CEAC Commentary

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The Resurgence of Authoritarianism in the 21st Century: Why Did Military Rule Return to Thailand?

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1. The Global State of Democracy

Since the beginning of the 21st century, democratic backsliding has become a serious concern worldwide. In the 1990s, following the end of the Cold War, concepts such as democracy, human rights protection, anti-corruption, and good governance spread globally as universal values.

However, according to Freedom House scores, the number of countries classified as "free" peaked at 89 in 2005 and has declined ever since. Today, the number of countries classified as such is lower than those that are not. In particular, from around 2006, when China's political influence began to rise, the number of countries whose "freedom" scores deteriorated exceeded those that improved year-on-year.

Within this broader trend, the greatest threat to democracy in the 21st century is the emergence of strongman leaders, who are different from past military dictatorships.

First, the phenomenon is no longer confined to authoritarian regimes; it has also appeared within democratic systems, not only in developing countries but also in advanced democracies. The rise of U.S. President Donald Trump is one such example.

Second, unlike 20th-century dictators, many contemporary strongmen come to power through popular support, often via elections. The logic used to justify their authoritarian governance has also changed. During the Cold War, Southeast Asian dictators legitimized their rule through narratives of "development" or "anti-communism." By contrast, today's strongmen in emerging economies appropriate values such as the rule of law and good governance—which have been promoted since the 1990s as foundations of democratization—as justifications for seizing and consolidating power.

In the 1990s, international organizations and donor countries, including Japan, as seen in its involvement in Cambodia, actively promoted governance reforms in emerging states by advocating the rule of law and good governance. This raises an important question: could the global wave of governance reforms initiated in the 1990s—targeting states with weak democracy and governance—have unintentionally contributed to the rise of 21st-century strongmen?

2. Strongmen and Political Regimes

To address this question, it is useful to reconsider the defining characteristics of strongmen. Common traits include nationalism, protectionism, intolerance toward minorities and foreigners, personality cults, disregard for the rule of law (including interference with courts), claims to exclusive representation of the public and populist tactics that mobilize fear.

Two major structural factors underpin the rise of strongmen.

The first is economic globalization. Globalization has encouraged multinational corporations to seek countries with low corporate taxes and cheap labor. In response, states have reduced corporate tax rates and liberalized labor markets to enhance competitiveness. These policies have weakened redistribution mechanisms and social protections, widened income inequality, hollowed out the middle class, and fostered nationalist and xenophobic sentiments, conditions under which radical strongmen gain popular support.

The second factor is the rise of social media. Until the late 20th century, intermediary organizations and mainstream media served as bridges between politicians and voters. However, in the 21st century, social media platforms such as Twitter (X) and Facebook have allowed political leaders to appeal directly to voters. Leaders increasingly rely on support from unorganized masses rather than party structures, enabling them to win elections and exercise power. As a result, voters' choices are shaped less by party platforms and more by leaders' personalities, perceived abilities, and images.

Because social media favors short messages, it is particularly effective at appealing to negative emotions such as anger and fear. Repeated dissemination of fake news has deepened social divisions and begun to erode democratic politics. Although Japan was once considered relatively insulated from the political influence of social media compared to Southeast Asia, Social Networking Service (SNS)-based campaigning has expanded rapidly since elections in 2025.

Against this backdrop, the emergence of strongmen has accelerated since the 2010s across different political systems. Strongmen can be defined as leaders who skillfully deploy new political techniques adapted to contemporary conditions such as economic globalization and social media. Their governing methods are strikingly similar in both democratic and authoritarian regimes.

That said, it would be analytically crude to lump together figures such as Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Donald Trump, Hun Sen, and Rodrigo Duterte. Although academic consensus remains underdeveloped, these leaders can broadly be categorized into three types: new strongmen, original strongmen, and returned strongmen.

"New strongmen" refer to leaders who emerged from the late 2010s onward—such as Duterte, Trump, and France's President Macron. Although they arise through democratic processes, their tenure often ends after electoral defeat. According to widely cited indicators from Sweden's V-

Dem project, countries such as the United States and France, with historically high levels of democracy, are unlikely to descend fully into authoritarianism even under strongman leadership.

"Original strongmen" are long-entrenched leaders who came to power before 2010, such as Cambodia's Hun Sen, Russia's Putin, and Turkey's Erdoğan. They consolidated power before the "strongman boom" entered popular discourse and have intensified authoritarian control in recent years. Correspondingly, their V-Dem democracy scores remain low.

"Returned strongmen" differ fundamentally: they are not individuals but military regimes. These regimes dominated political power during the Cold War, underwent periods of democratization, and then reasserted military control. Democracy indicators initially rose during democratization but have since declined.

3. Governance Reform and Its Impact on Political Regimes

Countries classified as having "original" or "returned" strongmen share another feature: their democracy scores improved sharply during the 1990s, when governance reforms were introduced.

Governance reforms covered a wide range of areas—from democratization support to women's rights—but placed particular emphasis on the rule of law and anti-corruption. As a result, many countries established courts, anti-corruption agencies, and election commissions. From the late 1990s through the 2000s, numerous international conventions—such as the UN Convention against Corruption—were signed and ratified, leading to the creation of anti-corruption bodies. Constitutional courts and election commissions were also introduced to strengthen legal oversight.

Yet it remains questionable whether governance indicators truly improved. In Cambodia, despite deep international engagement—including by Japan—rule-of-law and governance indicators have fallen short of expectations. Russia experienced a brief post-Soviet improvement before stagnating. Thailand showed modest improvements in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but many observers on the ground noted that little had changed in practice; from the 2010s onward, indicators worsened.

The key point here is that, while democracy indicators fluctuate easily with elections and regime change, governance indicators are far more resistant to improvement. Nevertheless, the introduction of powerful anti-corruption bodies and constitutional courts may have unintentionally provided tools for strongmen and military regimes to eliminate political rivals.

4. An Overview of Thailand's Political History and the 1997 Constitution

This dynamic is particularly visible in Thailand. Modern Thai politics began in 1932 with a constitutional revolution that transformed its absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy. Despite formal commitments to Western-style democracy, real power remained concentrated among the military and bureaucratic elite. To date, Thailand has experienced 13 successful coups.

During the Cold War—especially after the 1957–58 coup—long-term military rule prevailed. A democratic opening emerged after student protests in 1973, but regional communist expansion and domestic instability soon led to renewed military control.

In the early 1990s, coinciding with the end of the Cold War, Thailand embarked on genuine democratization and governance reform. At the time, it was regarded as a "model democracy" within Southeast Asia. The centerpiece of this reform was the 1997 Constitution, often called the "People's Constitution."

A small circle of legal scholars played a decisive role in drafting the constitution. Because academic appointments in Thailand require royal approval and positions are limited, constitutional scholars form a narrow elite network. One prominent figure—the constitutional scholar Borwornsak—exerted significant influence over the constitution's design.

He identified five core governance problems in Thailand:

(1) Monopoly of power by the military and bureaucracy

(2) Weak political parties, frequent coups, and short-lived governments

(3) Lack of policy continuity
(4) Collusion between bureaucrats and business conglomerates
(5) Excessive centralization

While this diagnosis was largely accurate, the prescribed solutions were deeply flawed. The 1997 Constitution introduced:

- Elements of direct democracy, such as referenda and citizen petitions
- Decentralization
- Numerous permanent independent bodies, including a constitutional court, administrative court, National Anti-Corruption Commission, Election Commission, and Human Rights Commission
- Strict ethical regulations and severe penalties for politicians

These independent agencies were granted substantial authority and autonomy over budgets and

personnel. However, fundamental power structures, military dominance, bureaucratic control, and royal networks, were left largely untouched.

As a result, Thailand entered the 21st century with a deeply imbalanced institutional framework: the deep state remained intact, while politicians alone were subjected to intense scrutiny and sanction. It was within this distorted system that two strongmen emerged: Thaksin Shinawatra and Prayuth Chan-ocha.

5. The Thaksin Government: Governance Reform and Confrontation with Bureaucracy and the Military

The first strongman in Thailand was Thaksin Shinawatra. His Thai Rak Thai Party won landslide victories in the 2001 and 2005 elections; in 2005, it secured approximately 75% of parliamentary seats, forming Thailand's first single-party government. Thaksin served as prime minister from 2001 to 2006, before being ousted by a military coup.

Although often labeled "populist," Thaksin's governance reforms deserve closer examination.

Following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the IMF sharply criticized Thailand's weak governance, elevating "good governance" as a central reform agenda.

Thaksin sought to replace bureaucratic dominance with a politician-led system centered on himself through the following actions:

- Shifting policymaking to prime ministerial strategy committees and private advisory groups
- Incorporating major capitalists into strategic councils
- Centralizing national development strategies
- Restructuring budget allocation from ministry-based accumulation to top-down control
- Increasing discretionary central budgets under the prime minister
- Reducing military expenditure in both absolute and GDP terms

Thus, while publicly advocating governance reform, the administration in practice reduced the authority and budgets of the bureaucracy and the military, concentrating power in the hands of the prime minister. From the perspective of bureaucratic and military elites, this was therefore an "unwelcome" government.

Intervention in the Ministry of the Interior was particularly forceful. This Ministry oversees local administration and the police and is an exceptionally powerful institution in developing countries. Thaksin curtailed its authority by transferring key powers to other ministries and by creating prime minister–appointed positions within local administration—reforms that bureaucrats in the Ministry perceived as an encroachment on their established institutional domain.

These reforms weakened bureaucratic and military authority while concentrating power in Thaksin's hands, provoking strong resistance, particularly from the Ministry of Interior. Interventions in local governance, including the introduction of direct elections for local leaders, intensified bureaucratic backlash. By the end of Thaksin's tenure, mass resignations, elite opposition, and middle-class protests culminated in the 2006 coup.

Thaksin can thus be seen as having challenged entrenched elite interests under the banner of governance reform, only to be removed by military intervention. Ironically, however, the institutional framework he left behind, harsh on politicians but lenient toward the military and bureaucracy, later became the foundation for military rule.

6. The Prayuth Government: Remilitarization in the Name of Good Governance

The second strongman was General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who came to power through the 2014 coup. He served as the prime minister of the military regime from 2014 to 2019 and continued as a civilian prime minister until 2023, effectively creating a long-term authoritarian government.

Unlike Thaksin, Prayuth fully exploited the independent agencies and anti-corruption mechanisms created by the 1997 Constitution, as listed below:

- Establishing the National Council for Peace and Order,
- Packing constitution-drafting and reform bodies with military officers, bureaucrats, and conservative legal scholars,
- Filling independent agencies with loyalists, and
- Intensifying investigations and prosecutions of Thaksin-aligned and reformist politicians under the banner of anti-corruption.

The 2017 Constitution introduced stringent "political ethics" provisions, allowing the Constitutional Court to impose lifetime bans from office. Dozens of legislators from the predecessor of today's main opposition party have been prosecuted under these clauses.

The problem lies in the fact that the definition of "ethical violations" is extremely vague, leaving considerable room for arbitrary interpretation and enforcement. While these provisions have been applied stringently to Thaksin-aligned and reformist politicians, military leaders and conservative elites are rarely held accountable, even when corruption allegations are raised. This reflects the existence of a clear double standard.

Although the number of anti-corruption investigations and the budget allocated to anti-corruption efforts have increased steadily—giving rise to what might be described as an "anti-corruption boom"—their application has been highly selective. Under the banner of "good governance," these measures have, in practice, functioned in part as instruments of political

repression. This pattern closely parallels anti-corruption campaigns under Cambodia's Hun Sen regime.

In terms of economic policy, the Prayuth government promoted regional development initiatives such as the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), which attracted considerable interest from Japanese firms. However, senior military officers were deeply embedded in the core institutions overseeing these projects, and the initiatives were closely linked to the promotion of the defense industry. As a result, rather than diminishing military influence, these policies served to reinforce it.

Budgetary allocations following the coup also shifted back toward a higher proportion of centrally controlled spending—a move criticized by opposition parties for prioritizing pensions and welfare benefits for military personnel and bureaucrats. In local administration, elections for local chief executives were temporarily suspended and incumbents' terms extended in an effort to co-opt local elites; at the same time, a large number of local politicians were removed from office on corruption charges. Thus, although framed in the language of governance reform, these measures were, in effect, deployed to strengthen military control.

7. Conclusion: The Contradiction between Democracy and Good Governance

The Thai case highlights the following key points:

・In countries with long histories of authoritarian rule—where democratic institutions and political culture have yet to take root—the international community in the post–Cold War era introduced democracy and good governance simultaneously in a rapid, bundled manner.

・Although both democracy indices and governance indicators appeared to improve temporarily, these changes were largely superficial, and the underlying structures of the deep state remained intact.

・Powerful anti-corruption agencies, constitutional courts, and independent electoral commissions, institutions originally intended to support democratization, have, in practice, been repurposed by strongmen and military regimes as tools for eliminating political rivals.

・As a result, democracy and good governance have not necessarily moved in the same direction. Instead, a paradoxical situation has emerged in which the discourse of good governance is deployed to justify and facilitate democratic backsliding.

Thailand's military coups have served as a negative precedent for neighboring countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar. They have provided justification for authoritarian retrenchment, encapsulated in the logic that "if even Thailand can be remilitarized, then it is permissible for others to do the same."

In other words, while democracy and good governance are both fundamentally important values that should be pursued, their relationship is not a simple linear or proportional one. Depending on institutional design, political culture, and power structures, good governance, once captured by strongmen, can become a tool for undermining rather than strengthening democracy.

(This is an English translation of an outline of the lecture delivered by Dr. TOYAMA Ayako, Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Tsukuba, at the 106th Policy Plenary Meeting of CEAC on July 28, 2025.)