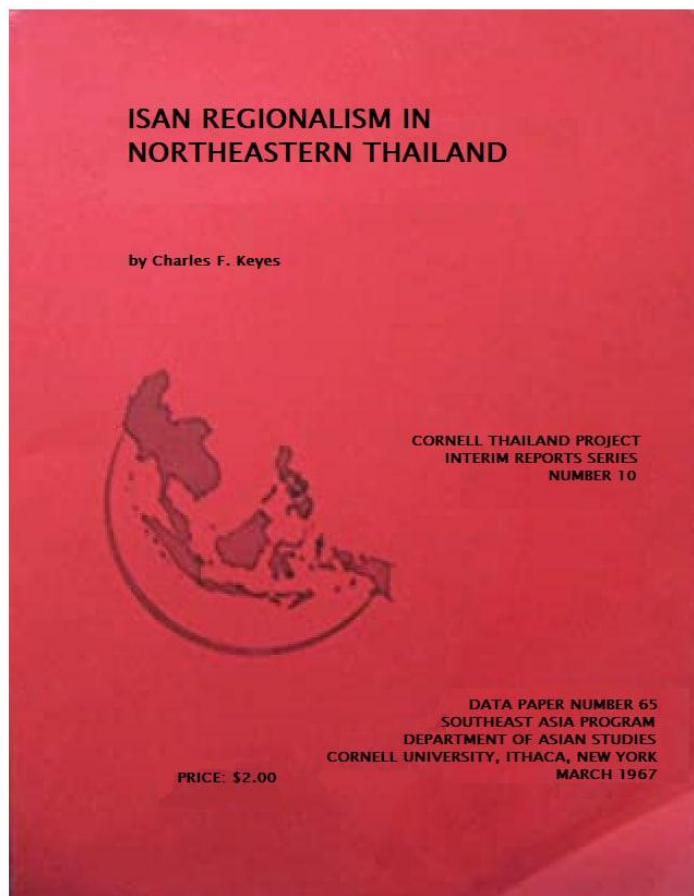
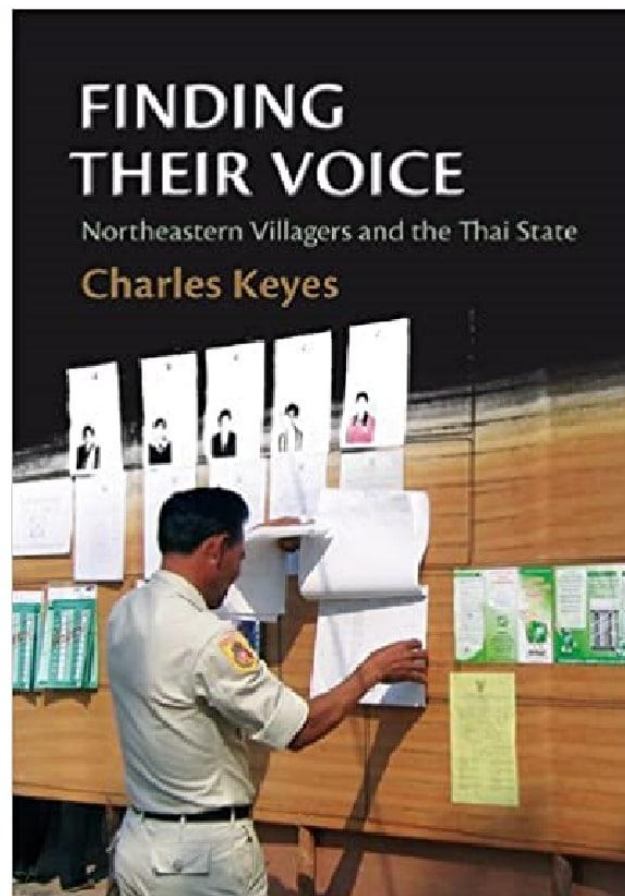


# Charles Keyes dying wish for democratic Thailand

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | January 18, 2022



Cornell University, 1967



Silkworm Books, 2014

***With the death of Professor Charles F. Keyes earlier this month, Isaan lost one of its oldest and best friends. He had done his field research in Maha Sarakham in the early 1960s and wrote what was his first most major publication and which began the most influential English-language book on the region:***

Almost a half century later, Keyes revised his book, titled, (*italics*) Finding Their Voice: Northeastern Villagers and the Thai State (*end italics*) (Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2014). It is a book that celebrates, in a sense, the reawakening of the Isaan people (and ironically published shortly after the 2014 coup).

*What might well be his final piece of writing was what we bring you below, a Foreword he wrote for the late book, Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand. Keyes noted that the book's tone is pessimistic about the future of Thailand. But he wrote that he still had hope: "I think that the dissenting voices, especially among the young in Bangkok as well as upcountry, are growing in strength." Increased scrutiny of the military and the crown, he wrote, perhaps as a dying wish for democracy in Thailand, "will lead more and more Thais to question the current system."*

Published with permission from Yale University. *Coup, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand* (Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Monographs), 2020; Pavin Chachavalpongpun,

***Due to the severity of Article 112 of Thailand's criminal code, certain parts have been redacted/censored ~~ The Editor***

## ***Foreword***

By ***Charles F. Keyes***

THIS VOLUME OFFERS assessments of the character of Thai politics since 22 May 2014, when the Thai army staged a coup that ended a democratically elected government in Thailand. The coup took place as the country was going through a major transition in the monarchy. The 2014 coup was the twelfth since 1932, when a constitutional monarchy was first proclaimed, and it was the second since 2006, the recent ones both aimed at eliminating the role of the Shinawatrass (Thaksin and his sister Yingluck) and their political followers from Thai politics.

Thaksin Shinawatra, a former businessman from Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, had first risen to political prominence in 2001 when he led the Thai Rak Thai Party to a significant electoral win. He then had led the same party to a lopsided victory in 2005. His success had been based primarily on his populist policies, including universal health care, promotion of enterprises primarily for the emerging middle class in rural—especially northeastern and northern—Thailand, and expansion of infrastructure mainly for the benefit of the rural population. In the process, however, he alienated the old elite, including the ranking members of the military, not only by pressing for these policies but also by his enrichment of himself and family, by his war on drugs, which led to many deaths, and by his heavy-handed policies toward the Muslim-led insurgency in southern Thailand. Following a coup in 2006 he was removed from office and forced to flee the country.

In 2011 a new constitution was adopted, and an election soon followed. In this election, the Pheu Thai Party, successor to the Thai Rak Thai Party, won an overwhelming majority of parliamentary seats. Yingluck, Thaksin's sister, who then headed the party, became prime minister. The military, now supported by many in the urban middle class, once again intervened in a coup in 2014.

Federico Ferrara argues, correctly I believe, that the 2014 coup was not class based, because the growth in the economy in the early twenty-first century had led to the emergence of a middle class in north and northeast Thailand and among migrants from these regions living in Bangkok that support the populist parties begun by Thaksin. Ferrara sees the conflict as a "struggle for recognition" by the disenfranchised peoples of Bangkok as well as by their regional relatives. Ferrara continues that "while the proponents of an egalitarian conception of the Thai nation may well have history on their side, for the time being royalists retain control of the country's treasury, its military and its judiciary."

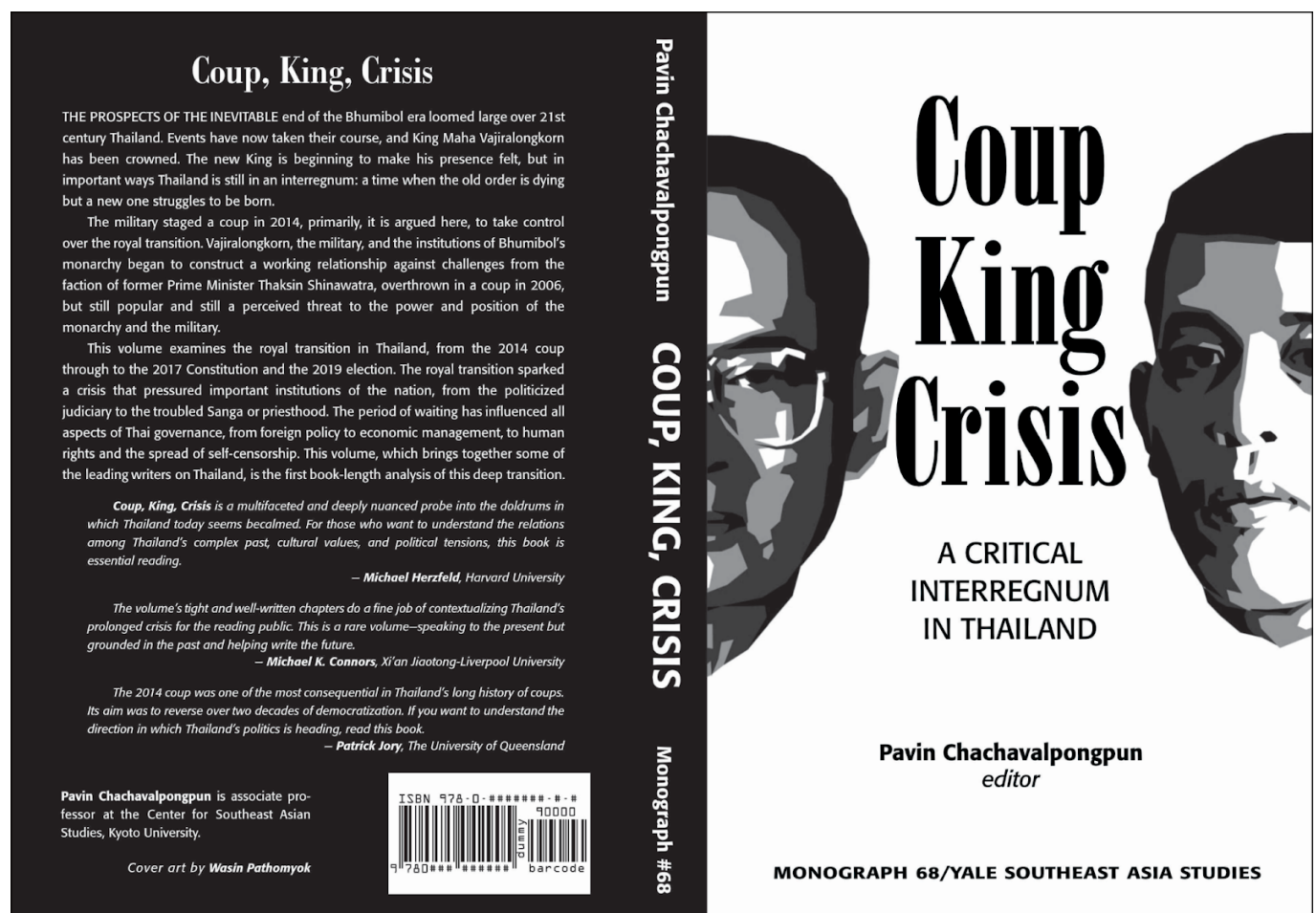
Tyrell Haberkorn argues that because the junta ignored or ran roughshod over the constitutional rights of any who disagreed with the 2014 coup there is a growing demand, particularly among young people, for justice.

David Streckfuss agrees, arguing that "the Thai military government has been neither terrifying nor brutal, but rather absurdly banal and profoundly stupefying. The junta did not just seize power; it heralded a new age where Thai society will have little chance to communicate and might in time become paralyzed."

This paralysis is also in part a consequence of the decline in the first decades of the twenty-first century of the Thai economy, as Krislert Samphantharak details in his contribution. It is also the result of the military's cooptation of Thai nongovernmental organizations, as detailed by Somchai Phatharathananunth in his chapter. And it is very much a result of the junta asserting control over the legal system, as Sarah Bishop shows in hers.

Above all, the major question about the future turns on the role of the king. The 2014 coup took place not long before there was a transition to a new monarch. On 13 October 2016 King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the monarch who had reigned for 70 years, passed away. This ushered in the transition to a new monarch, King Vajiralongkorn, King Bhumibol's son.

Several of the contributors to this book see the transition as one of the major reasons for the coup, as the new king and the military did not wish to allow for any dissent about the succession. As Pavin Chachavalpongpun notes in his introduction: "King Vajiralongkorn's dependence on the army to ensure an uncomplicated transition has resulted in an increased role for the military in Thailand's affairs of state."



**Coups, King, Crisis: A Critical Interregnum in Thailand (Edited by Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Foreword by Charles F. Keyes, Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monograph #68, 2020, 379 pages; Paperback \$28, Kindle E-book \$18; ISBN 978-1-7326102-0-0)**

As prince, and even after becoming king, Vajiralongkorn spent much time in Germany, where he maintains a separate palace. Handley underscores that "XXXXXX XXX XXXXXXXX XXXXXX, XXXXXXXXXXXX XX XXX X XXXXXXXX XXXXXX." He has assumed direct control over the royal household and palace security agencies and has taken personal command of the Crown Property Bureau (CPB). As Handley notes, "New orders in July 2017 made clear Vajiralongkorn regards the wealth of the CPB as his own." Hewison concludes his contribution by saying, "For those who hoped

for a more open and democratic Thailand in the twenty-first century, the succession of a military-trained king, determined to expand the monarchy's powers, has disappointed." As is clearly the case, documented in many accounts (mainly non-Thai, however), the king is unpopular and is growing more so.

A major problem for the coup-makers is that King Vajiralongkorn lacks the **XXXXX (XXXX)** of his father. Paul Handley, Charnvit Kasetsiri and especially Kevin Hewison provide detailed accounts of a succession of crises emanating from Vajiralongkorn, many of which have centered on his **XXX XXXXX XX XX XXXX XXX XXXXXXXXXXXX**. One of the most dramatic stories concerning Vajiralongkorn's relationships with his wives and mistresses relates to his third official wife, Princess Srirasmi, whom he married in February 2001. Although he has other children, it is the son by Srirasmi—Prince Dipangkorn—who was (and is) recognized as the heir apparent. Srirasmi's being the mother of this prince did not prevent the king from ending the marriage. As Hewison discusses in his contribution, in 2014 a new crisis developed when the family of Srirasmi along with her confidantes were purged. Hewison notes, "**XXXX XXXX XXXXXX X XXXXX XXXXXXXX XX XXX XXXXX XXXXXXXXXX XXXXX XXX XXXXX'X XXXXXXXX XXX XXXXXX XXXXXXXX, XXXX XXXX XXXX**. In 2019 the king, following his ascension to the throne, married Suthida Bajrasudhabimalalakshana (Suthida [Tidjai] Vajiralongkorn na Ayudhya), a former airline stewardess who, while his mistress, had been designated as his aide-de-camp with the rank of air force general. Vajiralongkorn also married Sineenat Wongvajirapakdi and elevated her to become *chao khun phra*, or royal noble consort. **XXX XXX XXXX XXXXXXX XXXXXXX XX XXX XXXXX XXXXX XXXXX XXXX XXX XXXXXXXX, XXXX XX XXXXXXX XXX XXXXX X XXXX XXXXX** while pronouncing her "flawless."

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In recent decades some leading members of the Buddhist monkhood (Sangha) have taken positions that challenge the traditional premise that the Sangha, monarchy, and state are intrinsically intertwined. Khemthong Tonsakulrungruang observes that "the waning authority of the Sangha Council during the 1980s created a relatively free space for non mainstream Buddhist movements to emerge," most notable of which was the antiestablishment Dhammakaya sect. Efforts by the military to suppress this sect have not succeeded, but whereas this failed effort may encourage other dissident movements to emerge, for the moment most monks still appear to accept the authority of the Sangha Council.

Paul Chambers argues in his chapter that "for the foreseeable future the military will continue dominating the country in partnership with the monarchy, even though the junta transformed itself into a veiled tutelary democracy." This conclusion is echoed by several other contributors. As Claudio Sopranzetti notes, "Since the 2014 coup, Prayuth has solidified this convergence by endorsing the three pillars of ultraroyalism, anti-corruption and moral governance."

Most of the contributors to this book take a pessimistic view of the possibility for real democracy in Thailand. Their main argument is that the military has such firm control over the levers of

government that there is almost no chance that dissenting voices—from the countryside, from young people, from older democrats—can persuade the military to withdraw from or even lessen their governance.

I, however, am less pessimistic. I think that the dissenting voices, especially among the young in Bangkok as well as upcountry, are growing in strength. Demographics are not on the side of the junta. In addition, the king's **XXXX XX XXXXXXXX (XXXXXX)**, even if backed by the power and authority (*amnāt*) of the military, will, I think, lead more and more Thais to question the current system.

Charles F. Keyes

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***Note: The image of the cover of Isan Regionalism in Northeast Thailand was enhanced for clarity.***