

ASIAN DEMOCRACIES AND THAILAND'S MILITARY TAKEOVER

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The May 2014 military coup in Thailand followed a complicated series of political events. Widespread demonstrations against the government of then prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra had prevented the holding of an election in February 2014. Thailand was racked by turmoil as the protests against the government (the “yellow shirts”) in turn triggered large-scale mobilizations organized in favor of the government (the “red shirts”). A ruling by the Constitutional Court then removed the divisive prime minister from office. With violence persisting, the military stepped in to take power. It set up a National Council for Peace and Order, revoked a swath of political freedoms, and clamped down on anti-coup protests. The country has still not reverted to democratic rule. While promising a return to democracy, the military so far has simply consolidated its own power.

The events in Thailand have presented Asian democracies with an important test case for their commitment to upholding democratic norms in the region. In this article, the Japanese, South Korean, and Indian members of Carnegie’s Rising Democracies Network assess how their respective countries have responded. They explain why Asian responses to the coup have been so cautious and ambivalent. Our guest contributor, Thitinan Pongsudhirak, offers a Thai perspective on why it has been U.S. and not Asian positions that have kept pressure on the Thai junta to move the country back to democracy.

JAPAN: BACKTRACKING

MAIKO ICHIHARA

The Japanese government was slow to respond to the growing unrest in Thailand, and its early words urging the restoration of democracy were soon drowned out by actions that spoke the opposite: establishing bilateral relations with the military junta.

The first Japanese government statements about the growing unrest in Thailand were released on November 26, 2013, the day after a large-scale antigovernment demonstration took place in Bangkok over a proposed blanket amnesty bill to pardon politicians, including former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the brother of Yingluck Shinawatra who himself was ousted in a 2006 military coup. The statement by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged self-restraint on all sides in Thailand and the restoration of normal relations.

Within a day of when the National Council for Peace and Order assumed power in Thailand, the Foreign Affairs Ministry expressed its deep regret and this time strongly urged the restoration of democracy. However, it did not take any action to help the Thai junta draw up a concrete road map toward democratic elections. Nor did the Japanese government reach out to other Asian countries to help Thailand with the restoration of democracy.

At a news conference the next day, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida emphasized that the Thai political system had to be decided by the people of Thailand.

Japan also avoided expressing concrete issues of concern such as the dissolution of the Thai Senate and restrictions on free speech and assembly. Instead, in a very generic sense, Japan asserted its hope for the restoration of civilian rule and democracy. In addition, in trying to persuade the Thai junta to lift martial law, Japanese governmental officials occasionally raised an economic argument, stating that Japanese tourists would not return to Thailand until after martial law was lifted.

Then, sometime between late August and early September 2014, the Japanese government seems to have decided to establish good bilateral relations with the Thai junta government.

The first official meeting between a Japanese government official and the Thai junta government took place on September 4, when then Thai permanent secretary for foreign affairs Sihasak Phuangketkeow visited with Kishida. During the meeting, Kishida discussed Japan's intention to maintain strong bilateral cooperation with Thailand while still holding out hope for the restoration of democracy. Shigekazu Sato, the then Japanese ambassador to Thailand, subsequently made courtesy visits to most Thai junta cabinet members.

Then, on October 16, during the tenth annual Asia-Europe Meeting in Milan, Italy, where General Prayut Chan-o-cha made his international debut as Thailand's prime minister, the coup leader met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. At that meeting, the first between Prayut and the political leader of a developed country, Abe emphasized Japan's intention to foster cooperation with the junta government.

Subsequently, expressions of Japan's hope for the restoration of democracy in Thailand disappeared from official statements. Furthermore, the Japanese government did not comment on Yingluck Shinawatra's impeachment or the tightened military control after the lifting of martial law.

There seem to be multiple reasons for the shift in the Japanese government's approach to the Thai junta government. First, Japanese companies have pushed the Japanese government to maintain good bilateral relations with the Thai government, even while it remains under military rule. Indeed, Japan is the biggest investor in Thailand; more than 1,500 Japanese companies had operations in Thailand as of April 2014, according to the Japan External Trade Organization.

Second, the Thai junta government approached China as Western countries were criticizing the military rule, and Thailand has used the China card as a bargaining chip when speaking to Japan.

In playing the geopolitical power game with China for political influence and also fearing the relative economic loss to China in Thailand, the Japanese government apparently felt that it did not have the option of prioritizing a push for democratic restoration. However, such a pragmatic approach does not sit easily with the Abe administration's ostensible emphasis on values-based diplomacy.

SOUTH KOREA: UNPREPARED

JEONG-WOO KOO

At the 2014 ASEAN-Republic of Korea Commemorative Summit on December 10, in Busan, South Korea, human rights and democracy issues were notably left off the agenda, and indeed there was no mention or discussion of either matter in regard to Thailand. Instead, the meeting focused on measures to deepen the strategic partnership between South Korea and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), cooperate on regional security, and accelerate economic growth. The meeting also dealt with how to address regional issues such as joint responses to climate change and to natural disasters.

South Korean civil society criticized the South Korean government and ASEAN heads for failing to address Thailand's military coup or to respond collectively to the subsequent setbacks to basic civil and political rights in the kingdom. General

Prayut Chan-o-cha, who led the coup and became the prime minister of the military junta, was one of the participants in the Busan meeting.

The political background of South Korea's president, Park Geun-hye, has militated against a critical response to the military coup, the associated public unrest, and the resultant suppression of basic rights in Thailand. Her father, Park Chung-hee, ruled South Korea from 1961 to 1979. As a presidential candidate, Park Geun-hye issued a public apology for human rights abuses undertaken during his presidency, but she described his 1961 military coup as necessary for the nation.

Since her election as president in December 2012, Park Geun-hye has focused on trying to rejuvenate economic development, while taking tough stances on South-North Korean détente in favor of building a strong deterrent against the North. Critics argue that this has deflected the government from carving out a coherent framework on the promotion of democracy and human rights, including in Thailand. As a consequence, for example, the rapidly rising South Korean foreign aid is increasingly driven by national interest motives, rather than by development motives.

INDIA: BUSINESS AS USUAL

NIRANJAN SAHOO

Although India took a visible step of pulling back its troops to give a gentle nudge to the Thai military regime, its post-coup engagement with the junta leadership looks very much like business as usual.

In fact, recent engagements between the Thai junta and India's defense and commerce ministries have taken a positive direction. The recent high-profile visit of India's national security adviser to Thailand led to the signing of several landmark agreements between the two distant neighbors on a range of issues including defense and strategic cooperation, maritime security, and counterterrorism, among others.¹

India has found it easy to do business with the Thai junta. In part that is because it shares a very close bond with Thailand and in part because it is wary of China's growing economic and military strength. The Thai junta government under General Prayut Chan-o-cha has expressed its willingness conclude a free trade agreement with India and to support India's trilateral highway initiative that would connect India, Myanmar, and Thailand on land routes.

In other words, India's post-coup response has been based on pragmatic strategic and economic concerns more than any keenness to uphold or promote values such as democracy and human rights. Thus it is unsurprising that India has not said a word on the junta's imposition of martial law, restriction of freedom of expression, and clear violation of the rule of law in the hushed-up trial against the ousted prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra.

India's initial response to the Thai military coup was decidedly low-key. On May 21, 2014, the External Affairs Ministry stated that, "We hope that the people of Thailand resolve the political situation peacefully through dialogue and uphold the rule of law."²

Some analysts have suggested that India's subdued response to such a major event in its near neighborhood was because of the country's preoccupation with a monthlong general election.³ However, those who have been tracking India's reactions to coups elsewhere know well that the standard response of the Indian External Affairs Ministry is one of noninterference in another country's internal affairs.⁴

In this instance, India viewed Thailand's democratic process as its own internal matter that should go through a process of correction and adjustment. This is similar to the position India took against the military coup that ousted Egypt's Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.⁵

But India did react more strongly to the most recent Thai military coup than to Thailand's military coup in 2006, when Thaksin Shinawatra, the older brother of Yingluck Shinawatra, was ousted as prime minister. This time, India canceled

a joint military exercise with the Thai army.⁶ Considering India's traditional foreign policy stance of noninterference, that decision was a significant step.

Among India's vibrant civil society and democracy watchdogs, the response to the Thai coup has been surprisingly muted. The democracy watchdogs had been more concerned when coups occurred elsewhere (as in Egypt and the Maldives). The fact that Thailand has suffered frequent coups may explain the lukewarm response.

ASIAN VERSUS WESTERN RESPONSES

THITINAN PONGSUDHIRAK

The responses of Japan, South Korea, and India to the 2014 Thai military coup have been influenced by Western powers and by regional geopolitical competition. In crucial ways, the Western responses—and in particular the stern position of the United States—set the tone and benchmark for Asian reactions.

The contrast between Washington's opprobrium and Beijing's acceptance of Thailand's May 2014 coup defined the post-coup context.

The United States adopted a much tougher posture toward this coup than it had taken in response to the previous Thai coup in 2006. The Thai military had reassured U.S. officials that no coup was in preparation. Thus, the United States felt deceived when the military intervened. The United States implemented measured sanctions, downgraded relations with Thailand, and called for the immediate holding of free elections and the restoration of democracy. Washington felt it had been taken for a ride in 2014, while it let the Thai military off the hook in 2006.

China, meanwhile, was going to be a fair-weather friend irrespective of Washington's severity of response. Beijing was relaxed and uncritical in its reaction to both the 2006 and 2014 coups. Because Washington's hardline reaction in 2014 was so conspicuous, Beijing's embrace of the coup leaders was of greater significance in 2014 than it had been in 2006. As

Western criticism of the most recent Thai military seizure of power increased, Thailand's top brass sought and received support from Beijing.

The Asian states' response to Thailand's coup is driven by interests, not values. Soft and hard authoritarian Asian states, from Cambodia and Malaysia to Myanmar, Vietnam, and China, are hardly advocates of democratic rule. Meanwhile, the more democratic states—Japan, South Korea, and India—have too much at stake to toe pro-democracy lines at the expense of commercial benefits and geopolitical interests.

The key voice in Asian reactions toward the Thai putsch was Japan's. Tokyo did not want to "lose" Thailand to China, as it felt it had lost Myanmar in the 1990s by focusing too much on democracy. But it had no other choice initially than to condemn the coup and call for the restoration of democratic rule.

By September 2014, senior Japanese diplomats were in search of a more nuanced position. They wanted Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha to visit Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in Tokyo in response to an earlier flurry of high-level visits between senior Thai and Chinese government and military leaders. Abe received Prayut in Tokyo, signed a memorandum of understanding to build an east-west rail project in Thailand, and enticed the Thai leader to publicly reassure an election date in early 2016.

This election pledge subsequently slipped indefinitely, of course, but Japan had made its point. It opposed the coup on democratic values but found a way to protect its interests vis-à-vis China in mainland Southeast Asia. Thai leaders sought hedging strategies from Japan due to the relatively unfavorable terms that Beijing had attached to a proposed rail development project. Japan's geopolitical competition against China has become one of the most significant influences over Thailand's post-coup conundrums.

Other Asian democratic concerns were more ephemeral. Both President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines and then president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia expressed

disapproval of the Thai coup within hours and almost by instinct. But these positions were not sustained and later succumbed to the cardinal noninterference expediency favored by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

India and South Korea, meanwhile, appeared relatively indifferent and followed routine business-as-usual approaches. For them, interests trumped values. The same can be said of Thailand's other ASEAN neighbors, none known as a bastion of democratic rule.

They can hardly be blamed in view of an incipient Western retreat from democracy championing. In May 2015, Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop became the first senior leader of a Western country to visit Thailand and effectively recognized the Thai coup leaders.

For both sides of the Thai divide, what the West says and does still matters most. Western criticism cannot dislodge the post-coup government in Bangkok. But despite their insistence that they pay no heed to international impressions, the ruling generals in fact do monitor and care about how the international community views Thailand. The absence of repeated Western calls for elections and democratic rule in Thailand would remove the really significant factor that keeps the military at least talking about a new constitution and verifiable election timetable.

NOTES

- 1 "India, Thailand Agree to Bolster Defence Cooperation: Ajit Doval," *Economic Times*, April 3, 2015, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-04-03/news/60787127_1_ajit-doval-thai-premier-thai-government.
- 2 See Embassy of India in Bangkok, "Official Spokesperson's Response to a Media Inquiry on the Situation in Thailand," press release, May 21, 2014, www.indianembassy.in.th/mynews.php?nid=162.
- 3 See S. D. Muni, "India," in *Supporting Democracy Abroad: An Assessment of Leading Powers*, eds. Daniel Calingaert, Arch Puddington, and Sarah Repucci (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2014), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/democracysupport/india#.VXZV802Jhzg>.
- 4 For instance, India's response to the military coup in Egypt was similar to its response to the one in Thailand.
- 5 India's standard response to the violent takeover by the Egyptian army can be found in these words: "We are closely monitoring the evolving situation in Egypt. . . . [We urge] all political forces to abjure violence, exercise restraint, respect democratic principles and the rule of law, and engage in a conciliatory dialogue to address the present situation." See Muni, "India." The bracketed text is in Muni's publication.
- 6 "India Recalls Its Troops From Joint Exercise in Thailand," *Economic Times*, May 23, 2014, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-05-23/news/50055225_1_joint-exercise-military-exercise-thailand.

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