When Coups Occur:

Erosion of Democracy in Thailand and Myanmar

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that attempts at coup d'état have decreased since the end of the Cold War. But this does not mean that coup attempts will not occur in the future. With the recent two military coups in Thailand and Myanmar, all the continental states in Southeast Asia have entered authoritarian rules. This article explores when coups possibly occurred in the cases of Thailand in 2014 and Myanmar in 2021 that experienced overthrowing the civilian governments and the rise of the military in power. The Early Warning Signals (EWS) recently endorsed to investigation of the likelihood of military coups and qualitative analysis of collected data on factors affecting such incidents were combined to better explain the situations. From this approach, this article found that Group Grievance and Security Apparatus indicators in the Fragile States Index are important factors leading to the occurrence of military coups in the two countries. Also, from the qualitative analysis, a political culture relying on iconic political leaders in the two countries has been a negative influence that deludes democratization and challenges civilian rule.

Keywords

Coup d'état; Myanmar; Thailand; ASEAN; Democracy; EWS.

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Introduction

After the end of the Cold War, a highly elated atmosphere with expectations for development and harmony in the global community prevailed. One of the conditions measuring democracy, which showed some degree of achievement during this time, is the choice of leader with legitimacy of rule through the election, followed by the power of the elected government. It became taken for granted on one side of the globe, but it has still been elusive on the other side of the planet since then.

The disruption of the democratic system by force emerged as a coup d’état led by a specific group, especially the military, and has been incessant all over the world for the past 10 years. Many cases have been discovered for the last decade, including Mali in March 2012, Egypt in July 2013, Thailand in May 2014, Burkina Faso in September 2015, Turkey in September 2016, Zimbabwe in November 2017, Sudan in 2019, and again Mali in August 2020. And the very recent coup in February 2021 occurred in Myanmar. Although scholars say that the frequency of coup attempts is generally declining, the decline does not mean that coups will not occur in the future but continue to be seen.

In the aftermath of the 2016 military coup in Thailand and the 2021 coup in Myanmar, the democratic aspirations of Southeast Asian nations have been severely curtailed, plunging them into the clutches of authoritarian rule. While Thailand held a general election in 2019, the veneer of democracy was thinly veiled. In 2017, the election rules were amended under military rule, effectively hindering opposition parties from gaining a majority. The 2021 constitutional amendment further distorted the composition of elected representatives, rendering the election results inconsequential as the military-appointed senate prevented the winning party from establishing a new cabinet. A similar constitutional system with election rules and a military-backed senate exists in Myanmar. For this reason, some scholars use such terms as “democratic dictatorship”, “democratic authoritarianism”, “disciplined democracy”, and “dynastic democracy” to describe this uneven playfield (Jang 2013; McCargo & Alexander 2019; Nishizaki 2022; Pongsudhirak 2003).

Technological innovation, expansion of exchanges and civic awareness of democratic values throughout the globe have raised voices for democracy and the rule of law, but these countries have been faced with the opposite trend. Why do military coups continue to occur despite the severe criticism from the international community and resistance from the people in the countries? Literature on what triggers military coups has not yet reached an agreement, and the coups in Southeast Asia focusing on their causes have not been discussed with comparative analysis or a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

This article evaluates the causes of the occurrence of the coups in Thailand and Myanmar through the newly endorsed Early Warning Signal (EWS) for prediction of coups. The EWS as a tool for observing the probability of a coup attempt was previously attempted by Josef Kraus (2020) in his case study of Montenegro. This leads to another question – are the recent coups in Southeast Asia following the pattern of what scholars argued based on the quantitative approach, or is there a unique characteristic that requires qualitative analysis that adds explanation?
Military Coup

Robert H. Jackson defines a coup d'état as "a sudden and violent change in government, usually brought about by a small group of people who use force or the threat of force to overthrow the existing government" (Jackson 1990). Whether or not a coup maker is the military or civilian personnel, some portion of armed forces are needed in a coup attempt at least partially. This also suggests that a coup attempt and the subsequent regime change, if successful, does not necessarily involve with the participation of a large group of people, which distinguishes it from revolution (Fosu 2002).

By studying coups in Africa, Fosu (2002), Collier and Hoeffler (2007) found that poor economic performance leads to organizing a coup, as military coup makers are dissatisfied with the civilian political representation and at the same time plan a coup with the idea that they can win better popular support. Fossum (1967) also argues that a large portion of coups in Latin America occurred at the time of social disorder. From these studies, it is argued that the military justifies their coups in the name of "restoring order," although the intention of the coup is different from the pretext.

It is generally understood that the motivation for a military coup attempt is the perception that their interests are not being represented or jeopardized by the incumbent government. The interests to a large degree involve economic and social benefits the military holds in a country, typically and officially stemming from military spending. Based on this premise, some scholars argue that military spending is in correlation to a coup (Bove and Nisticò 2014; Collier & Hoeffler 2007; Kawaura 2018; Leon 2013). The lower the military expenditure, the more chances of a military coup. Of course, this is not just about fiscal policy and allocation to the military by the leadership of government, but values perceived by the military, including social influence and related businesses that conflict with the civilian leadership (Gaub 2016).

Londregan and Poole (1990) are the ones who performed statistical analysis on coup attempts in 121 countries from 1950 to 1982 and found that previous coup attempts and low economic performance including poverty are the main causes leading to the probability of coups. Leon (2013) paid attention to the relationship between military spending and coup probability; he contends that coups are more likely when military expenditure in proportion to GDP is relatively low and the spending tends to increase when coups are successful. This analysis is significant when explaining the causes of coup attempts for those who see coups are the very result of seeking financial interest through seeking financial benefits allocated to the military.

Another area of discussion is the relationship between the probability of coup attempts and regime types. Some scholars argue that coups are not likely to occur in democratic societies due to the lower support for the military (Sudduth 2017). This also suggests that military regimes have more chances to experience coups rather than democratic regimes. Others pay attention to the degree of stability of regime, rather than the type. They maintain that both strong democracies and autocracies reduce the likelihood of coup attempts (Bodea, Elbadawi, and Houle 2017).

Lindberg and Clark (2008) maintain that coup susceptibility hinges upon the degree of democratization process that should constitute various stages of transition from authoritarian to democratic rule.
Bennett, Bjørnskov and Gohmann (2019) say that coup attempts occur when coup-makers believe that their choice in political affairs has better outcomes and maintains the interests they represent. In that sense, coups led by military actors generally represent military interests on which the support for them is based, such as an increase in military spending and guaranteeing privilege provided to their support groups (Albrecht and Eibl 2018; Bove and Nistico 2014). Such interests can be expanded to preferential treatment for military-associated enterprises and judicial or criminal exemptions for military personnel (Bennett, Bjørnskov, and Gohmann 2019, 2).

This means that interest in coup attempts extend to institutional changes by securing rewards provided to their supporters or creating mechanisms to prevent any challenges from opponents. In this sense, Bove and Nistico (2014) assert that one significant change with successful coups is a tremendous increase in national fiscal output allocated to military spending. To put it another way, coups become more likely when their interests are threatened or they seek opportunities to expand their interests.

Thyne (2010) underscores the influence of international factors on coup attempts, suggesting that the presence of foreign powers with close economic ties can either encourage or discourage coups depending on their signals to potential plotters. Gassebner, Gurmann, and Voigt (2016) acknowledge the lack of consensus on the definitive causes of coups but propose, based on extreme bounds analysis from 1952 to 2011, that countries plagued by political instability, weak economies, slow population growth, an absence of neighbouring democracies, and a lack of property rights protection are more susceptible to coups. Powell and Thyne (2011) suggest that democratization may reduce the likelihood of coup attempts. These two opposing arguments clearly demonstrate that understanding coup occurrence requires a nuanced approach that considers both quantitative and qualitative factors, with a focus on the unique circumstances of each coup. This perspective is readily accepted by those who examine coup cases in Southeast Asia, particularly in Thailand. Given the country's history of 19 military coups over the past century, it is reasonable to assume that coups within the same country may unfold differently due to varying contextual factors.

Some scholars also pay attention to the role of international organizations (IOs) that may have influences in preventing the outbreak of a coup and promoting democratic regime change. Part of the assumption of the positive influence of international organizations, according to Shannon, Thyne, Hayden, and Dugan (2015) is that democracy as an international norm receives more attention and provides legitimacy to respond to coups in the international community. Again, the basic premise of studying coup makers is that they are rational actors who take into account the costs and benefits of their actions in a particular environment. They calculate the likelihood of success of their coups and consider the consequences of failure (Powell 2012).

In the discussion of effectiveness in preventing coups, regional organizations are expected to be more reliable and competent in imposing sanctions than other actors (Bapat and Morgan 2009). They can take action to prioritize issues that take place in a specific region (Karns and Mingst 2004). This is particularly effective when regional organizations establish an anti-coup framework to counteract the attempts to change government with the use of force that is perceived as a factor that affects security instability in the region, rather than a peaceful change of government based on democratic institutions and social consensus (Omorogbe 2011).
In this regard, counter-coup activities can strategically alter the perception of coup plotters by increasing costs and lowering benefits. The intervention and influence of regional organizations in which the coup state is a member can be noticeable, rather than an individual state. International norms shared in the region and penalties taken to deter coup attempts are the typical expected roles of regional organizations. Powell, Lasley, and Schiel (2016) found that the African Union (AU)'s anti-coup norms with advocacy of democracy and leverage including trade relations, humanitarian assistance, and democratic neighbours contributed to effectively keeping coup attempts in check. Adding to this, recent literature on the effectiveness of the AU and its responses to coup attempts has been underway to examine how the AU with its democratic norm contributes to a reduction in the occurrence of coups (Basiru and Osunkoya 2020; Cowell 2011; Nte 2020; Souaré 2014; Wobig 2014).

On the other hand, no significant research on the role of the international organization in Southeast Asia, namely ASEAN, can be conducted due to its institutional peculiarity. Unlike the AU which has shown its will to intervene in national issues of its members, ASEAN as the only international organization in the region is well-known for its non-intervention principle in domestic issues of member states. Although ASEAN newly adopted the ASEAN Charter in 2008 which contains articles to promote democracy based on the rule of law and democratic principles, actions taken by the organization generally remained normative, issuing non-binding expressions in the wake of facing serious international pressure (Mathur 2021).

Domestically, coups occur when the political system of a state is weak. This leads to a rational expectation by coup plotters that they can take over the regime at the expense of a certain portion of the cost (Buhaug 2006). Some scholars point out that this was the major dysfunction of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the AU, due to its non-interference policy, which excluded international consideration of and response to coups, and provided legitimacy to block and criticize the involvement of international actors in the crises (Kioko 2003; Kufuor 2002; Taylor 2003). This indifference makes the coup makers aware that there will be no international penalties for their actions, and the movement of the international community limited to accusations without practical means of punishment is regarded as a signal that their actions can be tolerated (Powell, Lasley, and Schiel 2016, 484).

As indicated above, a large group of researchers tried to identify the causes of coup attempts. This is especially prevalent in Africa and Eastern Europe, and such issues in Latin America and the Middle East have also been discussed. Despite the contributions, efforts to examine cases in Southeast Asia have nearly been absent. Many Southeast Asian states are still struggling with the transition from military rule to democracy, or vice versa. For this reason, in this article, with the cases of Thailand and Myanmar, theoretical and empirical scholarship on military coups is examined to open broader implications in this scholarly agenda.
Methodology

In order to assess the causes of the recent coups in the two countries, qualitative scrutiny is required to carefully compare and review the two cases, also with the help of a quantitative approach that measures the significance of frequency, which is already a clear-cut phenomenon in the region. To gauge the likelihood of coup attempts, Kraus (2020) recently introduced Early Warning Signals (EWS) with a set of indicators based on both quantitative and qualitative data. The EWS attempts to delineate state stability with various indicators, including government-military relations, civil control over the military and police, strength of government and civil society, ethnic relations, the existence of unofficial armed forces and economic performance. These factors can be evaluated by employing quantitative data based on the Fragile States Index and the CIVICUS Monitor.

Developed by the Fund for Peace as an independent non-profit organization, the Fragile States Index assesses states’ vulnerability to conflict. It is based on a set of indicators categorized by Factionalized Elites, Security Apparatus, and Group Grievance to measure a country’s socioeconomic and political stability (Fragile States Index 2023). The index scores each country on a scale from 0 to 120. If there are any worsening trends in the indicators of the index, such negative factors of state stability will be considered as increasing coup possibilities.

Created by CIVICUS as an international alliance of civil society organizations, the CIVICUS Monitor provides a comprehensive assessment of the civil society conditions of countries. It has five categories to rate countries’ civic space - open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed, or closed – based on data on freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, and the state’s duty to protect fundamental freedoms (CIVICUS 2023). The categories are measured by a group of research experts from partner organizations.

Like Kraus's work, this article incorporates additional quantitative data, including military spending and economic performance (GDP growth), to assess the likelihood of coups based on governance and military capabilities in the two countries. However, solely relying on official data from these countries may not provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. To complement the quantitative data, this paper emphasizes a qualitative approach to better illuminate the underlying causes of coups, drawing insights from two recent Southeast Asian cases. It is acknowledged that these two cases require further analysis due to their unique structural backgrounds. Therefore, Kraus introduces civil society as an additional indicator related to governance and its potential to resist coup attempts (Kraus 2020, 31). As discussed later, the political structure of the two countries – characterized by power struggles between the military and civilian groups, and a hybrid system rooted in military dominance under a veneer of civilian governance – helps explain these phenomena in Southeast Asia.

Background: Military Presence in Thailand and Myanmar

Thailand’s political turmoil over the past two decades is largely attributed to deep-seated tensions between political factions, often represented by the ‘Red Shirts’ and ‘Yellow Shirts,’ pro-Thaksin and anti-Thaksin groups, and pro-military and anti-military supporters. The rise of Thaksin Shinawatra as a prominent political leader and his populist appeal, which fueled his political influence,
can be traced back to Thailand's democratic advancements in the preceding decade. The post-Cold War era of the 1990s, marked by economic development, witnessed the emergence of an urban middle class comprising entrepreneurs, students, and intellectuals who organized resistance against the military establishment (Glassman 2010, 1302). This transformation reflected Thailand’s democratization process during the 1990s, characterized by political pluralism and liberalization. A new constitution was adopted, establishing a legal and institutional framework to accommodate social diversity and prevent the monopolization of political agendas by a select few elites (McCargo 2002, 2; Song 2007, 231).

However, the emergence of Thaksin and his political base in the new century created a paradox that deepened the uncertainty of the country's democratic environment. Thaksin's rise and the success of his political party, Thai Rak Thai, were fueled by the 1997 constitution and the democratization of the 1990s. Thaksin's unique political strategy, which appealed to voters through manifesto promises such as the 30 baht health scheme, debt suspension for farmers, and village and urban community funds, solidified his support base among local communities. His landslide victory and the dominance of his political party, unprecedented in Thailand's fragmented political landscape, propelled him to the position of prime minister, granting him immense power. Ironically, the very democratic process that brought Thaksin to power also enabled him to circumvent checks and balances, creating an authoritarian style of governance (Kim 2008, 54-55). Paradoxically, the adoption of a new constitution intended to protect civil liberties and rights and establish mechanisms for political stability resulted in a single-party dominance led by a charismatic individual (Song 2007, 239).

As independent institutions enshrined in the constitution, the functions and roles of these organizations were designed to provide checks and balances on political power. However, in 2000, when the National Counter Corruption Committee (NCCC) accused Thaksin of concealing $100 million in assets, Thaksin leveraged his network to gather 1.4 million signatures and orchestrate a protest to demonstrate his public support. Following his election victory, the Constitutional Court, in a narrow 8-7 vote, dismissed the indictment. This case exemplified how democratic institutions, intended to be independent, could be swayed by political influence, reflecting the deep divisions in public support (Khamchoo 2002, 142; Hawkins and Selway 2017, 389). Already under Thaksin's administration, academia, the media, and other civil society organizations that voiced criticism of the government were targeted with repression and punishment, prompting them to mount resistance against Thaksin's style of governance (Phongpaichit and Baker 2005, 18). Pongsudhirak (2003) aptly termed this system "authoritarian democracy" - a period of "unprecedented political stability" characterized by Thaksin's control over the House of Representatives, populist policy designs, and suppression of dissent from social groups.

Anti-Thaksin movements were organized, and protests against the government intensified. The 2006 coup was justified by the military as a response to the escalating anti-Thaksin protests. The events leading up to the coup can be understood as a reaction to Thaksin's attempts to reshape the governance system. Thaksin's policies, which focused on appealing to local communities and securing voter support, alienated traditional elites, leading to a divergence of interests between the military and the royal family (McCargo 2005, 499). The Thai monarchy, seeking to maintain
its position as a stabilizing force and decision-maker in times of political crisis forged a strategic alliance with the military. This long-standing military-royal alliance has hindered the establishment of true liberal democracy in Thailand, resulting in a political system influenced by both military-royal and populist groups that can be characterized as quasi-democracy (Seo 2015, 272-273).

The approval of the 2006 coup by the king, who had previously declared support for democracy in the 1990s, demonstrated the monarchy’s prioritization of protecting its own interests over adhering strictly to democratic principles and values. The king’s political decisions on sensitive issues like coups, government organization, and the appointment of military and government officials through the Privy Council subtly revealed the monarchy’s influence in Thai politics. The Privy Council served as a bridge between the monarch and the military, allowing the king to appoint military personnel with significant military, social, and political clout to the council. As a result, it has been argued that the civilian prime minister is merely a figurehead in the chain of command, while it is the top military leaders who hold actual control over the military force, which is also heavily influenced by the monarch (Chambers 2013, 75).

In Thailand’s unique political landscape, the concept of a rule-based democracy, characterized by the separation of powers among the legislative, judicial, and executive branches, clashes with the informal power wielded by the conservative alliance between the monarchy and the military. This alliance has effectively operated outside of democratic control for decades, rendering Thailand’s democratic structure inherently weak. While the government, nominally a parliamentary democracy rooted in elections and popular support, has existed, the true reins of power remain firmly in the hands of unofficial leaders operating behind the scenes.

The background of the 2014 coup is widely understood by the Yingluck government’s bold attempts that created a wave of opposition. The major issue that caused fierce criticism came from the amnesty bill that would have set Yingluck’s brother Thaksin who was ousted by the 2016 coup free from criminal charges, which was denied by the Senate (ABC News 2013). Also, in November 2013, the Thai court rejected the Thai Rak Thai-led reform attempt to elect the entire Senators by vote as it could jeopardize the country’s democratic system (Fuller 2013). Protesters from anti-Thaksin groups proceeded to street protests organized by the Democrat Party and civilian groups to call for the resignation of Prime Minister Yingluck and her government.

As a response, the Yingluck government dissolved the parliament and called an election to repress the opposition and reaffirm popular support, which turned out to be unsuccessful due to the boycott from anti-Thaksin groups (Sopranzetti 2016, 299). In March 2014, the Constitutional Court of Thailand ruled that Yingluck and her government were found guilty of their abuse of power; another ruling in May finally determined her dismissal as Prime Minister (Ebbighausen 2014). Her “charge of negligence” for a 10-year of jail term was added over the rice subsidy scheme; the policy was introduced to purchase rice at a price higher than the market price by the government but left enormous national fiscal losses and allegations of corruption (Kim 2016). The military coup on May 22 was executed and the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) as a military junta to rule the country until 2019 was established.
The 2014 coup is widely perceived as a calculated move by the military and the monarchy to achieve the incomplete mission of removing pro-Thaksin groups from power, a goal that had remained unfulfilled in the 2006 coup. With the experience of the 2006 coup in mind, the military meticulously crafted a more elaborate plan to overcome the perceived shortcomings of the previous attempt (Seo 2015). The establishment of the Yingluck government in 2011 underscored the importance of public support in securing political legitimacy, a lesson learned by the anti-Thaksin camps, including the military. Consequently, immediately following the coup, the military junta approved the rice subsidy scheme that had been stalled under the Yingluck government (Constant 2016). The NCPO also sought to bolster its public image by implementing economic stabilization measures, including price controls on essential goods, tax adjustments, and increased loan availability from state-owned banks (Lee 2014, 5).

On the other hand, the military junta pledged to hold a general election in exchange for a constitutional amendment before transferring power back to a civilian government. The revised constitution, ratified in a 2017 referendum with 61% approval, introduced a new system for appointing senators, requiring military recommendations and royal approval. Meanwhile, members of the House of Representatives were to be elected through a mixed system combining direct constituency elections and proportional representation. Under this system, 350 seats were directly elected based on the majority vote in each constituency, while the remaining 150 seats were allocated through proportional representation based on the total votes collected across all constituencies (Seo 2020, 204-205). This proportional representation system, designed by the junta, was intended to prevent political parties with widespread support from gaining an excessive number of seats (Seo 2020, 206). This was evident in the case of the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai Party, which secured 136 seats through constituency elections but failed to win any seats through proportional representation, compared to the 265 seats it held in 2011. Consequently, the pro-Thaksin party’s political influence in parliament was significantly diminished.

In Myanmar, Ne Win’s military regime, which came to power in 1962, liquidated the past of Burma established by U Nu based on the 1947 constitution. The parliament, all political parties and many civil society organizations, except religious groups, were dissolved. With 25 years of unchecked rule through the Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP), the military was the backbone of Myanmar’s socialist one-party dictatorship. The party and government agencies, the main bodies of state governance, were dominated by retired and incumbent military officers under Ne Win’s power (Kipgen 2012, 754).

The expansion of Myanmar’s military influence was partly attributed to the military modernization process. Due to the democratization movement in cities and several ethnic insurgent groups arising out of dissatisfaction with the regime, the military faced challenges to ensure firm control of the country’s territory. These threats naturally became aware of the need for military build-ups through modernization. In a national program for large-scale infrastructure led by the military, over $1 billion in 1989 and $400 million in 1994 were spent on weapon purchases from China (Ramachandran 2021).
This time, the socialist economy from the time of Ne Win was abolished and a state-led market economy was introduced. Many of the companies were founded in the 1990s and their business expansion was directly linked to the military. The two major military conglomerates, the Union of Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), have entered various business areas including construction, hotels, tourism, transportation, jewellery, and agriculture; these conglomerates provided benefits to military personnel and agencies through subsidiaries, extraction of resources and the establishment of joint ventures with foreign companies and investments.

Criticism from the international society and punitive economic sanctions caused by the long-term repression of opposition politicians including Aung San Suu Kyi and mass human rights violations were recognized as threats, and accordingly, political liberalization was taken by the military (Bünte 2016). Nevertheless, the military’s political influence did not fade away. According to the 2008 Constitution, the Commander-in-Chief, neither the president nor state counsellor, can nominate candidates for ministers of Defense, Home Affairs and Border Affairs, while the candidates can maintain their positions in the military. Under this structure, the government has only the right to request cooperation from the military, rather than the one to command and control.

Six of the eleven members of the National Defense and Security Council, which addresses security issues weekly and makes decisions on amnesty, appointment of commanders and emergencies, are incumbent military personnel. In addition, the military is allocated 25% of the seats of the upper (Amyotha Hluttaw) and lower house (Pyithu Hluttaw) so that it can appoint members of the two houses. In this way, the military has the veto that can dissuade constitutional amendments requiring 75% of the votes from the parliament. These legal and institutional arrangements allow the military to effectively control the civilian government.

The National League for Democracy (NLD), the representative non-military political party, also raised questions about the true nature of democracy in Myanmar. The NLD is often synonymous with Aung San Suu Kyi herself, who is revered as a symbol of hope for democracy in Myanmar. The party’s reliance on Suu Kyi’s personal stature has exposed its organizational limitations and decision-making weaknesses. While the NLD has attracted members from diverse backgrounds, including former commanders, students, and intellectuals who opposed military rule, these groups have often struggled to cooperate under Suu Kyi’s leadership, leading to the departure of some intellectual members (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, pp. 367-368). The party’s structure, heavily dependent on Suu Kyi, fails to demonstrate the democratic principles that differentiate it from the military regime. Instead, it appears to be a reflection of the division between Suu Kyi’s supporters and opponents within the anti-military groups.

Her arbitrary actions after her release raised doubts about her privatization of the NLD. Even before the victory of the general election that brought the NLD as the leading political party in the country, she showed something contrary to the democratization process. She had not recognized the legitimacy of the 2010 general election and the government that came to power, but it was after she met with President Thein Sein in 2011 that she began to cooperate with the military government. The NLD dropped the boycott of elections and joined in the by-election. As the decision
in the party was passed unanimously, such a drastic and sudden change of the party doctrine was only possible under Suu Kyi’s privatization of the party (Jang 2013, 22).

When Aung San Suu Kyi visited the United States in September 2012, she called for lifting the US sanctions against Myanmar. This gesture was opposite to what she had maintained. The US government employed economic and political sanctions on the country to demand improvement of human rights conditions and democracy. With this, Suu Kyi and the NLD had stuck to a pro-sanctions stance to oppress the military; it was argued that the sanctions card that Suu Kyi had kept could be used for her release (Montlake 2011). Irrespective of the truth behind this argument, it is true that Suu Kyi and the NLD shifted their ground abruptly after her release.

Suu Kyi’s inconsistency became even clearer after her rise in power. On the matter of the Rohingya crisis, the international community demanded her role as a mediator to restore peace and put an end to violence against them. It was very this moment that the world came to realize that her iconic image as a defender of democracy was an illusion. She kept silent on the humanitarian crisis in the Buddhist-Muslim conflict, since, behind the long history of tension between the Burmese and the Rohingya in Myanmar, Suu Kyi’s personal views on ethnicity and her political legacy given from his father shaped the political environment that led her to become inactive (Lee 2014).

Nevertheless, Suu Kyi and the NLD were the only prominent actors that were expected by people in Myanmar to take the country to a more democratic society. When the general elections were held in 2020, the NLD’s overwhelming victory was guaranteed. The party won 396 seats, even more than the previous 390 seats in 2015 (Maizland 2021). The military declared that the election was invalid and they rejected the result. Soon the military staged a coup in February 2021 and detained Suu Kyi. Mass protests against the military are continuing at this time of writing.

Early Warning Signals: Application to Thailand and Myanmar

According to the Fragile States Index, Thailand in the year of the military coup, 2014, was placed on the 80th out of 178 countries in state stability, compared to the highest 90th in the previous year. The higher the number, the more likely the country’s stability becomes. The lowest 71st was in 2015, which shows a quite drastic change in rank, indicating that the country experienced a sudden political change before and after the military coup.
From the indicator sets, the worst is the Factionalized Elites Indicator which evaluates how fragmentary the state institutions are along with not only brinksmanship and gridlock between ruling elites, added by their nationalistic political rhetoric, but ethnic, class, clan, racial or religious groups. The indicator also gauges power struggles, political competition, political transitions, and elections. The major factor that affected the social and political division of the country at the national level during those years, when mass protests by Red-Shirts and Yellow-Shirts, the divided political camps that support Thaksin and monarchy respectively with violence and bloodshed since 2008 (Raslan). As time went by, the division between the two groups intensified and brought out other forms of confrontations with different political orientations, such as Thaksin and anti-Thaksin, anti-military and pro-military, liberal and conservative, and democratic and authoritarian.

The second worst is the Group Grievance Indicator, which concentrates on schisms between different ethnic, religious, and other social groups in a country in a way that their access to services, resources and political process. It may include a historical component that constitutes a long history of aggrieved group relations from the past that still influence and shape the relationship among other groups. The representative case in Thailand is the southern provinces where ethnic and religious backgrounds, political orientations, and experience of government policy created a profound distrust and violent conflict. The population in the provinces is composed of Malay Muslims in the majority, followed by Thai Buddhists and Chinese. The southern provinces were also a strong backbone of the Democrat Party, which gained majority seats in all elections held in the 21st century. Its political popularity was to some degree attributed to Malay Muslims’ dissatisfaction with southern policy at the time of Shinawatra governments filled with incidents of violence and terrorism in the 2000s, and deadlock of the peace process.

Those two indicators show that the chance of a coup attempt can increase with the social and political environment that encourages such action justified by the discontent of certain parts of the society, which can be seen in the Security Apparatus Indicator. This other worse indicator contemplates...
the security threats coming from coups, terrorism, crime, military and police forces. The main security actors in Thailand are the Royal Thai Armed Forces, including the Army, Navy, and Air Forces and the Royal Thai Police. Overall, around 540,000 regular and reserve security forces account for 0.8% of the population, which has been characterized by human rights violations, lack of transparency and accountability, corruption, and escape from private control.

The government’s control and management of the military is executed through several security agencies including the Prime Minister’s Office, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the National Security Council (NSC), and the National Intelligence Agency, etc. Since the Thaksin government, the Royal Thai Police was under the control of the Prime Minister and the Yingluck government depended on the Police for security operations (Chambers 2013, 22). However, in practice, the ISOC was controlled by the Army commander as director (Pawakapan 2017, 8). Before the 2006 coup, Prime Minister Thaksin tried to put ISOC under the control of the Prime Minister’s Office by pushing for reform of the military-dominated ISOC, which came to be a failure (Pawakapan 2017, 20-21). Thus, under the two Shinawatra governments, the tension between the civilian politicians and military officials with the dominance over the security apparatus and state affairs was exposed to the surface.

The CIVICUS Monitor, developed by CIVICUS as a civil society alliance with an international network of organizations, provides ratings of 196 countries to evaluate the civic space that constitutes freedom of assembly, association and expression. The index monitors the civil society’s strength and describes the conditions by the rating system with the five conditions – open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed. Thailand has been in the score “repressed.” The category means that those who criticize power-holders are likely to be exposed to surveillance, harassment, intimidation, imprisonment, injury and death; civil society organizations are under threat of closure by the state, and anyone who organizes or joins in protests is targeted by the authorities; freedom of expression faces a challenge as the media reflects the state position and internet space can be blocked and monitored (CIVICUS, 2019). The political and social situation of Thailand fits into this score definition. One typical example is the lèse majesté law that led Thai people to consider criticism of the monarchy as taboo. For the past few years, political parties in opposition to the monarchy or military have been the target of disbandment, and public protests against the government face violent actions taken by the authorities. Therefore, the civil society in Thailand is weak, which increases the probability of coup attempts and chances of success.

Back to the Fragile States Index, Myanmar from the year of 2009 showed a steady improvement in the overall trend of state stability until recently. From the world’s most unfavourable conditions with 18th rank in 2011 out of 178 countries, the country displayed a better environment in stability ranked 35th in 2017 and 22nd in 2020. It can be conjectured that the improvement is attributed to the democratization with the rise of the NLD and political liberalization during this time. Compared to the Thai case, Myanmar’s Factionalized Elites Indicator shows a decreasing trend while the degree remains high.
Table 2. Fragile States Index of Myanmar

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>18th</td>
<td>21st</td>
<td>26th</td>
<td>24th</td>
<td>27th</td>
<td>26th</td>
<td>35th</td>
<td>22nd</td>
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<tr>
<td>Factionalized</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grievance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apparatus</td>
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(Fragile States Index 2021)

Still, among the indicators that challenge the state stability and may demonstrate the increase in the probability of a coup attempt, the worst in the case of Myanmar from 2011 to 2020 is the Group Grievance Indicator. This indicator during the democratization period is deteriorated while many other indicators tended to improve. This explains that the sociopolitical schism in Myanmar has not been resolved but rather worsened. Typically, ethnic relations from the deep-rooted armed conflicts represented by the recent Rohingya crisis resulting from genocide, refugees, riots, displacement and discrimination ever increased both the national and international insecurity under the democratically elected NLD government. This seemingly ironic phenomenon in the trend of deteriorated state stability is also proved by the Human Rights Indicator with 8.0 in 2014 and the worst 9.4 in 2020, and Refugees and IDPs with the lowest 8.0 in 2011 and highest 9.1 in 2018.

The history of strained relations between the military and anti-military groups reflects the marginalization of those seeking democratic change, a goal that the military-sanctioned democratization process and the rise of the NLD failed to fully achieve. This democratization, driven by a small group of elites from both sides, did not emanate from the grassroots, failing to represent the will of the wider population. In a scenario where the public pressure for democratization remained unmet and the process was unilaterally determined by the military leadership, liberal democracy as a means to restructure political freedom and establish limits on military influence in the political sphere was not realized. Consequently, the democratization that appeared to represent political liberalization only granted limited access to state affairs for Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD, excluding diverse political groups and civil society organizations. The co-dominant politics practised by the military and the NLD amounted to little more than the inclusion of military and non-military elite minorities in state leadership, legitimizing military influence under the guise of civilian governance. However, this power-sharing arrangement crumbled in 2021 when the NLD’s attempts to challenge the military’s presence triggered the coup.

Another Myanmar’s worsening trend in the Fragile States Index is the Security Apparatus Indicator which considers security threats to a state stemming from issues of violence. In the case of Myanmar,
the security apparatus extends beyond official military and police forces, since non-state armed groups have long been engaged in resisting the state for reconsidering ethnic policies. Furthermore, the military presence without civilian control is even worse than in Thailand. Military intervention in politics can be seen in its recognition. The military does not consider itself independent of political roles, but rather the guardian or caretaker of democratization and state affairs (Egreteau 2016).

The military also sought to maintain a disciplined democracy in the form of an elected government that protects their corporate interests and limits criticism and freedom (Bünte 2017, 108). The military generally avoided conflict with the civilian leadership and remained a low profile, because it was President Thein Sein with the military background that carried out the transition to disciplined democracy. Under his government, the military-dominated the parliament through the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and the members of the party were from the military, allowing direct and consistent control by the commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing (Bünte 2017, 109). Under this structure, the NLD, which occupied the majority of the parliament after the elections, had to take a cooperative stance in order not to provoke the military and cause internal conflict in the country.

Efforts to maintain the military’s political influence were also found after the transfer from the military to civilian government. The military vetoed the parliament in an NLD attempt to lower the minimum threshold required for constitutional amendment from 75 to 70 per cent. Checks and balances against Aung San Suu Kyi was a part of the military concern since the democratization. When the NLD approved the bill on the appointment of her as the State Counsellor, members of parliament from the military boycotted the decision (Thant 2016). The uneasy coexistence between the military and the NLD visually began to crack from that time.

The Civil Society Index classifies Myanmar as a "repressed" society, indicating that citizens’ criticism of the state often triggers severe human rights violations by the authorities, including both physical and mental violence that can result in serious injury or death. As a consequence, civil society organizations have struggled to develop their capacity to address social and political issues. The recent mass protests, which have been met with international condemnation, have become a target or military repression. The UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar has labelled the military’s actions against protesters as "mass murder" (Sharma, CNN, and Reuters 2021). Consequently, Myanmar’s civil society is one of the weakest in the world, increasing the likelihood of coup attempts without effective public counterbalancing mechanisms.
Table 3. Military Expenditure in Thailand and Myanmar (in US$, billion)

|----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|

(SIPRI 2020)

As indicated in Table 3, the relationship between coup attempts and military spending is not so clear in the two countries. While the military spending in Thailand during the years of the Yingluck government (2011-2014) remained steady, the one in Myanmar during the years of the NLD (2015-2019) showed a slight decrease. This explains that challenging the military by civilian governments is not always taken by attempts to decrease military spending; rather, it can be increased to appease the military in some cases, but the trend in these two countries is not coherent. As the Thai military after the coup significantly and gradually increased the military budget annually, the possibility that the military’s choice to increase the military budget after the coup this year remains to be seen. Ultimately, the argument by some scholars that the defense budget should be considered as a cause for coup attempts is difficult to be proven.

Table 4. GDP Growth in Thailand and Myanmar (in US$, billion)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>341.105</td>
<td>343.971</td>
<td>368.884</td>
<td>378.797</td>
<td>382.526</td>
<td>394.514</td>
<td>408.043</td>
<td>424.635</td>
<td>442.261</td>
<td>452.675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>49.541</td>
<td>52.311</td>
<td>56.147</td>
<td>60.878</td>
<td>65.742</td>
<td>70.34</td>
<td>74.384</td>
<td>79.148</td>
<td>84.491</td>
<td>86.931</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(World Bank 2020)

The relationship between economic performance and coup possibility is also not clear. As indicated in Table 4, both Thailand and Myanmar experienced steady GDP growths for the past 10 years. It suggests that the motivation behind the military coups in 2014 and 2021 cannot be explained by the economic environment. Even though other indicators may display negative aspects
of the two economies, possibly including slow population growth, median income growth and wealth
distribution, it is still difficult to explain the economy as a major determinant of coups raised
by other scholars that justifies the military engagement due to the inability to designate the situation
as a bad economy under consistent GDP growth.

Last but not least, probably the most significant factor that should be considered is the relationship
between democratization and the likelihood of coups suggested by Powell and Thyne. This is because they argued democratization may reduce coup attempts based on statistical analysis,
but both cases in Thailand and Myanmar are against this pattern. The problem with this approach
is how to understand democratization. Elections and civilian governments are seen as strong evidence
of democratization. Yet, the quantitative measure misses the unique presence of the military
in the two countries, as elaborated above with the military engagement in state affairs
of the two countries.

Another crucial aspect that deserves attention is the tendency to oversimplify the role of civilian
leaders, equating their non-military or anti-military backgrounds with "democratic" credentials.
In reality, civilian governments established through legal and democratic processes in these two
countries have often relied on the personal charisma and public support of individual leaders.
Ironically, these democratically elected civilian leaders have exhibited undemocratic tendencies
in their governance.

The Shinawatra family in Thailand and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar have both been mired
in controversies surrounding their political decisions. Their respective parties, Thai Rak Thai, Pheu Thai,
and the NLD, were heavily influenced, if not privately owned, by these individuals. Decision-making
processes were far from democratic, with major decisions often stemming directly from the top
leaders' directives. The oscillation between Thaksin's repression in the Deep South
and Yingluck's peace process, along with the Rohingya crisis under the NLD government with Suu Kyi's
tacit approval of repression, exemplifies the unilateral populism adopted by these political elites
to appease the majority groups rather than reflecting decisions made within a democratic framework.
In essence, democratization and the establishment of civilian governments in these two countries have
harboured hybrid-like authoritarian tendencies, fueled by immature political cultures that fail
to nurture and guarantee the participation of civil society.

The failure of civil society in Thailand during the recent democratic backsliding was not solely due
to the direct repression of the military rule following the 2014 coup. Rather, the democratic structure
encompassing civil society organizations (CSOs) and democratic institutions had been weakened
by political elites who exerted undue influence over the political process (Lorch 2020, 82-83). As Horner
and Puddephatt (2011) demonstrate, CSOs and democratic institutions in Asian democracies often lack
independence and autonomy due to their susceptibility to control or co-optation by political elites.
This creates a double burden for democratic institutions and CSOs in weak democracies.

On one hand, they face repression from authoritarian governments that are hostile to their activities.
On the other hand, they are also subject to manipulation by opposition political elites seeking
to mobilize support for their power struggles.
Conclusion

The EWS based on several indicators partially explained the possibility of coups. In the Group Grievance and Security Apparatus Indicators of the Fragile States Index, both countries have a similar worsening trend of difficulty in controlling the military, ethnic policies, armed conflicts, and political tensions between pro-military and anti-military groups. Particularly, the political influence of the military under the civilian governments did not diminish. Rather, civilian control over the military was blocked, and the military used coups to protect their privileges. Civilian governments that challenged the military was represented by democracy, but they were also under criticism due to their arbitrary decision-making structure that the political system relied upon. Civil society organizations in these two countries had no chance to grow to challenge the political culture to usher in democracy. In sum, group grievance, security apparatus and civil society conditions are the main factors affecting the likelihood of coups.

Civil society organizations play an important role as social institutions that can detect and criticize wrongdoings in national institutions and actors. NGOs including think tanks, and youth and women organizations can be a channel for social and political voices that can sometimes criticize national leaders. Such activism led to repression by the military in these two countries. When youth groups organized by students raised their voices for political reform against the military, they were subject to violence, arrest and detention last year in Thailand. The same is happening in Myanmar now.

Sanctions by a joint resolution in the regional organization involving member states can increase the cost of coup attempts. However, the ASEAN has no such experience, will, or know-how for this international political culture. There is no agreed declaration or stipulated resolution on the principle of prohibiting the use of force against regime change, and the organization lacks the legitimacy to intervene in member states when coups occur. This is why citizens who were in mass protests asked for international support outside Southeast Asia.

The ASEAN has not created an international order for democratic regime change. This trend will continue due to restrictions and repression of pro-democratic movements, frequent experiences of coups and the current military regimes on the continent. The absence of a framework or international norms for democratic regime change and domestic political structure relying on iconic individuals and shared experiences of strong military presence in politics in neighbouring countries led coups to occur, which is not unusual in the region.
References


