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The Misinterpretations and Misunderstandings of Populism in Thailand: Lessons Learned from Latin America

โดย

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Abstract

For many years, the study of populism has been held back by the complex problem of framing a clear methodological schema**.** Some analysts have offered definitions or listed essential characteristics of populism, and others have found only dubious connections and weak similarities between different populist practices**.** Attempts to offer a general characterization of populism have been contentious**.** According to Margaret Canovan, the definitions formed **'**suggest affinities with ideological movements like socialism, liberalism or nationalism**.** But although all these other **"**isms**"** range over widely varied phenomenon, each gains a degree of coherence to identify themselves by the name, distinctive principles and policies**'.** However, **'**populism does not fit this pattern**'.**

This research aims to investigate the misinterpretation and misunderstanding of populism in Thailand by analyzing and comparing with the evidences and experiences of populism in Latin America**.** It also studies the relations between populism and democracy, which was understanding controversially among Thai scholars and policy-makers such as the then Deputy Prime Minister M**.**R**.** Pridiyathorn Devakula once stated that**: "***The end of democracy is populism***".** Finally, the research tries to diagnose the possibility that populism can support and get along with democracy in the society**.**

Keywords: Populism, Democracy, Thailand, Latin America

Contents

Abstract……. 2

Chapter 1: A false positive: the misconceptions and misleading comparisons of Latin American populism in Thailand…….6

Towards what populism is and how it has been defined……9

Traditional definition……10

Change in contexts……...12

Political populism…….13

Economic populism……..19

A conceptually problematic understanding: How do the Thai public understand populism? How do they compare it with Latin American counterparts?.....22

Anek's misconception……..22

Final reflections……27

References……29

Chapter 2: Populism *without* the people? Towards how the "people" are constructed in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela and Prayut Chan-o-cha's Thailand in comparative perspectives……32

What is populism and what does it do to democracy?.....34

Populism through mass society, historicist lens……...35

Populism as political strategies……37

Populism as an authoritarian form of democracy…….41

Populism through the ideational approach……...42

Populist as a political logic/discourse……..43

Economic populism……..46

Venezuela: Hugo Chávez, father of populism of the twentieth-first century…...……48

Thailand: Between *Dhammaraja* and democracy……56

The royal hegemony…….57

Thaksin's populism versus King Bhumibol…….64

People's populism versus Royalist populism……...67

References……74

Figures

Figure 1: Main theories of populism according to their meanings……...20

Figure 2: "There are people who say that without political parties there can be no democracy, while others say that democracy can work without parties. What is closer to your views?" (N = 1,200)……50

Figure 3: Confidence in the Government (N = 1,200 in 1995; N = 1,500 in 1996)…….50

Figure 4: Percentage of votes in the 1998 Venezuelan presidential elections…….51

Figure 5: King Bhumibol during one of their visits to a rural village……..62

Figure 6: Queen Sirikit during one of their visits to a rural village…….62

Figure 7: King Bhumibol giving audience (from left to right) to the junta's leader Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon, the anti-regime protest's leader Chamlong Srimueng, and the royal advisor and former PM Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, on May 20, 1992……...63

Figure 8: Gen. Prayut on the motorbikes in Buriram (northeast), May 2018……..…71

Figure 9: Gen. Prayut visiting a market in Prachuab Kirikhan (west), March 2015……71

Chapter 1

A false positive: the misconceptions and misleading comparisons of Latin American populism in Thailand

The scene of Bangkok in 2006 was tumultuous and chaotic. Earlier that year, a group of leading media and opposition figures had established the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), also colloquially known as the "Yellow Shirts," and called for a street protest to voice their dissents against the Thaksin Shinawatra government's (2000-2006) suspicious deeds. Collectively wearing t-shits and scarfs in bright yellow, thousands of Bangkokian urbanites occupied the streets of the capital for more than half a year, demanding Thaksin's resignation and political reforms. To be sure, their demands would go further, from calling for King Bhumibol's intervention to crying for a military coup. Among many of the PAD's allegations against the popularly elected Prime Minister who held robust bastions in the poverty-stricken north and northeastern regions were corruption, suppression of freedom of expression, anti-monarchical inclination, and, perhaps the most important, his "populist" politics.

Several months before the prolonged mass demonstrations culminated into a successful, bloodless military putsch on September 19, a number of think tanks and news outlets fervently spurred opinion pieces and researches on the calamity of what they branded as "Thaksin's populism." Public scholars also turned to the media and newspapers to dissect the abnormalities and polarizations in Thai politics, assiduously ascribing the current civil unrests under Thaksin's growing authoritarian proclivity to his populist politics. In 2003, for example, Sawai Boonma, former Senior Country Economist at the World Bank and fierce critics against the government, released a book entitled *Populism: a disaster from Argentina to Thailand?* where he drew comparisons between Argentina's Peronism and "Thaksinomics". As the name of the book shows, the author considers populism essentially detrimental to democracy and destructive to the economy.[1] Anthropologist Theerayut Boonmee, in his 2004 book *Road Map Thailand*, saw populism as "clientelism through state policies"; that it is another form of clientelism in which the patrons are no longer the elites or

[1] Sawai Boonma, Prachaniyom: Hayana Jak Argentina Tueng Thai? [Populism: A Disaster from Argentina to Thailand] (Bangkok: Nation Books, 2003).

individual politicians but the state.[2] But perhaps the most important work on the issue was that of Anek Laothamatas, a scholar-turned-politician who was one of the leading opposition figures. On the eve of the 2006 military coup, he published a highly problematic (but ubiquitously cited) research report entitled *Thaksin–Populism: meaning, problems, and solutions*, sponsored by the government-owned King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI). In addition to Theerayut's idea of populism as "clientelism through state policies", Anek's publication was fundamentally based on Latin America's experience of populism and the structuralist views. All in all, this school of scholarly works saw populism as incompatible with democracy and inherently associated with redistributive policies and personalistic leadership.

Years later, a new wave of scholarly and journalistic pieces on Thai populism would essentially emerge again during the Yingluck Shinawatra government (2011-2014), grounded on general public perceptions, spurious comparisons with Latin American nations (especially Argentina and Venezuela), and a series of previous ill-researched literature in Thai language on Thaksin populism. For instance, Sawai Boonma in 2012 released the freshly updated edition of his 2003 book, but this time he additionally integrated the case of Hugo Chávez's Venezuela into his analysis in order to stress the "disastrous" effects of populism.[3] Similarly, Somkiat Tangkitvanich, president of the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), also extensively published articles criticizing fiscal irresponsibility and monetary unsustainability of Yingluck's "populist policies" and called for the government to "resolve populist policies by democracy".[4] All in all, among many pretexts under which the opposition attacked Yingluck and which the military claimed for staging the coup in May 2014 was, unsurprisingly, the Shinawatra sibling's populist politics.

Grounded on the aforementioned (mis)understanding, this paper aims to problematize an extensive body of Thai literature on populism in terms of how it produces and reproduces misconceptions, which oftentimes tend to spur invalid comparisons between Thailand and

[2] Theerayut Boonmee, Road Map Prathet Thai [Road Map Thailand] (Bangkok: Saitharn, 2004), 52.

[3] Sawai Boonma, *Prachaniyom: Hontang Su Hayana [Populism: Path towards Disaster]* (Bangkok: Post Publishing, 2012).

[4] Somkiat Tangkitvanich, "Korsanue Patiroop Karnmueng Pue Lod Panha 'Nayobai Prachaniyom' Yang Pen Prachatipatai [Proposals for Political Reforms Aimed at Democratically Solving 'Populist Policies' Problems]," Thailand Development Institute (TDRI), 2014, https://tdri.or.th/2014/10/howto-resolvepopulistpolicy-bydemocracy/

Latin America and lead to spurious conclusions. The first section of this paper revisits a wide range of conceptual frameworks of populism in Latin America and the world. I propose that we should categorize them broadly into two groups according to their ontological significance: political or economic. Particularly fundamental in this section will be theories, observations, and debates in Latin American populism studies, especially those put forth by Gino Germani, Torcuato di Tella, Kurt Weyland, Ernesto Laclau, Kirk A. Hawkins, Cas Mudde, Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Carlos de la Torre, and Rudi Dornbusch with Sebastian Edwards. Drawing on different conceptual frameworks developed here, a number of Latin American cases that have frequently been mentioned in Thai media outlets when they refer to the perils of populism are concomitantly examined: Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela. Essentially, the analysis focuses on the three countries' socioeconomic developments and changes in public policies to assess how and why populisms in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Venezuela – depending on theoretical lens, time and space – can or cannot be qualified as political and/or economic populism. The second and last section returns to Thailand's general perceptions and understandings of populism to reveal the grave consequences which an ill-conceived, unreliable conceptual framework could yield, particularly in the comparisons between Thai and Latin American populism. The influential work by Anek Laothamatas will be thoroughly reviewed and analyzed in terms of its contributions and misconceptions/misunderstandings vis-à-vis general theoretical frameworks of populism presented in the first section.

By so doing, this article sheds light on the problematic aspects of Thailand's body of literature on populism. This school of conventional wisdoms has dominated the debates for far too long and given birth to the "ghost of populism" that has been haunting the country for almost two decades. Undoubtedly, comparing Thailand's populism with that of Latin America or other parts of the world is constructive and timely, for it helps us to understand better what it is and how to deal with it. Likewise, the global rise of populism prompts us to rethink about democracy, equality and wealth redistribution, casting doubts upon the universally vaunted success of liberal representative democratic regimes. However, such a comparative study will prove fruitful only when the comparison is conducted with well-rounded definitions and rigorous methodologies. This paper aims to contribute not only to such an effort but also to the ongoing debates over what populism is.

"*You don't know what it is, but you can tell it apart when you see one*":

Towards what populism is and how it has been defined

For more than half a decade, both scholars and journalists alike have long been debating over and attempting to define what populism is. One of the pioneering efforts first began in 1967 at a conference led by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner at the London School Economics. A group of leading scholars gathered to discuss and delineate what they saw as "the new specter haunting the world": populism[5]. But despite such vibrant scholarly conversations and debates, no general agreement was reached. "There can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism," the conference report wrote, "But no one is quite clear just what it is. As a doctrine or as movement, it is elusive and protean. It bobs up everywhere, but in many contradictory shapes. Does it have an underlying unity or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?".[6] Populism means different things to different people.

To be sure, the disagreements over the definition of populism have persisted well until today. While some consider it as a political strategy, an ideology, a discursive approach, a semi-authoritarian regime or an abnormal phase towards modernization, others see it as a set of irresponsible macroeconomic policies, a political style, a regime of "democratic illiberalism" or a moral and Manichean discourse. To make the matter further complicated, unlike "democrat", "conservative", "liberal" or "socialist", populism is a term which one rarely uses for calling one's self because it holds an intrinsically negative meaning. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, only few politicians self-identify as populists – not even the most recognizable figures of populism such as Argentina's iconic Juan Domingo Perón or Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra: "[P]opulism is a label seldom claimed by people or organizations themselves," Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser wrote, "Instead, it is ascribed to others, most often with a negative connotation".[7] From calling politicians as diverse as the

[5] Carlos De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*, Research in International Studies ; Latin America Series No. 32 (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), x.

[6] Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 1.

[7] Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

conservative US president Donald Trump or Venezuela's radical left *El Comandante* Hugo Chávez as "populist," it is certainly not an exaggeration to argue that the meaning of populism remains a contested terrain in each and every one of disciplines in social science nowadays.

Traditional definition

An Italian-born sociologist who fled Mussolini's Italy to Argentina, Gino Germani was among the first scholars who pioneered the study of Latin American populism. In his seminal 1962 book, Germani scrutinized the rises of populist leaders of Latin America's three largest countries in the 1930s-1940s: Mexico's Lázaro Cárdenas, Brazil's Getúlio Vargas, and Argentina's Juan Domingo Perón.[8] Grounded on modernization theories, he depicted politics as primarily shaped by economic policies and subsequent societal changes, hence populism could and should be explained by analyzing socioeconomic factors. According to him, the global economic crisis of the 1930s forced export-led nations in Latin America to make a substantial structural change in order to appease the external shocks that damaged the national economy. This essentially gave rise to what came to be called "import-substitution industrialization" (ISI) economic policies in the region's three major countries. Through this state-led, inward-looking strategies, Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico were believed to be embarking on a modernization process similar to that of Europe. Therefore, such a progress should have given birth to a civil society and the masses/the working class, whose subsequent bottom-up mobilizations would develop into modern forms of institutions for social and political integration: unions, parties, organizations, and legislation. A Euro-centric, Germani saw this European-based process of mass incorporation as "natural", for the changes were led by the civil society, and the demands of the emerging masses/the urban working class could be channeled through self- organized institutions.

On the contrary, Latin American experiences of modernization fundamentally differed from the European model, he argued. While Latin America's ISI policies similarly engendered industrialization and urban working class, it was an endeavor led by the state rather than the private sector as in Europe. The masses were incorporated into politics in a

[8] Gino Germani, *Política y Sociedad En Una Época de Transición: De La Sociedad Tradicional a La Sociedad de Masas*, Biblioteca de Psicología Social y Sociología (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidos, 1962).

top-down manner without any formal institutions to channelize their demands, causing what he described as "asynchronousness" and an aberration of modernization process.[9] These eventually resulted in a lack of bottom-up civil society and an abnormal form of integration expressed in national-popular movements: populism. According to Germani's historicist structuralist view, populism is simply a phase within Latin America's transition from premodern to modern society in which the popular mass is vertically incorporated and manipulated by its leader. It is essentially a class-based movement associated with the ISI and expansionary, redistributive economic policies aimed at accommodating the masses through clientelist network.

Another Italian-born scholar who moved to Argentina, Torcuato di Tella, expanded Germani's observation further to highlight the elite leader's capability to maintain the backing from the elite while mobilizing his or her followers at the same time. In other words, it is a multi-class alliance rather than a class-based movement like Germani observed. "Populism", wrote di Tella, "is a political movement which not only holds strong popular support, but also has the participation of non-working-class sectors who have significant influence in the party and the support from those who hold anti-status quo ideology".[10] In addition to the support from the elite and mass mobilization, another feature which he argued is pivotal to the populist leader's sources of strength is "a widespread ideology or emotional tie that favors [direct] communication between leaders and followers and creates a collective enthusiasm".[11] This is precisely when charismatic leadership comes into play. Numerous studies on Perón and Peronist network in this regard – the excellent works by Plotkins[12] and Auyero[13], for instance – corroborate di Tella's observation.

[9] Gino Germani, "Stages of Modernization," *International Journal* 24, no. 3 (1969): 476.

[10] Torcuato Di Tella, "Populismo y Reforma En América Latina," *Desarrollo Económico* 4, no. 16 (April 11, 1965): 401.

[11] Di Tella, 398.

[12] Mariano Ben Plotkin, *Mañana Es San Perón: A Cultural History of Perón's Argentina* (Wilmington, Del.: SR Books, 2003).

[13] Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita.* (Duke University Press, 2001).

All in all, these early theories of populism as defined by Germani and di Tella, although basically revolving around modernization and expansionary economic policies, are valuable for their characterization of an intimate relationship between a charismatic leader and the "people", urban-based labor as core constituency, and personalistic leadership/charisma.

Change in contexts

Following Samuel Huntington's theory put forth in his pivotal 1991 book[14], a number of Latin American nations, including but not limited to Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, and Brazil, can be located within the global context of the second wave of democratization (1945-1964). Mexico remained an exception due to the one-party rule by the PRI. Along with "classical populism", it was precisely a period in which the population also saw mass enfranchisement, popular elections, and progressive social movements. However, by the 1960s this wave of democracy in Latin America subsided and was replaced instead by the wave of military coups that started to plague the region with the 1964 Brazilian military coup ousting President João Goulart. As the Cold War intensity escalated, more and more Latin American countries fell under US-backed military dictatorship. Populism, as understood through a structuralist lens, was believed to be curtailed and exterminated. Another phase of history is believed to have come to pass.

As the third wave of democracy ushered throughout the world, Latin America was no exception. Beginning with the death of the caudillo Francisco Franco and Spain's subsequent democratization in 1975, Latin American military regimes followed a similar path. The "bureaucratic authoritarian regimes" – a term coined by Guillermo O'Donnell in 1988[15] – either collapsed with disgrace (as in Argentina) or retreated relatively smoothly back to the barracks (as in Brazil and Chile) throughout the late 1970s until the end of the 1980s. The return to democracy, however, was accompanied by a new wave of populist leaders such as Brazil's Fernando Collor de Mello, Peru's Alberto Fujimori, Ecuador's Abdalá Bucaram, and Argentina's Carlos Menem. The puzzle is that these presidents did not implement neither ISI

[14] Samuel P Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

[15] Guillermo A O'Donnell, *Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Argentina, 1966-1973, in Comparative Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

nor redistributive policies that were largely characterized within a structuralist/traditional understanding of populism. As a matter of fact, certain contemporaries of Perón, Cárdenas, and Vargas – such as Ecuador's José María Velasco Ibarra – did not even implement ISI policies. De la Torre demonstrated in his work that the Ecuador under Velasquismo remained an agricultural-based society, yet Velasco Ibarra is consensually considered as populist.[16] In a stark contrast of most populists in the first half of the 20th century, Latin American populist leaders in the 1980s were strongly pro-market, enacting a neoliberal agenda at full steam and vowing to tackle the economic debacle left behind by the military governments, particularly hyperinflation and macroeconomic mismanagement.

Political populism

Kurt Weyland was among the first scholars to argue against the traditional "cumulative" definitions of populism. He contended that the previous studies which "assumed a close connection between populist politics and its social roots, socioeconomic background conditions, and/or substantive policies, especially expansionary economic programs and generous distributive measures" have failed to thoroughly explain why neoliberals like Fujimori and Menem were also regarded as populists.[17] Proposing that populism should be first and foremost placed within a political domain rather than linked to economic or social realms, Weyland argued that the term should be defined as a "political strategy" or a "specific way of competing for and exercising political power."[18] He wrote that this reconceptualization captures best the basic goal of populist leaders, which is to win and exercise power while using economic and social policy as an instrument for this purpose. Moreover, this redefinition also encompasses the dichotomic nature of populism which usually rests upon "the distinction of friend versus foe" or "a leader's promise to protect the people from a pernicious enemy." Populism in this sense, therefore, is more flexible and "most attuned to the opportunism of populist leaders and their weak commitment to substantive policies, ideas, and ideologies."[19] As a result, he divided Latin American

[16] De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*.

[17] Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 5.

[18] Weyland, 18.

[19] Weyland, 11.

populists into two broad subtype categories: "classical populism" of the 1930s and 1940s and "neopopulism" of the 1980s and 1990s. Later on, when the rise of Hugo Chávez's anti-neoliberal influence engendered a series of similar phenomena in the region: Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and the Kirchner, Weyland argued that this wave of left-leaning populist leaders was noticeably different from both classical and neo- populism in a number of aspects, although the political strategies they employed remained largely the same. He called them "radical populism".[20]

According to Weyland (2001), populism is consisted of (1) an individual, personalistic leader who seeks or exercises government power, and (2) large numbers of followers from whom the individual leader received support. In fact, he stressed that populism is crucially leader-centric and not the same as social movements. "Populism emerges," he wrote, "when personalistic leaders base their rule on massive yet mostly uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of people".[21] As a result, populist leaders need a set of key instruments for mobilizing the largely unorganized masses and for demonstrating their distinctive power capability, such as "elections, plebiscites, mass demonstrations, and most recently opinion polls." By mobilizing the masses through such direct means, they are typically inclined to have little to no regard or respect for checks-and-balances institutions. Additionally, because their mass support is naturally uninstitutionalized, fragile and fickle, they also have to "create a particularly intense connection to their followers" by drawing on "the potency of charisma".[22] Weyland also noted that some populist leaders, once in power, may choose to formally institutionalize themselves into an organization or a clientelist network by "routinizing their charisma."

All in all, Weyland highlighted that his theory manages to preserve "the central rationale of populism [that is] the quest for political power" but at the same time "leaves the association of populist politics with specific social constituencies, economic settings, and socioeconomic policies open for empirical research." Contrary to that of Germani or di Tella, Weyland's theory of populism as a political strategy not only renders it timeless but also liberates it from being associated with any kind of ideologies or class alliance. Neither was it

[20] Kurt Weyland, "Populism and Social Policy in Latin America," in *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century.*, ed. Carlos De la Torre and Cynthia J. Arnson (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013), 120–23.

[21] Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," 18.

[22] Weyland, 14.

merely a transitional phase linked to economic policies, nor a result of aberrant modernization.

Along the same line, De la Torre (2000) studied both classical and neo-populism in Latin America – particularly the Ecuadoran cases of Velasco Ibarra and Bucaram – by situating populism strictly within political realm. Free from any economic inclination and focusing on the personalistic leadership, he defined populism "as a style of political mobilization based on strong rhetorical appeals to the people and crowd action on behalf of a leader".[23] Populist politics, in his view, is comprised of (1) Manichaean and moralistic discourse dividing society into two antagonistic camps; (2) clientelist networks; and (3) different forms of political participation that prioritize mass demonstration and leaders over citizenship rights and liberal democratic values. Through these frameworks laid by Weyland and De la Torre, it is now possible to begin explaining why politicians as diverse as Perón, Chávez, Fujimori, Menem, or even Trump and Duterte, can be labelled as "populist".

Another breakthrough in the studies of populism and in the effort to develop its minimal definition can be found in Ernesto Laclau's remarkable 2005 book *On Populist Reasons* and his chapter in Francisco Panizza's edited volume published in the same year. Unlike conventional wisdoms which treat populism and mass politics with negative connotations (a transitional phenomenon, economic negligence, manipulation, demagoguery, anti-intellectualism or authoritarianism), Laclau proposed that populism should be studied and viewed as a political logic and a discourse. Similar to Weyland and De la Torre but greatly different from Germani and di Tella, he saw populism as a discursive form of doing politics which can emerge anywhere at any time. It generally involves a charismatic leader who employs dichotomic discourse to galvanize mass mobilization by constructing two irreconcilable political subjects: the people and the enemy.

The Argentine scholar began his approach to populism by stressing that it is imperative to start with "social demand" as the smallest unit of analysis in the formation of the social link.[24] According to him, there are two kinds of social demands: the satisfied ("democratic demand") and the unsatisfied ("popular demand"). He argued that demands in the first type, if punctually or individually satisfied through institutions or formal channels, "do not construct

[23] De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America:The Ecuadorian Experience*, xi.

[24] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 73.

any chasm or frontier within the social".[25] On the contrary, if different sectors within a society see a number of their demands rejected, the accumulation process will take place: "[A]ll will share the fact that their demands remain unsatisfied. That is, the demands share a negative dimension beyond their positive differential nature".[26] This very first circumstance – the aggregation of unsatisfied/popular demands – is part and parcel of what Laclau called the first stage of the preconditions of populism.

Against this backdrop comes "the logic of equivalence". It is a process in which all the unfulfilled demands, "in spite of their differential character, tend to reaggregate themselves, forming what we will call an equivalential chain" among the people.[27] The more democratic demands "are differentially absorbed within a successful institutional system," he wrote, "the weaker the equivalential links will be and the more unlikely the constitution of a popular subjectivity." On the other hand, the equivalential links will be created in a situation where "a plurality of unsatisfied demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them differentially co-exist".[28] According to Laclau, this constitutes the second precondition of a *populist rupture* or a breakaway with the status quo: the equivalential articulations of unsatisfied/popular demands.[29] Once unsatisfied demands accumulate and the equivalential chain emerges, what follows in the next step is the discursive construction of an internal frontier. This is an idea which he called "the formation of antagonistic frontier" and which aims to divide the society into two camps: "the people" and "the power".[30] This is precisely the third and final precondition: a dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier.

Laclau emphasized one of the most important elements in this theory: "the more the chain of equivalences is extended, the weaker will be its connection with the particularistic demands which assume the function of universal representation".[31] Simply put, he argued

[25] Ernesto Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London, England: Verso, 2005), 36.

[26] Laclau, 37.

[27] Laclau, 37.

[28] Laclau, 38.

[29] Laclau, 46.

[30] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 74.

[31] Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?," 39.

that once the number of unfulfilled/popular demands increases, there will be a process in which the "particularities" of these demands are increasingly surrendered and reduced to a minimum until there is one "commonality." It is, therefore, imperative to construct a universal popular signification that can bring "equivalential homogeneity" to "a highly heterogeneous reality".[32] This is what he termed as "empty signifier" – a word ["democracy", "poverty", "socialism", "immigration", "the oligarchy", etc.] that can mean different things to a myriad of people but at the same time fortifies the chain of equivalence and merge "the people" altogether into one single unit ("totality") against a discursively constructed "enemy".[33] Interestingly, these ideas of Laclau effectively rebut a conventional wisdom that sees all kinds of populism as class-based, for the chain of equivalence and empty signifiers can very much cut through classes and bridge them altogether. Furthermore, because Laclau's populism is conceptualized as political logic, it can be employed to describe leaders from all kinds of political spectrum and economic preference.

Recently, a group of scholars such as Kirk A. Hawkins, Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have come up with a novel approach to explain the global reemergence of populism. Drawing largely from discursive theories of populism, especially that of Laclau, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser proposed an "ideational conceptualization approach" to better understand and define populism.[34]

Although there have been discussions over what populism really is (discourse, thin-centered ideology, political strategy, etc.), Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser's ideational approach first and foremost presents that populism entails "a set of ideas that can be combined with other ideological features," and that it always attaches itself to some "host" ideology.[35] On an ontological level, they contended that populism contains some moral aspects, for it "sees politics as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of a knowing, diabolical evil—hence, it is Manichaean or dualistic".[36] It primarily "seeks the immediate political expression of the popular will and sees its opposition in such diabolical

[32] Laclau, 40.

[33] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 69–71.

[34] Kirk A Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "The Ideational Approach to Populism," *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017): 513–28.

[35] Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 514.

[36] Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 515.

terms." At the center of populism, the authors stressed, is so-called popular identity or "the reified will of the ordinary folk who constitute the bulk of the citizenry," which is presented as the embodiment of democratic values. On the other hand, against this notion of the people is "an equally reified group of elites" who are seen as "anti-people" – a group that is "secretly aiming to subvert the popular will for selfish purposes." Crucially, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser's ideational approach diverges from Weyland's populism as a political strategy in that it considers the role of the leader not necessarily central and hence populism can be used to describe attitudes, movements, and parties.

According to them, populism has at least two opposites: elitism and pluralism. The first – also shares the same Manichean worldview as populism – assumes that the people are dangerous, volatile and needs to be controlled while depicting the elite as a small group of actors who should be in charge of the government due to their intellectual and moral superiority. Pluralism, on the other hand, rejects the Manichaean distinction between the people and the elite and respects diversity of ideas and interests in society.

Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser argued that their ideational approach to populism is different from Laclau's discursive theory in that "it analytically separates the existence of populist language from its effect on politics".[37] It also allows us, they continued, to "test propositions about the conditions under which populist rhetoric succeeds in its political goals" and could point to the fact "that a greater variety of movements and parties can be included under the populist umbrella, including minoritarian radical-right ones that may lack charismatic leadership". As a result, based on the aforementioned theoretical foundation, the authors introduced a novel quantitative methodology drawn from a systematic reading of political speeches to empirically measure populist discourse and sharpen commonalities. The criteria and the analytical framework employed with the dataset tremendously help scholars to identify populists in a systematic way. Hawkins' 2010 monologue *Venezuela's Chavismo and Populism in Comparative Perspective* employed this framework to analyze how and why Hugo Chávez was qualified as populist. However, this article acknowledged the methodology's limitation. For example, it cannot reveal why populist leaders came to power or why their administrations had a positive or negative impact on democracy. Furthermore, focusing excessively on political speeches as the principal quantitative indicator could

[37] Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 516.

obscure and leave out a number of other populist traits, which would potentially weaken the result.

Economic populism

When asked what populism is, a number of ordinary people would possibly think of it a set of irresponsible economic policies. Indeed, this aspect of populism is equally important and should be looked at along with its political meanings. Following a structuralist approach based on Latin American classical populism, James Malloy saw it as "redistributive, nationalist, and inclusionary state policies" that are opposite to "exclusionary policies that benefit foreign capital, concentrate economic resources, and repress popular demands".[38] However, the most comprehensive work on economic meaning of populism was better explained by Rudi Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards in 1991, based largely on the Peruvian and Chilean experiences during the presidencies of Alan García and Salvador Allende, respectively.[39] At the zenith of Latin America's left-leaning "radical populism" of the 2000s, Edwards published a book on the topic again in 2012. Purely from an economic dimension, Dornbusch and Edwards defined populism as a set of macroeconomic policies which "emphasizes growth and income distribution and deemphasizes the risks of inflation, external constraints, and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive nonmarket policies."[40] It usually comes with high and unsustainable fiscal deficits, expansive monetary policies, and wage increases that are not justified based on increases in productivity.[41] Although beginning with great euphoria, he added, the cycle usually ends "with rapid inflation—and in some cases hyperinflation—higher unemployment, and lower wages. Time after time these policies ultimately fail, hurting those groups (the poor and the middle class) that they are supposed to favor". Vibrantly encapsulating this definition of economic populism were Chávez's economic policies during the oil boom era of the 2000s.

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[38] James Malloy, "The Politics of Transition in Latin America," in *Authoritarians and Democrats: Regime Transition in Latin America*, ed. James Malloy and Mitchell Seligson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), 235–59; De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*, 2.

[39] Rudi Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards, *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*, Conference Report (National Bureau of Economic Research) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[40] Dornbusch and Edwards.

[41] Sebastian Edwards, *Left behind : Latin America and the False Promise of Populism.*, Paperback (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 167–68.

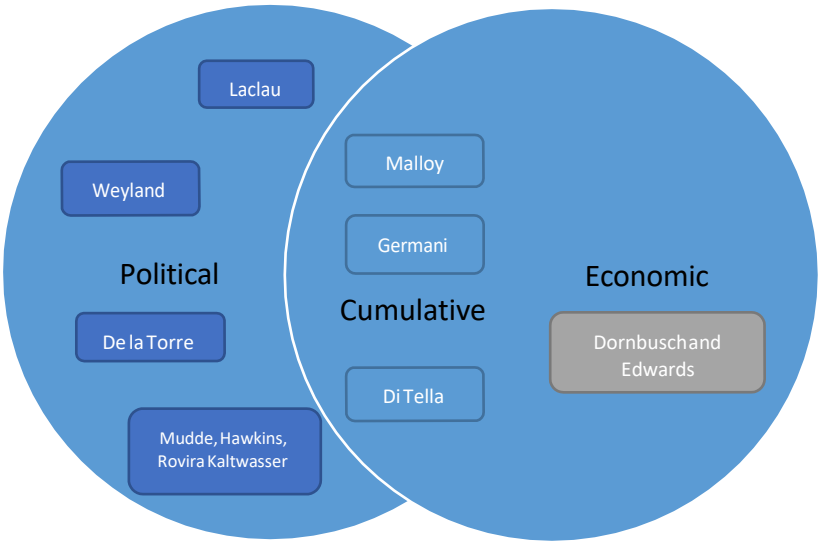

Figure 1: Main theories of populism according to their meanings

To conclude the first section, Figure 1 summarizes the theoretical frameworks that have been reviewed so far in this paper. It divided them into two broad categories according to its definition: political or economic. The theories by Laclau, Weyland, Mudde, Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser and de la Torre are located within the political realm, regardless of their different subtypes (discourse, ideology, style, etc.). It should be noted that a number of theoretical frameworks on populism that have not been mentioned here – such as that of Canovan[42], Panizza[43], Finchelstein[44], or Pappas[45]– should be placed on the political side as well. On the other hand, Dornbusch and Edwards's theory of macroeconomic populist policies is situated within the economic meaning. In the middle between the two categories is the "cumulative definition," which is derived from an effort to clarify the classical populism that blends a political definition with redistributive, inclusionary economic policies.

To avoid conflating the different shades of populism in any analysis, I propose that we should refrain from employing the cumulative approach and that two dimensions of populism must be examined separately: (1) the ways in which these leaders were doing politics; and (2)

[42] Margaret Canovan, *Populism*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).

[43] Francisco Panizza, "Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London: Verso, 2005), 1–31.

[44] Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017).

[45] Takis Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy : A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

the economic policies during their government. On one hand, certain leaders can be described as populist because of their ways of doing politics. In a strict sense, they are political populists because they claim to speak in the name of "the people", employ the unpluralistic discourse of "the people VS the other", and favor direct, personalistic communication between them and their bastion over liberal representative institutions. For example, Perón, Chávez, Fujimori are all notoriously well-known for their aggressive use of divisive discourse. Chávez labelled political elites and the opposition whom he saw as not part of Venezuela's "authentic people" as "imbeciles", "escuálidos", "traitors", or "pitiyanquis".[46] Likewise, the personalistic politics and the complete disrespect for checks-and-balances institutions of the popular Alberto Fujimori also prove the case. Perón's enchanting charisma among the crowd went along with a number of authoritarian attributes, such as the persecution of the opposition and the expropriation of newspapers that criticized him.

On the other, the leaders who are categorized into the group of "political populism" do not necessarily have to employ expansionary measures and/or "populist economic policies." For example, Carlos Menem, Alberto Fujimori, and Abdalá Bucaram all emerged into the national political arena because of the economic crisis and their promise to solve it. They all implemented strict austerity measures and did not employ redistributive policies like those of Chávez or Perón during his two presidencies. Contemporary "populist" leaders such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Rodrgio Duterte fit precisely in this group of political populists.

In turn, those who use "populist economic policies" do not necessarily have to be classified as "political populism". For example, during his presidency Brazil's Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva employed redistributive measures, such as Bolsa Família, and issued a wide range of other public policies aimed at the low socioeconomic sector. Moreover, Lula was a charismatic leader, holding the enormous bastion of the urban poor. Nevertheless, he did not use political populist strategy nor style. He respected institutions and pluralism and honored the opposition. Unlike his counterparts at the same period, he did not try to amend or rewrite the Constitution so that he could extend his presidential term limit.

[46] Margarita López-Maya and Alexandra Panzarelli, "Populism, Rentierism, and Socialism in the Twenty-First Century: The Case of Venezuela," in *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*. (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 248.

Perón, Chávez and Morales are the ultimate examples of leaders that are qualified as populists both in political and economic sense. Not only did they encompass all the characteristics of political populism put forth by Laclau, Weyland, Mudde, Hawkins, Rovira Kaltwasser and De la Torre, but they also employed the macroeconomic populist policies as defined by Dornbusch and Edwards.

A conceptually problematic understanding: How do the Thai public understand populism? How do they compare it with Latin American counterparts?

As we have categorized different theoretical frameworks of populism in the first part, the following section will employ these approaches to briefly analyze how the Thai public understand and see populism, particularly in scholarly debates and journalistic articles. Most of the time, these studies on Thai populism by Thai scholars are drawn on comparison with Latin American populism without taking into account the nuances and differences among the cases. Firstly, they failed to identify the minimal definitions of populism or situate the dimension of meanings of populism they were looking at. Rather, they conflated the economic aspect of populism with its political significance and thus failed to establish an appropriate, rigorous theoretical frameworks. Secondly and as a result, the political dimension of populism has largely been consumed and overlooked by its economic counterpart. Largely dismissed were the construction of the people, the linkages between leaders and followers, the divisive "the people VS the other" discourse, and the relationship between populism and democracy/pluralism. The ultimate result is that most news outlets, the public at large, and the academia in Thailand degraded populism as a mere "economic ideology" intrinsically incompatible with and destructive to democracy and economic stability.

Anek's misconception

On the eve of the 2006 coup against Thaksin Shinawatra, Anek Laothamatas published one of his most influential study on Thai populism *Thaksin–Populism: meaning, problems, and solutions*. According to him, the terms "populist" and "populism" were novel in Thailand. It was only after the general elections of 2001 that they were broadly used by the

media, academic circles, and the society at large to describe Thaksin's fresh approach to politics.[47] Coining the then Prime Minister's unique way of doing politics as "Thaksina-populism", he began his study by dividing populism's definition into five strict meanings according to different regions in the world. It is worth noting that he saw populism as first and foremost an "ideology" that is different across the globe:

- Based on evidence from Russia and the US (1860s-1880s), populism is "rural-based, bottom-up processes" where political parties, leaders, and masses sought to transform the society into another reality which valued and benefited farmers and poor people.

- Based on Latin American experiences from 1920s to today, populism is "bottom-up processes where prominent leaders backed by political parties induce people to cast votes to principally support farmers and poor people in cities. In this context, people mean lower-class and poor people in cities."

- Based on Western Europe contexts nowadays, "populism means processes where leaders and political parties lead middle-class and ordinary people who used to be 'silent voices' to cast votes to support policies which primarily focus on drawing immigrants of different nationalities, cultures, and faiths to become a part of western nation and civilization to forge national unity."

- Based on the Third World contexts, "populism means development approach in the third world that focuses on self-reliance and detachment from global capitalism and globalization and greater attention on the agricultural sector and farmers." Centered on the rural poor in the agricultural sector, "[t]his approach assures that people have confidence in indigenous wisdom of the society and do not merely attend to western philosophies and disciplines."

- Populism is "contentions pertaining to people, politicians who are deceitful to the people, and democracy. These have been prevalent in the West from the ancient Greek and Roman eras till today."

In terms of Latin American populism, he specifically observed that it is not a "social movement, revolutionary struggle, reformist attempts, or coups d'état." Rather, it is a

[47] Anek Laothamatas, *Thaksina-Prachaniyom: Kwammai, Panha Lae Tang Ork [Thaksin–Populism: Meaning, Problems, and Solutions]* (Bangkok: King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2006), 1.

normal political movement that vied for power primarily through elections. Latin American populists managed to rise to power fundamentally because of their policies and charismatic leadership, which they used to gain support from workers, day laborers, and the urban poor. Latin American populism tends to dismiss the importance of political parties, organizations or institutions and prioritizes the role of leadership in terms of how the leader could connect to his or her followers. I see that the reason why populism emerged and persisted in the South American nations so easily was because they are all presidentialism. The presidential elections gave way for the charismatic leaders to individually demonstrate their policies, their intellect, and their oratory skills to the public at large without having to form a strong political party as a platform first.[48]

He went on to mark that populism in Latin America "neither completely espouses capitalism nor socialism" and is inherently against liberal representative democracy.[49] Instead, Latin American populism mixes parts and parcels of different ideologies such as capitalism and socialism into its effort to carve out economic policies. While acknowledging that Latin American populists can come from the left and the right such as Chávez and Fujimori, however, he paradoxically stressed that "Latin American countries that are populist all see state interventions in the economy or have the state-led economic policies. Rather than letting mechanisms within the market system do the job of redistributing income and welfare, populists use public budget primarily for redistributive purposes, especially by financially supporting the lower socioeconomic sector."[50] He also noted that "Latin American populism are usually criticized by the World Bank or the IMF for its incorrect ways of satisfying the demands of the people or for its excessive spending that destroyed economic stability and efficacy."[51] Because "South American governments' so extreme intervention that the economy failed to function," he added, "Latin American populism tends to entail policies that

[48] Laothamatas, 6.

[49] Laothamatas, 6.

[50] Laothamatas, 7.

[51] Laothamatas, 8.

spark inflation, currency devaluation, growing public debts, business/private-sector meltdown, bankruptcy, inefficiency, unproductivity and lack of competition."[52] All in all, Anek simplistically saw Latin American populism as personalistic politics that is inherently associated with redistributive policies.

Grounded on this conceptualization, he found that Thaksin, along with his political party, was qualified as populist because he "demonstrated conducts and attributes and implemented policies similar to Latin American populism."[53] According to Anek, Thaksin was a populist like his counterparts in Latin America because (1) he was a prominent leader and favored the rural poor, who were the large majority of the country's population; (2) he used specific sets of policies to satisfy the people's demands instead of offering them money; (3) he explicitly aided, supported, and subsidized farmers, poor people, and lower- class people in rural areas; (4) he prioritized personal linkages and communication between him and his bastion over intermediaries or established institutions; (5) he stressed the values and importance of the "people" more than any other politicians or Prime Minister; and (6) his policies constituted a hybrid between capitalism and socialism. Besides, they did not regard that "giving" to poor people meant "taking" from wealthy people.[54] In the last part of his study, he concluded that populism is "detrimental to democracy and the country, and detachment from populism is very difficult." He urged that it is important "that populism be honest and prudent" and that "we must deal quickly with Thaksin-style populism before another economic crisis arises and destroys the nation completely."[55]

Although a detailed study, Anek's insight on Thakin and populism poses a series of grave problems in terms of its conceptualization and the theoretical definition with which he approached his research question. Firstly, the five "strict" definitions of populism are ironically unable to generate any "strict" or minimal meaning of populism at all. For example, his definition of populism as "a development approach in the third world that focuses on self-reliance and detachment from global capitalism and globalization and greater attention on the agricultural sector and farmers" gives a glimpse of confusion. Citing Mao Zedong's China as an example, he argued that this case was qualified as populism simply

[52] Laothamatas, 8–9.

[53] Laothamatas, 54.

[54] Laothamatas, 54–61.

[55] Laothamatas, 152.

because he "paid close attention to farmers and the rural poor." If we were to use this problematic lens to read leaders of the third world, any leaders of any countries whose majority of the population is the rural poor could then be labelled populists. This approach would spark a whole range of erroneous understanding when pushed to the extreme, and the theoretical framework would fall apart: could the Khmer Rouge regime of Cambodia or the Castro regime of Cuba – both focused on "self-reliance", were anti-capitalism and paid greater attention on the agricultural sector and farmers – also be called populist?

Secondly, Latin American populism is not a unique nor monolithic phenomenon that warrants a necessity to be categorized as a different, distinct group. Undoubtedly worthy of research because of its nuances and recurrence, Latin American populism can be explained through a large variety of theoretical frameworks revisited in the first section of this paper. With minimal, universal definitions of Weyland or Laclau, for example, Latin American populism can be situated within a larger global context. By drawing his study on the belief that populism in Latin America (and other parts of the world) is a different strain endemic to a specific region, Anek failed to frame his analysis properly, rendering it dubious and unreliable. In other words, if Anek was to describe Thaksin as "populist", it should not be because he "demonstrated conducts and attributes and implemented policies similar to Latin American populism." Rather, his research should be better framed in a way that it could delve further to identify the units of analysis – shared traits, attributes or commonalities – that cut across time, space and ideologies among classical, neo-, and radical populists of Latin America and other parts of the world. Most importantly, nuances should not be dismissed along the way. Certain unique features of each case should also be mentioned.

Lastly, as Germani, di Tella and other structuralists did, Anek associated populists' political styles/strategies closely with state-led, expansionary policies that favored the poor. Perón's Argentina was his sole case study on which he based his understanding of Thaksin's populism. As a result, his study of Thaksin's populism stood on an unsteady ground, tilting towards the economic aspects here and the political dimensions there. Of course, such an attempt has largely failed to explain the ubiquitous emergence of right-wing populist leaders who are pro-market and do not care for the poor nowadays. Thus, it is important to first and foremost limit the frameworks of the analysis of populism into a definite camp. As I previously laid out at the end of the first section, the question is simple: if one is to argue whether a leader is populist, the first question to be raised is "*in terms of what? political or*

economic?". Only then should we proceed to examine such leaders in-depth with corresponding theories and definitions.

Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2008), for example, offered a better nuanced view of Thaksin's populism. For instance, they argued that Thaksin "was not a populist when he rose to power in 2001 but became so in intensifying stages over the next five years," when he was fervently pressed by the urban middle-class mobilization (the PAD) that called for his resignation.[56] According to them, Thaksin's populist politics, unlike Anek's view, went far beyond redistributive policies. It was a response to social demand and insecurities of the large informal mass created by Thailand's strategy of outward-orientated development and subjection to neo-liberalism. Grounded on political discourse analysis, they demonstrated that Thaksin was qualified as populist because of his "rhetorical rejection of Thailand's political elite and denigration of liberal democracy in favor of personalized authoritarianism."[57]

Final reflections

Because Anek's monolithic view of populism has been adopted by Thaksin's opposition – especially the PAD, the military and the Democratic Party – and became a mainstream worldview, a crucial dimension of populism has been largely dismissed and any discussions about it in Thailand are automatically limited to Thaksin. Whether being a destructive force or a corrective for democracy, the very emergence of populism – both economic and political – points to the fact that there is something wrong with liberal representative democracy. It is a symptom showing the accumulated illnesses of the nation's existing democracy. Perón was successful not only because of his political and economic strategies and charisma, but also precisely because he tapped into and empowered the urban poor that had been left behind by Argentina's oligarchy. Chávez's victory by the end of the 20th century proved that Venezuela's political elites were getting more and more out of touch and unable to solve economic crisis as well as the people's daily struggles. Bolsonaro's recent triumph also revealed that the Brazilians had lost faith in formal institutions or traditional political parties and were willing to bet on a dictatorial, authoritarian leader who

[56] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Thaksin's Populism," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008): 62.

[57] Phongpaichit and Baker, 62.

promised to quell corruption, restore security, and bring stimulus to a stagnant economy. The same could be said for Thaksin and his sister who became the first female PM of Thailand in 2010, Yingluck. The success of the Shinawatra sibling at the poll and the enormous support they gained from the rural poor in the north and northeast – about two-thirds of the population – showed that the Bangkok elites who had long controlled resources and political power were no longer relevant for a large part of the population.

Indeed, it is precisely in these moments of "populist rupture" where representative liberal institutions and checks-and-balances mechanisms must come into play and stay independent so that they could check or prevent populist leaders from sliding into full authoritarianism, as currently seen in Maduro's Venezuela. David Altman wrote that the integration of citizen-initiated mechanisms of direct democracy into the existing liberal representative democracy serves "as an intermittent safety valve against the perverse or unresponsive behavior of representative institutions and politicians."[58] Populism, in turn, is precisely "the perverse or unresponsive behavior" that burst into the fore when institutions or traditional ways of doing politics fail to accommodate the social demands of the people.

By treating populism through the appropriate lens, we might see it as a "mirror of democracy" rather than an idea antagonistic to democracy. Likewise, we may better understand how and why populism occurs at the very first place. By refraining from framing populism within the negative connotations, we will be able to shed lights on the causes that engender it and might potentially find the way in which we can mitigate or hinder its consequences and (re)emergence.

[58] David Altman, *Direct Democracy Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 59.

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Populism *without* the people? Towards how the "people" are constructed in Hugo Chávez's Venezuela and Prayut Chan-o-cha's Thailand in comparative perspectives

Populism and democracy are the two terms that have largely been associated with each other. Whereas some argue populism is insidious to democracy, others see it as a corrective for or even a progressive way to move towards democracy. In a liberal representative democracy where political elites are out of touch with the ordinary people, failing to truly represent them or respond to their demands, a populist rupture is bound to break through. With promises for a more direct, inclusive/exclusive form of democracy, populist leaders step to the fore in their battle against the discursively constructed "enemies" – be it "the oligarchy", "the immigrants", "the elites" or "the *pitiyankis*". They vow to quell these enemies, nepotism and corruption so as to (re)establish a certain set of values and usher a new era of doing politics. Crucially, populists claim they are the only one that can speak for and in the name of the people. Liberal representative institutions needs to be packed, exterminated or bypassed, for they are a mere nuisance encumbering the *Messiah* from fulfilling the people's will. Indeed, populists can do so because they hold the sacrosanct license dear: the electoral legitimacy.

The paper aims to look at the question of whether it is possible for a populist leader to operate and define who "the people" are without having to open the space for the people themselves to participate in the process. Simply put, the central puzzle tackled here is whether there can be a populist who claims to speak for the people without such a participatory process as elections. Two case studies will be used in the analysis: Venezuela during the Hugo Chávez government (1999-2013) and Thailand during the Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha military junta (2014-2019).

The first section of this research summarizes some of the essential theoretical frameworks of and debates on populism in current literature. Careful attention will be paid on how these frameworks consider the relationship between populism and democracy. By using these definitions put forth by major theorists, I will briefly assess the criteria of populism into which Gen. Prayut may or may not fall *vis-à-vis* the textbook example of Chávez.

The second section turns to analyze the different ways in which Chávez and Gen. Prayut constructed "the people" and "the other." Latin American experiences of populism demonstrate that while charismatic leadership is vital for populists to succeed, the need to achieve legitimacy through elections – regardless of whether they are free and fair – indeed plays an even more important role, especially in the populists' construction of the "authentic people" and the "other." Most literature on the issue argues that electoral legitimacy is crucial in that it fundamentally allows the populist leaders to assert that they rightfully "embody" and "represent" the people and/or the will of the people. A group of scholars goes further to argue that populism is essentially different from fascism or dictatorship because elections are still held and the opposition are not violently or systematically suppressed. However, despite the obvious lack of such a legitimacy and his blatantly authoritarian actions, public opinion polls conducted during the first years after the 2014 military coup show that Gen. Prayut gained widespread support from a large part of the public. This section delves into how Gen. Prayut, using a populist rhetoric and strategy, managed to define "the people" and "the enemies" in spite of being a dictator. How did he manage to embody and represent *la volonté générale* with the iron hand? By examining and juxtaposing key speeches, public policies, and political decisions between the case of Thailand and such a prototypical model of populism as Chávez's Venezuela, this paper hopes to solve the puzzle.

The main argument is that unlike other cases of populist phenomena, the junta found in Thailand's revered monarchy institution an "alternative" legitimacy that is much more powerful, universal, and inclusionary than the electoral one, and that it skillfully exploited it. As a result, I will point out the ways in which Gen. Prayut and his junta meticulously constructed a homogenous type of the "we, the Thai people" through the monarchy institution without any kind of participation from the people. Likewise, this paper demonstrates how Gen. Prayut identified the "enemies" of the nation along the process of constructing the people. Furthermore, I aim to contend that in contrast to Chávez and other prominent examples, Gen. Prayut's royal-military populism was by no means a challenge to the dominant elites. Rather, the 2014 coup d'état and the subsequent military government proved to be the conservative's successful effort to sustain the status quo following the two decades of disruption spurred by the Shinawatra sibling's own version of populism.

In sum, this study hopes to build an argument that at least as the case of Gen. Prayut's Thailand shows, it is possible to see populism without any participation of the people, and that "populist" – as a strategy of doing politics – can be employed to describe a dictatorial, authoritarian leader, too.

What is populism and what does it do to democracy?

For more than half a decade, both scholars and journalists alike have long been debating over and attempting to define what populism is. One of the pioneering efforts first began in 1967 at a conference led by Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner at the London School Economics. A group of leading scholars gathered to discuss and delineate what they saw as "the new specter haunting the world": populism.[59] But despite such vibrant scholarly conversations and debates, no general agreement was reached. "There can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism," the conference report wrote, "But no one is quite clear just what it is. As a doctrine or as movement, it is elusive and protean. It bobs up everywhere, but in many contradictory shapes. Does it have an underlying unity or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies?".[60] Populism means different things to different people.

To be sure, the disagreements over the definition of populism have persisted well until today. While some consider it as a political strategy, an ideology, a discursive approach, or an abnormal phase towards modernization, others see it as a set of irresponsible macroeconomic policies, a political style, a regime of "democratic illiberalism", or a moral and Manichean struggle. To make the matter further complicated, unlike "democrat", "conservative", "liberal" or "socialist", populism is a pejorative term which one rarely uses for calling one's self because it holds an intrinsically undesirable meaning. According to Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, only few politicians self-identify as populists – not even the most recognizable figures of populism such as Argentina's iconic Juan Domingo Perón or Thailand's Thaksin Shinawatra: "[P]opulism is a label seldom claimed by people or organizations themselves,"

[59] Carlos De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*, Research in International Studies ; Latin America Series No. 32 (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), x.

[60] Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, *Populism: Its Meaning and National Characteristics* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 1.

Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser wrote, "[i]nstead, it is ascribed to others, most often with a negative connotation".[61] From calling politicians as diverse as the conservative US president Donald Trump or Venezuela's radical left El Comandante Hugo Chávez as "populist," it is certainly not an exaggeration to argue that the meaning of populism remains a contested terrain in each and every one of disciplines in social science nowadays.

Populism through mass society, historicist lens

An Italian-born sociologist who fled Mussolini's Italy to Argentina, Gino Germani was among the first scholars who pioneered the study of Latin American populism. Grounded on modernization theories, Germani saw populism as a consequence of changes in macroeconomic policies that shook the society to its core.[62] According to his historicist-structuralist view, populism is simply a phase within Latin America's transition from premodern to modern society in which the irrational popular mass is vertically incorporated and manipulated by its charismatic leader. Essentially a class-based movement, Germani's populism is closely associated with the "import-substitution industrialization" (ISI) and redistributive economic measures aimed at accommodating the masses through clientelist network. Latin America's ISI policies engendered industrialization and a new urban working class, but unlike in Europe, it was an endeavor led by the totalitarian leader of the state rather than the private sector. Through universal suffrage and redistributive measures, Germani perceived that the masses were manipulated and incorporated into politics in a top-down manner without any formal institutions to channelize their demands. This caused what he described as "asynchronousness" – an aberration of modernization process[63] – as opposed to the "natural" ways of integration in the European cases. When bottom-up civil society is lacking, Germani sees that populism as an abnormal form of integration will come into play.

As the case of Perón revealed, Germani argued that populist leaders challenged the elites' exclusionary politics by appealing to and mobilizing the mass. In so doing, they reduced a struggle for a more just, inclusionary democracy to two antagonistic camps: the

[61] Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

[62] Gino Germani, *Política y Sociedad En Una Época de Transición: De La Sociedad Tradicional a La Sociedad de Masas*, Biblioteca de Psicología Social y Sociología (Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidos, 1962).

[63] Germani, 476.

authentic, homogenous people whom the elected populist claimed to embody versus the oligarchy. One of the most striking examples is Argentina's presidential elections of 1951 in which Perón vied for his reelection. With the universal male suffrage implemented since 1912 and the female suffrage which he and Evita had successfully pushed into law in 1947, Perón won a landslide of 67 percent in an election that saw the voter turnout as high as 87.95 percent.[64] In addition to attractive policies, his and his wife's charm, charisma, and oratory skills altogether enchanted and captured the recently enfranchised mass. Although Perón had already been highly popular among the urban working class prior to his debut as democratic candidate because he had served as the Secretary of Labor in the military government, his undisputable victory at the first truly universal poll in 1951 was a very clear sign showing that unlike other presidents before him, he righteously had the legitimacy to represent and speak in the name of all the people. Those who supported him were considered part and parcel of the authentic people, while those who opposed him were branded as "enemies of the nation" who were no longer "gentlemen that one should fight fairly but snakes that one can kill in any way".[65] Populism, in this sense, primarily involves an intimate relationship between a charismatic elected leader and the irrational mass, personalistic leadership, urban-based labor as core constituency, redistributive measures, and the creation of two antagonistic camps in the society.

Although such a historicist approach paved way for a better understanding of populism, it poses several problematic issues to a construction of normative frameworks at least two folds. Firstly, Latin America witnessed the new wave of populists again in the 1980s and 1990s. Conspicuously populist were leaders such as Brazil's Fernando Collor de Mello, Peru's Alberto Fujimori, and Argentina's Carlos Menem. Like Cárdenas, Perón, Velasco Ibarra, and Vargas, they were all charismatic. Not only was their governance personalistic and dividing the society into two camps, but they also held a robust bastion and sought to maintain the direct support by bypassing or eliminating mediating institutions such as Congress or political parties. As a result of this reemergence of populism, Germani's explanation of populism as a merely transitory phase towards modernization no longer holds water. Secondly, Latin American populists of the last two decades of the twentieth century

[64] Thomas E. Skidmore, James Naylor Green, and Peter H Smith, *Modern Latin America*, 8th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 252.

[65] Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War: Fascism, Populism, and Dictatorship in Twentieth Century Argentina* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 86.

did not return to the fore with the entirely similar economic formula like the ISI or redistributive measures, nor did they employ such strategies to gain support from the people. In a stark contrast of most populists in the first half of the twentieth century, Latin American populist leaders of the 1980s and 1990s were staunchly pro-market and seemingly supported globalization, enacting a neoliberal agenda at full steam and vowing to tackle the economic debacle left behind by the previous governments, particularly (hyper)inflation and macroeconomic mismanagement. More often than not, they were elected amid the crisis. This scenario effectively renders Germani's argument that populism is closely associated with redistributive measures untenable. As a matter of fact, certain contemporaries of Perón, Cárdenas, and Vargas – such as Ecuador's José María Velasco Ibarra – did not even implement ISI policies or undergo large-scale industrialization. De la Torre (2000) demonstrated in one of his works that the Ecuador under Velasquismo remained an agricultural-based society, yet Velasco Ibarra is consensually considered as populist.[66]

Populism as political strategies

Kurt Weyland was among the first scholars to argue against the historicist definitions of populism. He contended that such an approach which "assumed a close connection between populist politics and its social roots, socioeconomic background conditions, and/or substantive policies" have failed to thoroughly explain why neoliberals like Fujimori and Menem were also regarded as populists.[67] Proposing that populism should be first and foremost placed within a political domain rather than linked to economic or social realms, Weyland saw populism as a political strategy or a "specific way of competing for and exercising political power".[68] He argued that this reconceptualization captures best the basic goal of populist leaders, which is to win and exercise power while using economic and social policy as an instrument for this purpose. Most importantly, this redefinition also encompasses the dichotomic nature of populism, which usually rests upon "the distinction of friend versus foe" or "a leader's promise to protect the people from a pernicious enemy." Populism in this

[66] De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*.

[67] Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 5.

[68] Weyland, 18.

sense, therefore, is more flexible and "most attuned to the opportunism of populist leaders and their weak commitment to substantive policies, ideas, and ideologies".[69]

Weyland initially divided Latin American populists into two broad subtype categories: "classical populism" of the 1930s and 1940s and "neopopulism" of the 1980s and 1990s. Later on, when the rise of Hugo Chávez's fiery anti-neoliberal agendas engendered a series of similar phenomena in the region like Evo Morales, Rafael Correa, and the Kirchner, Weyland argued that this wave of left-leaning populist leaders was noticeably different from both classical populism and neopopulism in a number of aspects, although the political strategies they employed remained largely the same. He called them "radical populism".[70]

In Weyland's view, populism is consisted of (1) an individual, personalistic leader who seeks or exercises government power, and (2) large numbers of followers from whom the individual leader received support. In fact, he stressed that populism is crucially leader-centric and not the same as social movements. "Populism emerges," he wrote, "when personalistic leaders base their rule on massive yet mostly uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of people".[71] As a result, populist leaders need a set of key instruments for mobilizing the largely unorganized masses and for demonstrating their distinctive power capability, such as "elections, plebiscites, mass demonstrations, and most recently opinion polls." De la Torre also noted in this regard that "populists exchanged services for votes", but such exchanges were accompanied by "a discourse that portrayed common people as the essence of the nation creating political and cultural identities." [72] By mobilizing the masses through such direct means, they are typically inclined to have little to no regard or respect for checks-and-balances institutions. Additionally, because their mass support is naturally uninstitutionalized, fragile and fickle, they also have to "create a particularly intense connection to their followers" by drawing on "the potency of charisma."[73] Weyland also noted that some populist leaders, once in power, may choose to formally institutionalize

[69] Weyland, 11.

[70] Kurt Weyland, "Populism and Social Policy in Latin America," in *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century.*, ed. Carlos De la Torre and Cynthia J. Arnson (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013), 120–23.

[71] Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," 18.

[72] Carlos De la Torre, "Global Populism: Histories, Trajectories, Problems, and Challenges," in *Routledge Handbook of Global Populism.*, ed. Carlos De la Torre (New York and London: Routledge, 2018), 7.

[73] Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," 14.

themselves into an organization or a clientelist network by "routinizing their charisma." This minimum definition of populism as political strategies not only manages to cut across time and political or economic spectrum, but it also stresses that populism is part and parcel of democracy. Different forms of public participation – especially direct democracy – and a charismatic leadership are intrinsically related.

Likewise, De la Torre (2018, 8–9) considered populism as political discourses and strategies that aim to rupture institutional systems by polarizing society into two antagonistic camps.[74] Like Weyland, he stressed the leader-centric character of populism and argued that social movements that use a populist rhetoric of the people against the establishment are different from populism. Without its leader, a social movement is yet to truly become populism. Similarly, De la Torre sustained that populist leaders claim that they represent and even embody the interests, will, and aspirations of a homogeneous people. Citing Schmitt's notion of friend–enemy polarity, he observed that populists label all of those who dare to challenge their claim of being the incarnation of the people as "enemies of the people, the leader, and the nation". Rejecting pluralism, "[p]opulists do not face political adversaries; they confront enemies".[75]

Recently, Takis Pappas joined the quest of searching for a minimum definition of populism. In his 2019 book, he defined populism as "democratic illiberalism", suggesting that it is a modern historical phenomenon which pertains to a type of democracy that stands midway between liberalism and autocracy.[76]). He explained that the regime of liberal democracy, which has been in place ubiquitously since 1945 and triumphed over any other types of governance worldwide following the end of the Cold War, has failed to meet such expectations as ameliorating income inequality or building social justice. Amid such a scenario, the majority of ordinary people – the middle class – lose their faith in the existing political regime and feel increasingly "betrayed by their respective national political elites, resulting in a loss of trust in political liberalism and attempts to give vent to accumulated resentment".[77] It is in this environment of liberal democracy crisis which Pappas argued that

[74] De la Torre, "Global Populism: Histories, Trajectories, Problems, and Challenges," 8-9.

[75] De la Torre, 9.

[76] Takis Pappas, *Populism and Liberal Democracy : A Comparative and Theoretical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

[77] Pappas, 51.

"opportunistic leaders—authentic demagogues in the classical Greek sense of the word—may emerge and produce a populist outcome." In this context, populism will become an alternative type of democracy.

Populism, as defined by Pappas, is democratic because it is consisted of (i) electoral contestation and (ii) constitutional legality. It is illiberal in that it stresses (i) singularity over plurality, (ii) adversarial politics over political moderation and consensus, and (iii) majoritarianism over the rule of law and minority rights. According to him, there are three notions of "the people" that the populists usually construct discursively: little people, average people, and equitable native people (nativism). The first group is conceived as a vertically arranged dyadic relation (such as elites on top versus the people at the bottom). The second group takes the form of a vertical but triadic relation that consists of the elites, the average people, and the subaltern strata in society. And the last group is conceived horizontally as a relation between the native versus the non-native populations in society.[78]

Unlike De la Torre or Weyland, Pappas contended that populism does not necessarily have to be leader-centric. Instead, conceptualizing populism as democratic illiberalism encompasses all kinds of political phenomena that develop in liberal democratic systems: "including but not limited to individual leaders; movements and parties, whether in opposition or in government; party systems; political systems; ideologies or simpler sets of ideas; political discourses, rhetorical forms, and symbolic actions; and political strategies and policy packages".[79] All in all, Pappas considers that "populism is always democratic, but never liberal".[80]

[78] Pappas, 83.

[79] Pappas, 34.

[80] Pappas, 35.

Populism as an authoritarian form of democracy

From a historical perspective, Federico Finchelstein also joined the effort to study populism by comparing it with fascism. In so doing, he argued that the two terms are often conflated but at the same time "are genealogically connected".[81] Essentially, he saw populism as "an authoritarian form of democracy" born with the defeat of fascism.[82] Populism as a regime "sees no limits on its claims to popular sovereignty, identifying the votes of electoral majorities who support the regime with the structural, transcendental desires of the people and the nation".[83] Populism takes on the role of a ventriloquist who claims to know and speak for what the people truly want. It incarnates "the full representation of an entire people and often translates this into the idea of full delegation of power to the leader".[84]

Central to his argument is the role that democratic elections play between fascism and populism, regardless of whether it emanates from the left or the right. Like Pappas, he maintained that populism is vitally different from fascism in that populists most often follow the democratic rule of the game and will eventually cede power after losing an election. This is because populism, in his view, builds its legitimacy and claim of popular national representation on electoral decisions and rejects the fascist form of dictatorship.[85] Finchelstein went further to contend that populism speaks in the name of a single people, and it does so in the name of democracy – a term that is defined in a narrow sense as the expression of the desires of the populist leaders. In this context, populism

> *is not a pathology of democracy but a political form that thrives in democracies that are particularly unequal, that is, in places where the income gap has increased and the legitimacy of democratic representation has decreased. As a response, populism is capable of undermining democracy even more without*

[81] Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), xxxviii.

[82] Finchelstein, 27.

[83] Finchelstein, xxxviii.

[84] Finchelstein, xxxviii.

[85] Finchelstein, xxxviii.

breaking it, and if and when it does extinguish democracy, it ceases to be populism and becomes something else: dictatorship.[86]

In the construction of the people, he noted that "populism conceives the people as One— namely, as a single entity consisting of leader, followers, and nation. This trinity of popular sovereignty is rooted in fascism but is confirmed by votes".[87] Meanwhile, the opponents – such as the opposition, the elite or the media – are framed as public enemies *but only rhetorically*. He reiterated that whenever "populism moves from this rhetorical enmity to practices of enemy identification and persecution, we could be talking about its transformation into fascism or another form of dictatorial repression".[88] Echoing Pappas, Finchelstein's populism is by no means liberal; rather, it is an illiberal regime that is willing to play electoral politics.

Populism through the ideational approach

Recently, a group of scholars such as Kirk A. Hawkins, Cas Mudde, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser have come up with a novel approach to explain the global resurgence of populism. Drawing largely from discursive theories of populism, especially that of Laclau, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser proposed an "ideational conceptualization approach" to better understand and define populism.[89]

Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser's ideational approach first and foremost presented that populism entails "a set of ideas that can be combined with other ideological features," and that it always attaches itself to some "host" ideology.[90] Like Pappas, Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser's ideational approach considers the role of the leader not necessarily central and hence populism can be used to describe attitudes, movements, and parties.

[86] Finchelstein, 5.

[87] Finchelstein, xxxix.

[88] Finchelstein, 5.

[89] Kirk A Hawkins and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, "The Ideational Approach to Populism," *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 4 (2017): 513–28.

[90] Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 514.

On an ontological level, they contended that populism contains some moral aspects, for it "sees politics as a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of a knowing, diabolical evil—hence, it is Manichaean or dualistic".[91] It primarily "seeks the immediate political expression of the popular will and sees its opposition in such diabolical terms." At the center of populism, the authors stressed, is the so-called popular identity or "the reified will of the ordinary folk who constitute the bulk of the citizenry" that is presented as the embodiment of democratic values. Against this notion of the people is "an equally reified group of elites" who are seen as "anti-people" – a group that is "secretly aiming to subvert the popular will for selfish purposes." According to them, populism has at least two opposites: elitism and pluralism. The first – also shares the same Manichean worldview as populism – assumes that the people are dangerous, volatile and needs to be controlled while depicting the elite as a small group of actors who should be in charge of the government due to their intellectual and moral superiority. Pluralism, on the other hand, rejects the Manichaean distinction between the people and the elite and respects diversity of ideas and interests in society.

Crucially, the essence of this approach is to distinguish between inclusionary and exclusionary forms of populism in three dimensions: material, political, and symbolic.[92] By employing this approach to quantitatively measure populist discourse, one will be able to empirically analyze how and why a certain leader is qualified as populist.

Populist as a political logic/discourse

Another breakthrough in the studies of populism and in the effort to develop its minimum definition can be found in Ernesto Laclau's remarkable 2005 book *On Populist Reasons* and his chapter in Francisco Panizza's edited volume published in the same year. Unlike conventional wisdoms which treat populism and mass politics with negative connotations, Laclau proposed that populism should be studied and viewed as a political logic and a discourse. Similar to political theorists but greatly different from Germani, he saw populism as a discursive form of doing politics which can emerge anywhere at any time. It

[91] Hawkins and Kaltwasser, 515.

[92] Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

generally involves a charismatic leader who employs dichotomic discourse to galvanize mass mobilization by constructing two irreconcilable political subjects: the people and the enemy.

The Argentine scholar began his approach to populism by stressing that it is imperative to start with "social demand" as the smallest unit of analysis in the formation of the social link.[93] According to him, there are two kinds of social demands: the satisfied and the unsatisfied. He argued that demands in the first type, if punctually or individually fulfilled through institutions or formal channels, will not construct any chasm or frontier within the social. On the contrary, if different sectors within a society see a number of their demands rejected, the accumulation process will take place: "[A]ll will share the fact that their demands remain unsatisfied. That is, the demands share a negative dimension beyond their positive differential nature".[94] This very first circumstance – the aggregation of unsatisfied/popular demands – is constitutive to what Laclau called the "first stage of the preconditions of populism."

Against this backdrop comes "the logic of equivalence". It is a process in which all the unfulfilled demands, "in spite of their differential character, tend to reaggregate themselves, forming what we will call an *equivalential chain*" among the people.[95] The more democratic demands "are differentially absorbed within a successful institutional system," he wrote, "the weaker the equivalential links will be and the more unlikely the constitution of a popular subjectivity." On the other hand, the equivalential links will be created in a situation where "a plurality of unsatisfied demands and an increasing inability of the institutional system to absorb them differentially co-exist".[96] According to Laclau, this constitutes the second precondition of a *populist rupture* or a breakaway with the status quo: the equivalential articulations of unsatisfied/popular demands.[97] Once unsatisfied demands accumulate and the equivalential chain emerges, what follows next is the discursive construction of an internal frontier. This is an idea which he called "the formation of antagonistic frontier" and

[93] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 73.

[94] Ernesto Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?," in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London, England: Verso, 2005), 37.

[95] Laclau, 37.

[96] Laclau, 38.

[97] Laclau, 46.

which aims to divide the society into two camps: "the people" and "the power".[98] This is precisely the third and final precondition: a dichotomic construction of the social around an internal frontier.

Laclau emphasized one of the most important elements in this theory: "the more the chain of equivalences is extended, the weaker will be its connection with the particularistic demands which assume the function of universal representation".[99] Simply put, he posited that once the number of unfulfilled/popular demands increases, there will be a process in which the "particularities" of these demands are increasingly surrendered and reduced to a minimum until there is one "commonality." It is, therefore, imperative to construct a universal popular signification that can bring "equivalential homogeneity" to "a highly heterogeneous reality".[100] This is what he termed as "empty signifier" – a word ["democracy", "poverty", "socialism", "immigration", "the oligarchy", etc.] that can mean different things to a myriad of people but at the same time fortifies the chain of equivalence and merge "the people" altogether into one single unit ("totality") against a discursively constructed "enemy".[101] Interestingly, these ideas of Laclau effectively rebut a traditional understanding that sees all kinds of populism as class-based, for the chain of equivalence and empty signifiers can very much cut through classes and bridge them altogether. Furthermore, because Laclau's populism is conceptualized as political logic, it can be employed to describe leaders from all kinds of political spectrum and economic preference. Particularly noteworthy in this regard is that Laclau did not imply that a populist rupture necessarily has to be democratic, nor did elections play a pivotal role; in fact, it could lead to fascism, socialism or to Perón's Bonapartism.[102]

[98] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 74.

[99] Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?," 39.

[100] Laclau, "Populism: What's in a Name?," 40.

[101] Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 69-71.

[102] De la Torre, "Global Populism: Histories, Trajectories, Problems, and Challenges," 5.

Economic populism

When asked what populism is, a number of ordinary people would possibly think of it as a set of irresponsible economic policies. Indeed, this aspect of populism is equally important and should be looked at along with its political meanings. Following a structuralist approach based on Latin American classical populism, James Malloy saw it as "redistributive, nationalist, and inclusionary state policies" that are opposite to "exclusionary policies that benefit foreign capital, concentrate economic resources, and repress popular demands".[103]

However, the most comprehensive work on economic meaning of populism was better explained by Rudi Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards in 1991, based largely on the Peruvian and Chilean experiences during the presidencies of Alan García and Salvador Allende, respectively.[104] At the zenith of Latin America's left-leaning "radical populism" of the 2000s, Edwards published a book on the topic again in 2012. Purely from an economic dimension, Dornbusch and Edwards defined populism as a set of short-sighted macroeconomic policies which "emphasizes growth and income distribution and deemphasizes the risks of inflation, external constraints, and the reaction of economic agents to aggressive nonmarket policies".[105] It usually comes with high and unsustainable fiscal deficits, expansive monetary policies, and wage increases that are not justified based on increases in productivity.[106] (Edwards 2012, 167–68). Although beginning with great euphoria, he added, the cycle usually ends "with rapid inflation—and in some cases hyperinflation—higher unemployment, and lower wages. Time after time these policies ultimately fail, hurting those groups (the poor and the middle class) that they are supposed to favor". Vibrantly encapsulating this definition of economic populism were Chávez's economic policies during the oil boom era of the 2000s.

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[103] James Malloy, "The Politics of Transition in Latin America," in *Authoritarians and Democrats: Regime Transition in Latin America*, ed. James Malloy and Mitchell Seligson (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), cited in Carlos De la Torre, *Populist Seduction in Latin America: The Ecuadorian Experience*, Research in International Studies ; Latin America Series No. 32 (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), 2.

[104] Rudi Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards, *The Macroeconomics of Populism in Latin America*, Conference Report (National Bureau of Economic Research) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[105] Dornbusch and Edwards.

[106] Sebastian Edwards, *Left behind : Latin America and the False Promise of Populism.*, Paperback (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 167–68.

Worth noting is the fact that certain leaders can be described as populist because of their ways of doing politics as well as because of their economic policies. In a strict sense, they are political populists because they claim to speak in the name of "the people", employ the unpluralistic discourse of "the people *versus* the other", and favor direct, personalistic communication between them and their bastion over liberal representative institutions. But at the same time, the leaders who are categorized into the group of political populism do not necessarily have to employ expansionary measures and/or populist economic policies. Likewise, those who use populist economic policies do not necessarily have to be classified as political populist.

Almost every theoretical frameworks of populism reviewed in this section – except the economic meaning and Laclau's definition – points to the fact that populism is born within democracy, regardless of the extent to which it is healthy or deleterious for democracy. Drawing on case studies from Latin America, the US, and Europe, these approaches seem to all agree that in addition to charismatic leadership, Manichean discourse and unpluralistic tendency, election – whether it is democratically free and fair – is central to the populists' legitimacy and claims. As a matter of fact, scholars such as Finchelstein and Pappas argued that election is the only element that differentiates populism from dictatorship and/or fascism. Populism is also different from autocracy because the opposition are not violently or systematically suppressed. As Weyland pointed out, populists employed key instruments such as elections, plebiscites, mass demonstrations, and opinion polls for demonstrating their distinctive power capability over the mass. The next section will apply these frameworks with such a prototypical case of Latin American populism as Venezuela's Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and with Thailand's leader during the military junta (2014-2019), Gen. Prayut Chan-o-cha. Careful attention will be paid on how they gained legitimacy and how the they discursively constructed "the people."

Venezuela: Hugo Chávez, father of populism of the twentieth-first century

If Juan Domingo Perón is widely considered as "father of populism" of the twentieth century, Hugo Chávez is indeed father of populism of the twentieth-first century. He embodied each and every definition of populism that we have reviewed so far. Chávez was born in 1954 to a poor family in Sabaneta, the state of Barinas. As usual for men from humble families who sought to climb up the social ladder, he entered the Venezuelan military academy in the capital at the age of 17. During these formative years, he developed great interests in Latin America's left-leaning military regimes that were authoritarian, anti-imperialist, anti-oligarchic, and developmentalist all at once, such as Panama's Omar Torrijos and Peru's Juan Velasco Alvarado. He once put it: "With Torrijos, I became a Torrijist. With Velasco, I became a Velasquist. And with Pinochet, I became an anti-Pinochetist".[107]

Having been in place since 1958, the ossification of Venezuela's Punto Fijo pacted democracy started to reveal itself in the late 1970s. Since the Black Friday erupted in 1983, more and more people were increasingly losing faith in one of Latin America's very much vaunted liberal representative democracies. Despite the windfall of petrodollars of the 1970s, structural problems such as income inequality, poverty and the lack of quality urban housing seemed to remain intact.[108] The political elites of the two main parties – Acción Democrática (AD) and COPEI – were getting out of touch. These conditions gradually exacerbated throughout the rest of the 1980s before culminating into the atrocious Caracazo incident in 1989. Three years later, Chávez and his like-minded comrades took the weapons and marched the streets in different parts of the country, trying to overthrow the beleaguered government of Carlos Andres Pérez (1989-1992). While Chávez's endeavor failed to crystallize and he was subsequently imprisoned for two years, such an attempt and his brief televised "*por ahora*" speech catapulted him into the national spotlight and spurred an enormous political tsunami nationwide. In the face of the specter from Caracazo and the collapse of national economy and social welfare due to less petrodollars in the coffer and the IMF-imposed austerity measures, the general public was quick to associate themselves with Chávez's visions, aspirations, and struggles for radical changes in politics.

[107] Cristina Marcano and Alberto Barrera Tyszka, *Hugo Chávez.* (New York: Random House, 2007), 37.

[108] Alejandro Velasco, *Barrio Rising : Urban Popular Politics and the Making of Modern Venezuela*. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

Rafael Caldera's victory in the 1993 presidential elections marked the end of the absolute control exerted by the AD and COPEI. Although Caldera himself had been one of the founding fathers of the COPEI and had served as president during 1969-1974, he vied for his second presidency this time under a new party. The 1993 elections, which saw the voter turnout of only 60 percent compared to 82 percent in 1988, proved that Venezuela's two-party system was clearly being dismantled, and that AD-COPEI party loyalties grew increasingly less relevant. In the midst of the prolonged economic crisis and decreasing income from oil exports, more and more electorate started to shift their attention from party loyalties to government performance, personalized leadership, and issues such as policy change or economic adjustment.

Pardoned after two years in prison, Chávez made a comeback to the political arena. Only this time, he did it through institutional means. With a new political party that he founded with his colleagues, he joined the 1998 race for presidency. The crown jewel of his campaign was his promise to convene the Constituent Assembly in charge of rewriting a new constitution. By replacing the "moribund" charter with a new one, Chávez touted that he was to embark on a revolution that would resuscitate the country's glory, refound the nation, and dignify the common people. Eventually, he won 56.2 percent of the votes in an election that was deemed democratically free and fair. Chávez's popularity and success at the poll can be explained in three dimensions. First, liberal institutions such as traditional political parties failed to sustain loyalties among the citizens. Beside widespread corruption and incompetence in economic and crisis management, the traditional parties lost touch with the population. The public opinion data from Latinobarómetro shows that between the years 1995–2001, Venezuelans increasingly felt that democracy can work without political party (Figure 2). Using Laclau's explanation on the preconditions for a populist rupture, this environment proved to be a fertile ground for a populist to emerge. No longer tenable or reliable were institutions, formal channels, and even the Constitution. Against this backdrop, a number of "unsatisfied demands" were reaggregating themselves, morphing into the chain of equivalence.

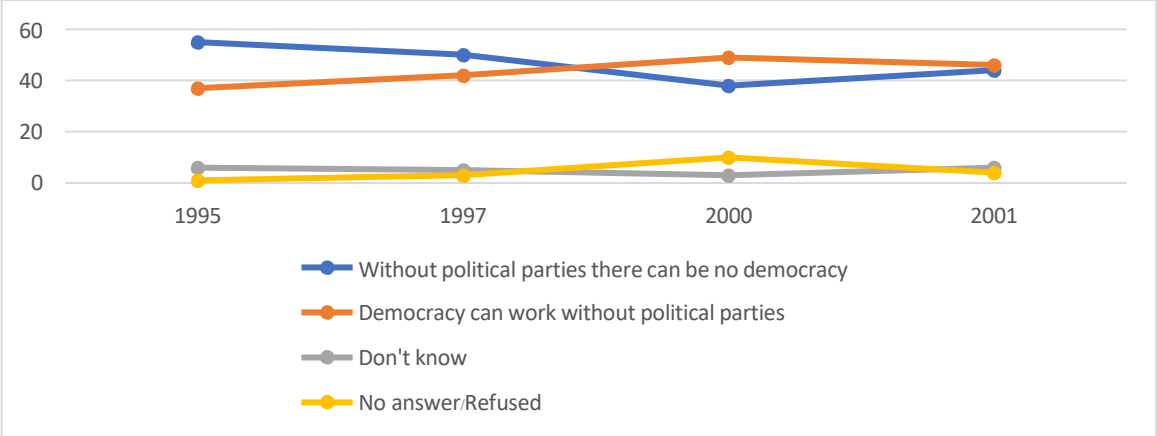

Figure 2: "There are people who say that without political parties there can be no democracy, while others say that democracy can work without parties. What is closer to your views?" (N = 1,200)

Source: Latinobarómetro 2006

Secondly, Chávez's victory also directly pointed to the Venezuelans' loss of confidence of the Caldera government and the political elite at large. Latinobarómetro's available data on public confidence towards the Venezuelan government in 1995 and 1996 confirms this observation, with 42 and 52 percent of the citizens indicating that they had no confidence at all in the Caldera administration, respectively (Figure 3). Indeed, the result of the 1998 presidential elections corroborated the Latinobarómetro data (Figure 4).

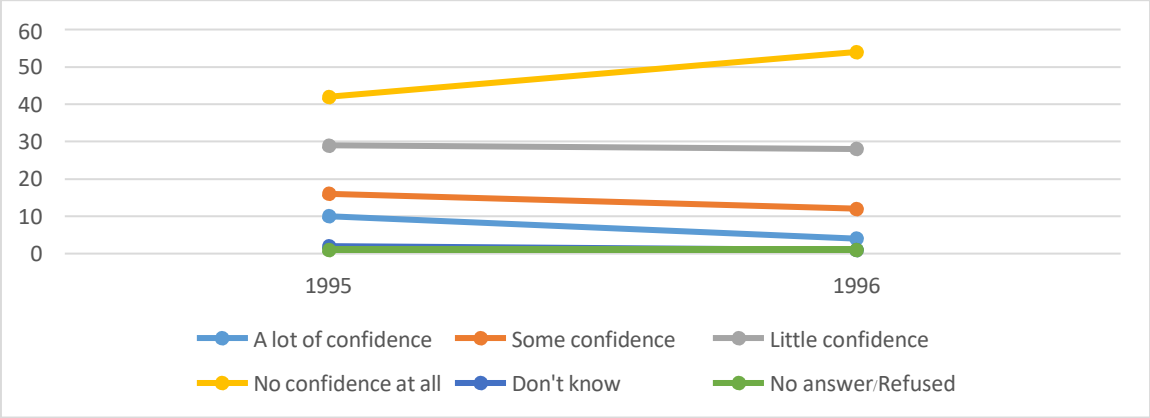

Figure 3: Confidence in the Government (N = 1,200 in 1995; N = 1,500 in 1996)

Source: Latinobarómetro 2006

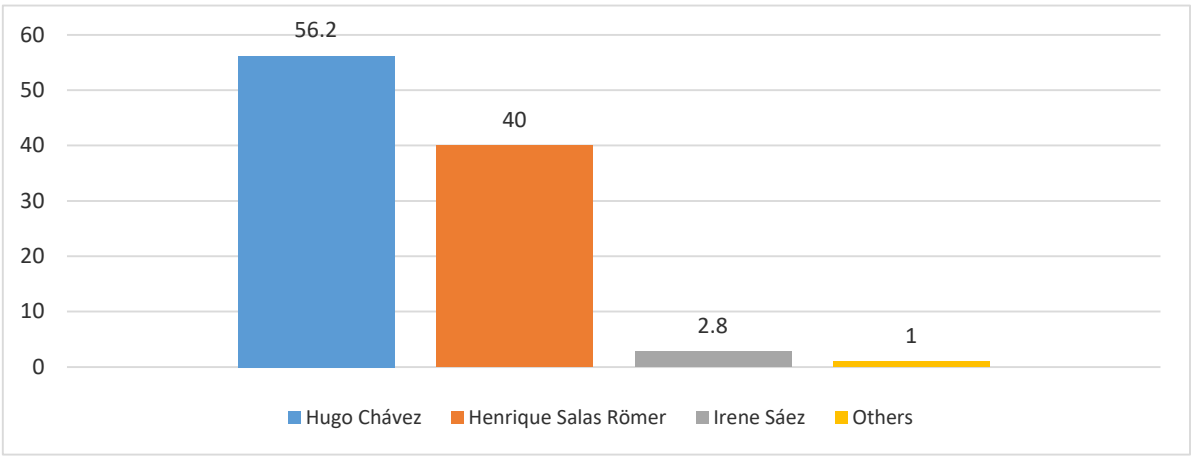

Figure 4: Percentage of votes in the 1998 Venezuelan presidential elections

Source: National Electoral Council n.d.

Thirdly, due to the deinstitutionalization of traditional parties and the dissatisfaction of ruling political elites, the public gravitated towards a personalist politics, effectively causing what Laclau called "a populist rupture". A mestizo military strongman from a humble background, Chávez completely shattered the conventional "suit and tie" image of politicians with his charisma and down-to-earth appearance. In their 2005 biography of Chávez, Cristina Marcano and Alberto Barrera Tyszka wrote that "the military uniform, however, would always be his preferred outfit—in fact, he liked it so much that he began to use it for official events, despite being retired and despite his advisers' admonishments to put it away".[109] Coming from a poor family and with this unique character and feature of his, Chávez charismatically positioned himself as a strongman and soldier who truly represented the Venezuelans, in a stark contrast to his two major rivals who represented the old, rich establishment: Henrique Salas Römer, a long-time political elite backed by AD and COPEI; and Irene Saez, a blonde former Miss Universe beauty queen turned politician. In addition to his embodiment of "change" by stepping into politics as newcomer, Chávez also managed to take advantage of his physical appearance and personal skills to alter the terrain of Venezuelan politics, bringing it closer to the ordinary people.

[109] Cristina Marcano and Alberto Barrera Tyszka, *Hugo Chávez.*

To be sure, not only did Chávez adroitly make use of his charisma and appearance, but he also employed populist rhetoric throughout his 1998 presidential campaigns and in the subsequent ones until his premature death in 2013. In an interview with a journalist in 1997, for example, Chávez reiterated his sacred mission of refounding the nation by the people and for the people through a new constitution:

> *That great power of which you speak is the constituent power (...) and that is what gives my candidacy true meaning, that is, reaching Miraflores with the majority vote of the people in order to activate that extraordinary power that does not belong to Chávez, but belongs to the people.*[110]

Likewise, his presidential campaign in 2000 also highlighted the central role of the people and the chronic disease of the ruling elite. With the slogan "*Con Chávez manda el pueblo*" [With Chávez, the people rule], he vowed to reestablish a nation based on social justice. Conspicuous were his intentions to battle against the "bourgeoisie", the "oligarchy", and their system of exploitation and domination: "Oligarchy, beware!", he said ahead of the election day, echoing the nineteenth-century caudillo Ezequiel Zamora's dictum.[111] After winning the vote, he reaffirmed his battle, pledging: "I will not rest until I sack the last vestige of the oligarchy".[112] During the start of the 2004 recall referendum campaign, Chávez was quoted as saying that he was confident he would be victorious in the referendum because the "majority of the people" did not want those who "sank the country" to return to power. He reiterated that it was vital to give "a resounding defeat to the Venezuelan oligarchy" because they were the ones who "tried to put their hands on the national wealth and take it away from the people".[113] "In two months we will face them [the opposition] to fight the battle for the future of Venezuela," he said.[114]

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[110] *Rostros y Rastros de Un Líder. Hugo Chávez: Memoria de Un Pueblo*. (Caracas: Centro Nacional de Historia y Servicio Autónomo Imprenta Nacional y Gaceta Oficial, 2014), 36.

[111] *Las Campañas Admirables Del Presidente Hugo Chavez*. (Caracas, Venezuela: Ediciones Correo del Orinoco, 2012), 45.

[112] *Las Campañas Admirables Del Presidente Hugo Chavez*, 83.

[113] *W Radio*, "Oficialismo y Oposición Iniciaron Campaña de Referendo Chávez," July 3, 2004. https://www.wradio.com.co/noticias/actualidad/oficialismo-y-oposicion-iniciaron-campana-de-referendo-chavez/20040703/nota/11179.aspx.

[114] Martin Sanchez, "Venezuela's Chavez and Supporters Get Ready for Recall Referendum with Mass Rally." *Venezuelanalysis.Com*, June 7, 2004. https://venezuelanalysis.com/news/533.

In constructing people as a single, unitary entity, Chávez vehemently depicted the political establishment or those who did not ally themselves with him as corrupt enemies who always sought to steal the power away from the sovereign people whom he embodied. The political arena was converted into a holy battlefield on which either side was destined to be annihilated. It was either supporting the Bolivarian Revolution or conspiring with the elite in a counterrevolution ploy. As Weyland, De la Torre and Pappas would argue, in such an environment pluralism, political moderation, and consensus were dismissed. Chávez's politics was heavily centered on singularity and adversarial struggles. In so doing, he also exploited the national symbols and images in an attempt to develop and strengthen his political discourse and position. From reinterpreting historical, military, religious, and cultural references to claiming he was the Liberator Simón Bolívar of the twentieth-first century, Chávez associated his quest for power with the War of Independence of the nineteenth century. On one side stood what Pappas called "little people" whom he – just like Bolívar – led in a struggle for peace, freedom and democracy. On the other were the powerful elites who – like the Spaniards – colluded with other imperialist nations in a debased effort to subvert the will of the people for their own benefits.

As the time passed by, Chávez's populist rhetoric separating the authentic people from the enemies grew increasingly hawkish. More confrontational, direct, aggressive, often insulting, and even lewd language were employed against the political parties, people, traditional power groups, and institutions that stymied his ways. To the elites, he threatened to "fry their heads" and called them imbeciles, escuálidos, traitors, or *pitiyanquis.*[115] Nevertheless, it should be noted that although he consistently used pejorative, populist discourse, it was evident that he did not start out at the beginning as a staunchly socialist candidate, nor was he always radical. In fact, it was not until 2007 that he became radicalized and clearly authoritarian. Four opposition-led events – some of which were US- backed – had tremendous influence on Chávez's radicalization: the attempted coup in 2002, the oil strike in 2002-2003, the recall referendum in 2004, and the upward trend of global oil prices during the mid- 2000s. These culminated into the 2007 constitutional referendum in which he proposed to amend 69 articles of the 1999 Constitution. Among the most significant proposed changes were the abolition of presidential term limits, the increase in presidential term from

[115] Margarita López-Maya and Alexandra Panzarelli, "Populism, Rentierism, and Socialism in the Twenty-First Century: The Case of Venezuela," in *Latin American Populism in the Twenty-First Century*. (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2012), 248.

six to seven years, the president's right to declare an unlimited state of emergency, and the lowering of the voting age from 18 to 16. The vote was vaunted as his endeavor to initiate the transformation of Venezuela into a socialist country: "[w]e have broken the chains of the old, exploitative capitalist system," said Chávez ahead of the referendum in 2007, "[t]he state now has the obligation to build the model of a socialist economy".[116] In an attempt to gather support from the people, he fostered the nation with a sense of urgent crisis, declaring at the closing of the campaign: "[t]his Sunday 2nd [of December] we will give another knockout to Bush, to US imperialism. No one should forget that this is the background of the battle [against US imperialism], a battle that is already 500 years old".[117] At the same event, he also went further to allege that the people who would vote against his initiative were voting for Bush: "We are not confronted with the pawns of imperialism or with those who play dirty to the empire. Our true enemy is the American empire".[118] In so doing, Chávez created a crisis of imminent imperialist invasion on top of the existing crisis of representation. The enemies of the people were no longer limited to the political establishment but went beyond borders. The only way to overcome them was to approve his constitutional reform. He was the one and only Savior of the nation.

Thanks to the enormous windfall from the surge of global crude oil price in the mid-2000s and the nationalization of the state-owned oil company, Chávez finally had the very much needed financial resources to fully embark on social development projects. Through nationalizations and a set of redistributive policies, he introduced a series of *Misión bolivariana* programs. Not only was it aimed at improving living conditions and social welfare of the urban poor, but it also sought to fortify social participation and political organization. Notable missions include the Cuban-supported community healthcare program "Misión Barrio Adentro", the literacy training program "Misión Robinson", the high school completion program "Misión Ribas", the university scholarship program "Misión Sucre", the subsidized food market program "Misión Mercal", and the housing project "Gran Misión

[116] *The Telegraph*. "Hugo Chavez to Make Himself President for Life," August 17, 2007. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1560583/Hugo-Chavez-to-make-himself-president- for-life.html.

[117] *Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias*. "Chávez: El Que Vote Por El No Lo Hace Por George W. Bush," November 30, 2007. https://web.archive.org/web/20090206184158/http://www.abn.info.ve/go_

news5.php?articulo=1126 31&lee=1.

[118] *Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias.*

Vivienda".[119] Though the extent to which these programs were successful has been broadly debated,[120] what is certain is that Chávez was using a set of policies which Dornbusch and Edwards called "macroeconomic populist policies". Rather than diversifying the economy and fortifying other productive private sectors, Chávez increasingly advanced nationalization programs, relied on the mining sector, and opted for a massive social spending based almost solely on oil income. But thanks to these measures and his leadership, he managed to maintain the clientelist network and political loyalties he very much needed for his political projects.

In sum, Chávez proved to be a populist in every sense. Undoubtedly a charismatic, affable leader, his political strategies from the beginning to the end were populist. Taking advantage of mass media as well as political rallies, he fomented a personalistic, intimate bond with his followers. A number of "empty signifiers" such as *revolution, democracy, social justice, the oligarchy,* were frequently employed to extend the equivalential chain. His ways of doing politics were black and white, as seen in his Manichean rhetoric and speeches which painted those who opposed him as entirely immoral, unscrupulous, and corrupt. The true people were constructed as a single unit: the "little people" who were left behind and deprived of their rights by the devious oligarchy. Crucially, he legitimized his rule through elections and referenda. The sovereign spoke through him and him only.

As De la Torre, Weyland, Pappas and Finchelstein would see it, there is no populism without democracy. Although democratic, populists tend to slide into autocracy because they rarely tolerate dissents or plurality. In addition to harassing the opposition and silencing media outlets that criticized him, Chávez started to clearly show his authoritarian traits in his 2007 attempt to amend the constitution so that he could stay in power indefinitely. But in spite of his defeat in that referendum, he continued to win the 2009 plebiscite and the 2012 presidential election. To succinctly put it in Samuel Huntington's words, election is the only game in town for Chávez. The more victories at the poll he secured, the more he believed he reincarnated the homogenous people. For populists like Chávez, a triumph in a democratically free and fair election automatically translates to the will of the people that lived in him.

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[119] Ryan Brading, *Populism in Venezuela* (Routledge Studies in Latin American Politics. New York: Routledge, 2012), 77.

[120] See, for example, Daniel Ortega and Francisco Rodríguez. "Freed from Illiteracy? A Closer Look at Venezuela's Misión Robinson Literacy Campaign." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 57, no. 1 (2008): 1-30.

Thailand: Between Dhammaraja and democracy

Unlike European, North American and Latin American nations, democracies in Southeast Asia in general are relatively new and unimaginably distant from consolidation. In fact, some countries are yet to democratize or barely familiar with liberal democratic values. Following centuries under the French empire and decades of brutal civil wars, Laos and Vietnam have been under the Communist Party's rule since 1975. After a century of British colonial government and more than five decades of military dictatorship, Myanmar had a high hope for democracy. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was finally released from house arrest and joined the general election in 2015. While the world praised her for finally bringing democracy to Myanmar, five years later the military is still virtually guiding every step she takes. To make the matter worse, the genocide against the Muslim ethnic minority Rohingya between late 2016 and early 2017 took place under Suu Kyi's leadership. In Singapore, though its electoral calendar has not been interrupted since its independence, this small island nation is a hegemonic authoritarian one-party state under the leadership of the Lee family. The same could be said for post-civil war Cambodia, which has been under what Levitsky and Way called "competitive authoritarianism."[121] With less pressure from the West and more support from Beijing, the Hun Sen regime ceased to continue with democratization endeavors and gradually became autocratic. The main opposition party have been banned, and vocal critics of the government have been either murdered or had to go in exile. Solid liberal representative democracies—although certainly far from perfect—seem to exist only in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Thailand has been no exception from this authoritarian trend of the region. Since the end of absolute monarchy and the inauguration of constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand's politics has shifted back and forth between an unstable civilian government and a military dictatorship. Unlike Venezuela, coups and infightings among factions have been norms rather than exceptions throughout a large part of the twentieth century. At the helm of the governments was the US-backed military junta, which had the support of Washington and the Thai royal family – the country's most beloved and sacrosanct institution. In spite of hot wars against communist insurgencies in Southeast Asia's Cold War, Thailand had relatively political stability under a bureaucratic authoritarian regime between the late 1930s and 1992, with a brief experience of parliamentary democracy from 1973 to 1976. With relative peace

[121] Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, "The New Competitive Authoritarianism." *Journal of Democracy* 31, no.1 (2020): 51-65.

and export-led, pro-business policies, it gradually evolved from an agricultural-based society to an industrialized nation. Thanks to its cheap labor and comparatively efficient infrastructure, Thailand received a massive influx of capital from the West and the East Asian nations such as Japan and Taiwan. This resulted in an outstanding economic growth between the 1960s and 1997.

As the Cold War tension in the region deescalated, the third wave of democracy swept over Thailand throughout the 1990s. The people's uprising in May 1992 in the middle of Bangkok, although violently suppressed, brought down the military regime, paving way for the liberal democracy to flourish. Pressed by the 1997 Asian financial crisis, a constituent assembly was convened to prepare a new constitution in an effort to strengthen democracy and find solutions to the economic crisis. Widely hailed as a groundbreaking in democratic political reform, the 1997 Constitution was drafted by the popularly- elected Constitutional Drafting Assembly, unlike all the preceding or the following ones that were either written by military juntas or appointed committees. Among the charter's key features were decentralization, compulsory voting, local elections, increased checks and balances, and the strengthening of the executive branch. Yet ironically, this so-called "people's charter" has been accused of giving birth to what seemed to be Thailand's very first populist: Thaksin Shinawatra's "parliamentary dictatorship" and his allegedly populist politics.

The royal hegemony

Despite the 1932 Siamese Revolution led by the People's Party, Thai politics at least until Thaksin's debut rarely involved the people. Instead, under the "Talons of the Eagle", two institutions have played the important part: the monarchy institution and the military. Because of intense infighting and corruption within different factions of the People's Party, the revolutionary's hegemony and popularity were short- lived. In turn, princes and the old elites whose power had been stripped off following the revolution began regaining their upper hand. In 1957, a pro-conservative army general Sarit Thanarat staged a coup against the last remnants of the People's Party, with the backing of the palace. A heavy drinker, Sarit Thanarat in almost every aspect portrayed an ideal picture of the Third World dictator: a generous father-like figure of the people, a vain womanizer and a "ruthless dictator who summarily executed criminals and political rivals to scare others".[122] Sarit's 1957 and 1958

[122] Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles : A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006): 139-140.

coups would destroy the country's already brittle political system to its core: political parties were banned, the legislature abolished, and martial law declared. With the royal endorsement, Sarit's coups would significantly pave the way for the old elites to fully reclaim their footholds on the political stage, standing side by side with the military amid the mounting Cold War conflicts and the US presence in Southeast Asia.

A number of scholarly works argued that Sarit used various methods to legitimize his premiership following the 1957 and 1958 coups. Thak Chaloemtiarana, for example, contended that following the coups, Sarit quickly grasped the urgent necessity to rebuild the tie between the armed forces and the elites that had been heavily severed by the revolution of 1932. [123] By reviving King Vajiravudh's (Rama VI, 1910-1925) triune "Nation-Religion-King" as a central political slogan for his regime and for the armed forces, Sarit reforged the military's inseparable relationship with the monarchy institution, that is, with the young King Bhumibol (King Rama IX), who ascended the throne in 1946 upon his brother's premature death. A number of the royal privileges and the monarch's prerogatives that had previously been banned by the People's Party and the Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram administrations (1938-1944 and 1948-1957) were resuscitated by Sarit and high-ranking conservative princes. Their aim was to bring the monarchy closer to the public and recuperate once again the King's stature of reverence. King Bhumibol was therefore sacralized and transformed into *Dhammaraja* – the supreme Buddhist righteous king.[124] In so doing, Sarit legitimized his assumption of power by proclaiming himself and the armed forces as the "defender" of the father and soul of national stability: the monarchy institution. For instance, in a stark contrast to Plaek, Sarit pursued a set of policies which encouraged King Bhumibol and the royal family to attend public ceremonies and make a state visit abroad. The Field Marshal reintroduced a number of long-dead sacral royal traditions, including the Royal Barge Procession (in 1959), the Royal Ploughing Ceremony (in 1960) and the practice of prostration before the monarch and his family members (by the 1960s), a custom that had been abolished decades earlier by King Bhumibol's grandfather.[125] In 1960, Sarit also had the National Day moved from June 24th, the date of the 1932 Revolution, to December 5th, King

[123] Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotic Paternalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[124] Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Introduction: A Timeless Thailand," In *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand*, edited by Pavin Chachavalpongpun (New York: Routledge, 2019): 5.

[125] Paul M. Handley, 143-152.

Bhumibol's birthday.

The perilous situation in the tumultuous, poverty-stricken Indochina during the 1950s also favored Sarit's junta and the monarchy institution substantially. As the Vietnam War broke out in 1955, Sarit led Thailand to what many historians called the "American Era" by siding with the Free World and closely cooperating with the US as its main ally in the wars against North Vietnam. Handley argued that "the Americans saw the king as a useful figurehead in the fight against communism."[126] By the early 1960s, the US Information Service had virtually taken over public relations for the Thai government, heavily funding equipment and programming for television and radio broadcasts with an anti-communist, pro-monarchy theme.[127] This alliance that Sarit and King Bhumibol fortified with the US government spawned tremendous political and financial support to the monarchy and the military regime. It became particularly noticeable when Sarit officially approved the presence of the US military bases in Thai territory in 1961 via the bilateral defense pact and when he staunchly implemented the hardline anti-communist policies against the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) insurgency in rural areas.

Along these same lines, Chanida Chitbundid argued that abject poverty and the region's backwardness catalyzed the process of consolidating the trilateral alliance among the US, Thai monarchy institution and the armed forces.[128] As a consequence of the fights against the Marxist-Maoist guerrillas and the US military's presence in Thailand, billions of dollars destined for improving and modernizing key infrastructure across the country were poured into Sarit's junta through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and several other channels. With an aim to draw the rural poor from the growing leftist movement, public works and mega projects mushroomed nationwide. These included the constructions of US government-funded highways cutting through CPT-controlled areas and connecting provinces from north to south with Bangkok, dams and enhanced irrigation systems for agriculture and efficient waterworks, in addition to the expansion of electricity access.

[126] Paul M. Handley, 105.

[127] Paul M. Handley, 149.

[128] Chanida Chitbandit, *Khrongkan Annueang Ma Chak Phraratchadamri: Kansathapna Phrarat Amnat Nam Nai Phrabatsomdet Phrachaoyuhua [The Royally-Initiated Projects: The Making of King Bhumibol's Royal Hegemony]* (Bangkok: Foundation for the Promotion of Social Science and Humanities Textbooks Project, 2007).

Similarly, to engage with the rural poor's miserable living standard in a "more peaceful" way, King Bhumibol, now fully regained his foothold in politics thanks to Sarit and the US, also played his part intimately with the military in what he himself called "a fight against hunger",[129] rather than against communism. Chitbundid explained that King Bhumibol, along with his family and the armed forces, frequently travelled to the CPT-dominated areas in Thailand's impoverished northern and north eastern regions during the 1960s–1990s and established the "Royally-Initiated Projects,"[130] which were comprised primarily of a series of the socio-economic development programs aimed at helping the rural poor – the majority of the population.[131] One of the most well-known successful Royally-Initiated Projects until today was founded in the northern provinces, where the guerrilla insurgencies had mainly operated and where the majority of populations were primitive hill tribes who had earned a living by planting and selling opium.

Dressed in casual but at times neat outfits, the monarch was usually seen sitting on the ground with the crowd. Always accompanying him was Queen Sirikit, who, on the contrary, never ceased to stun the crowd with her vividly elegant dresses. A stylish lady, she once admitted to the press that she indeed loved beauty and dressing up, especially during her royal tours to the Kingdom's peripheries: "The villagers could only see us once in a long while. In fact, they get to meet us only very few instances throughout their whole life. That's why I try to dress up so that they can see and remember us".[132] Surrounded by caravans of their attentive servants, the royal couple personally and intimately conversed with his subjects in remote villages, asking them in simple Thai language about their quotidian lives and attentively listening to their hardship stories. The monarch's exhaustion from journeying thousands of miles was portrayed through an image of the hardworking king with "sweat on

[129] Bridget Winter, *Soul of a Nation - The Royal Family of Thailand, Documentary* (London: BBC, 1979). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v28koYsdy38.

[130] This term is also widely recognised as "the Royal Projects," but in this research, I will use the same term as in Chitbundid. Generally, the Royally Initiated Projects constitute thousands of development programmes, such as better medical care from HM the King's team, constructions of dams and irrigation system, employments, sustainable crop cultivation and livestock production, among others. They are all privately funded by the Royal Household.

[131] Chanida Chitbandit.

[132] *Post Today*, "'Kwam Rak Nai Luang Khong Prachachon Tee Chan Jab Jai' Somdej Phra Rajini Phrarajathan Sampas Kae Klum Nak Khao Mue Pee 2523 ["The People's Love for the King That Impressed Me" Her Majesty the Queen's Audience with Press Corps in 1980]," November 2, 2016. https://www.posttoday.com/social/royal/463213.

the tip of his nose".[133] Oftentimes, he went on to establish schools, medical clinics and centers of agricultural development for substituting opium with other legal lucrative crops. Thanks to the King's direct command and his private funding, technical, financial and medical aids were injected straight to those villages much faster than the government's assistance.

His tours across the country indeed went beyond a mere state propaganda. Since televisions or radios were still a luxury in Thailand during the 1960s and 1970s, King Bhumibol's physical presence, grace and assistance – both spiritual and material – prompted rural villagers to feel included, visible, love, and care. Material gains which the rural poor received from the royal family dovetailed their Buddhist belief, for most Thais both in cities and provinces alike were religious. They were taught and strongly believed in Buddhist myths and precepts. Along with tangible gains bestowed by him, they saw in King Bhumibol the ten superior virtues, or *barami*, which the Buddha perfected before attaining enlightenment. This is the *thotsaphit rachatham*, the ten kingly virtues: charity, morality, sacrifice, integrity, gentleness, restraint (of senses and habits), avoidance of hatred, nonviolence, patience, and conciliation.[134] In an absence of democracy, rule of law, equality and equity, King Bhumibol the Dhammaraja quickly rose to become the nation's one and only moral authority and father figure that all the Thai people accepted and venerated. Rather than sitting idly on the golden throne and enjoying luxurious life, King Bhumibol was publicized as a truly devoting leader who brought dignity, equality and equity to the excluded. Politicians, on the other hand, were perceived as immoral figures vying for their own benefits and did not truly care for the people's misery like the monarch.

[133] Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 5.

[134] Paul M. Handley, 18.

Figure 5 and 6: King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit during one of their visits to a rural village. Source: https://www.thairath.co.th/news/royal/1682881 and https://siamrath.co.th/n/19952

After Sarit died in 1963 and his hand-picked successor Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn was ousted in the 1973 uprising led by student movements, Thailand breathed a fresh air of three-year parliamentary democracy until the 1976 Thammasat University Massacre. The country fell under another prolonged military-led regime (1976–1992), while the King's role in politics grew stronger in tandem. Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, who led the military-ruled government during 1980-1988, played a vital role in actively bolstering the King's works and ideologies and solemnly maintained Sarit's motto "Nation-Religion-King."

Chris Baker and Pasuk Pongpaichit sustained that with the advent of widespread use of modern media such as television and radio in the 1980s, the military government increasingly became "acutely aware of the power and rural reach of electronic media" and "abandoned the fight to control print media." It was in this decade that "television news began with the royal family" and "special programmes were broadcast about the monarchy, armed forces, the standard version of history, and official views of national development".[135] Those countless images and video footages portraying the King's works and devotion during his visits to countryside villages have been repeatedly reproduced until today, reinforcing the monarchy's role in Thai politics and in many Thais' belief as the "Soul of the Nation" and the embodiment of moral authority.

[135] Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*. 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 224.

Figure 7: King Bhumibol giving audience (from left to right) to the junta's leader Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon, the anti-regime protest's leader Chamlong Srimueng, and the royal advisor and former PM Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, on May 20, 1992.

Source: https://siamrath.co.th/n/8208

Although it is often said that the King was "above" political affairs, in a sense that he was not entitled to any constitutional prerogative to directly intervene or overtly influence, many scholars agreed that King Bhumibol was and is the pivotal figure in Thailand's contemporary politics. One noteworthy example is when the massive protest by a myriad of the emerging middle class broke out in 1992 against Gen. Suchinda Kraprayoon's 1991 coup d'état, or the Black May Crisis. As the situation exacerbated and turned violent, King Bhumibol managed to terminate this political unrest by holding an urgent private meeting between Suchinda and the leader of the protest. The meeting (Figure 7) was broadcast via public televisions, and several days later Suchinda resigned. After decades of endorsing military interventions, King Bhumibol was now portrayed not only as moral, sacred and popular, but also democratic and a stabilizing force guiding the Kingdom through the crisis. Since then, the military retreated from the political arena to their barracks. Thailand embarked on a very promising democratization after 1992 thanks to the May uprising (or the King, as many might say) and the aforementioned 1997 Constitution.

In sum, it can be argued that by the 1990s, King Bhumibol's royal hegemony had completely prevailed over social, economic political realms. Throughout the Cold War years, the military governments portrayed King Bhumibol as the embodiment of every Thai people and as the essence of the Thai nation. The enemies were the communist insurgents that aimed to demolish Buddhism, the virtuous monarch and "the authentic people" that he reincarnated altogether. Without any kind of citizen participations or elections, the military managed to construct and unite the people as one. But as the Red Scare subsided and the 1997 Constitution brought about genuine democratization, the Cold War equilibrium and the King's hegemony were going to be seriously challenged. Solid democracy started to shape up by the end of the century.

Thaksin's populism versus King Bhumibol

Winning a landslide in the 2001 general elections and again in 2005, the charismatic magnate Thaksin Shinawatra stepped into Thai politics with a massive fan base. A police general turned billionaire businessman and seasoned politician, Thaksin gained substantial popularity among the rural poor – still the majority of the country – thanks to his talent in economics, personal charisma and reformist, redistributive policies that went alongside pro-market measures. Among the crown jewels of his policies were the universal health coverage scheme, the 30 Baht (approximately $1) Health Care scheme, the Village Fund programs, and the local entrepreneurship stimulus program "One Tambon One Product" (OTOP).

Though his critics lambasted at these redistributive policies of his as "populist,"[136] there have been debates over the issue. Recent studies revealed that the overall macroeconomic policies throughout Thaksin's two administrations were far from fitting into Dornbusch and Edwards' definition of short-sighted economic populism. Hawkins and Selway, for example, contended that Thaksin "was not economically populist".[137] Unlike Chávez who aimed at maximizing the state's role in the economy and usually threatened the private sector with nationalization, Thaksin's economic agenda "sat alongside neoliberal market reforms" and his "policies were not as reckless or short-sighted as the term populist,

[136] See, for example, Anek Laothamatas, *Thaksina-Prachaniyom: Kwammai, Panha Lae Tang Ork [Thaksin–Populism: Meaning, Problems, and Solutions]* (Bangkok: King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2006) and Sawai Boonma, *Prachaniyom: Hontang Su Hayana [Populism: Path towards Disaster]* (Bangkok: Post Publishing, 2012).

[137] Kirk A. Hawkins and Joel Selway, "Thaksin the Populist?" *Chinese Political Science Review* 2 no. 3 (2017): 390.

in its policy meaning, invokes".[138]

Because the 1997 Constitution decentralized the country and allowed for local elections to take place like never before, Thaksin was given an institutional mechanism to harness and tap into the votes from the rural poor of the north and the northeast – the very same regions where King Bhumibol had extensively toured several decades before – with his appealing policies. Throughout his premiership, he constantly toured to the impoverished regions of the country and hosted a local weekly radio show, *Premier Thaksin Talks with the People* as a means of direct communication between him and the people.[139] Of the 500 seats in the Lower House, his newly founded Thai Rak Thai Party ("Thais love Thais") alone won 248 in 2001 and 375 in 2005. According to Chachavalpongpun, the era of Thaksin began with high hope, including "the empowerment of the electoral process, a fairer contest for political power, greater access to political resources for rural residents and a better management of economic policy that would distribute wealth more proportionally throughout the nation."[140] Holding this unprecedented electoral legitimacy, Thaksin emerged as a figure that empirically and scientifically embodied the majority of the people. He also appeared as easily reachable, relatable, and identifiable by "the people".[141]

While conventional wisdoms tend to monolithically see Thaksin as populist like Chávez in that he had always been like this, a group of scholars such as Kevin Hewison, Kirk A. Hawkins, Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker saw it differently. They argued that Thaksin "was not a populist when he rose to power in 2001 but became so in intensifying stages over the next five years," when he was fervently pressed by the urban middle-class protests that called for his resignation.[142] Employing ideational approach, Hawkins and Selway confirmed Phongpaichit and Baker's finding in that Thaksin's populist political discourse was largely absent in his first mandate, "but showed up clearly in his second term, especially in the moment immediately preceding his downfall in 2006".[143] Hawkins and

[138] Kirk A. Hawkins and Joel Selway, 378-379.

[139] Benjamin Moffitt, "Contemporary Populism and 'The People' in the Asia-Pacific Region: Thaksin Shinawatra and Pauline Hanson." In *The Promise and Perils of Populism: Global Perspectives* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2015): 293–316.

[140] Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 8.

[141] Benjamin Moffitt.

[142] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, "Thaksin's Populism." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38 no. 1 (2008): 62.

[143] Kirk A. Hawkins and Joel Selway, 390.

Selway went on to argue that

> *Thaksin was not as populist as some well-known, contemporary populist leaders, and he frequently tempered his populist rhetoric with pluralist appeals to conciliation and respect for liberal democratic rules. He also lacked clear calls for radical reform until the very end. Thaksin was not consistently or radically populist.*

Whilst the health of the revered King Bhumibol was in decline during the mid-2000s, the network monarchy – a network of non-monolithic groups and people whose interests rely on, and who get legitimacy from, their varying associations with the monarch[144] – grew increasingly anxious about Thaksin. Due to his wealth, power and incessant popularity, they saw in Thaksin a threat to their status quo and – allegedly – the throne. To be sure, the anti-Thaksin protest (wide known as the "Yellow Shirt" movement – a color that represents the King) also managed to galvanize support from an enormous part of the urban middle- and upper class precisely because it painted Thaksin as a politician who allegedly tried to establish presidentialism and abolish the monarchy institution.[145] With the military at the helm, the network monarchy returned to Sarit's playbook of the Cold War. In the middle of the night on September 19th, 2006, at the height of the unrest between the anti-Thaksin protests and the riot police, the military staged a coup. Claiming that the Thaksin administration was excessively involved in "corruption scandals, interference in independent agencies, and insults to the King," the armed forces marched their tanks out of barracks, annulling the 1997 Constitution and establishing a Council for Democratic Reform.[146] As opposed to the 2002 coup attempt against Chávez, the Thai crowd did not take to the street calling for its elected leader's return like its Venezuelan counterpart. Rather, they bought roses, food, and drink for the soldiers who stood guard at the capital's strategic points. Parents brought their sons and daughters to take photos with the camouflaged Humvees and

[144] Duncan Mccargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand." *The Pacific Review* 18 no. 4 (2005): 499–519.

[145] *Manager Online*, "Juak Yab Bok Tong 'Song Phra Charoen' Rab 'Maew' Chee Hermkrem- Bibangkwaun [Flying Flag 'Love Live the King' Is Unappropriate, 'Maew' Is Violating, Irrespectful to the King]," March 18, 2006. https://mgronline.com/onlinesection/detail/9490000036938.

[146] Government Gazette, *Thalengkarn Khana Patiroop Karnpokkhrong Nai Rabob Prachathipatai Un Mee Phramahakasat Song Pen Phramook [Statement of the Council for Democratic Reform]*, 2006.

tanks. The crowd was thanking the coup for saving the crown from the corrupt.

Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's younger sister, would go through this same misfortune. After winning a sound victory with 48.41 percent of the votes in the 2011 free-and-fair elections, Yingluck became Thailand's first female Prime Minister. Backed by the rural-based Red Shirt movement, she was seen as the heroine on the white horse who would continue her brother's quest to uplift the life of the rural poor. However, her administration was marked by another escalating political turmoil, precisely after it presented an amnesty bill in 2013 in an alleged attempt to bring Thaksin back to Thailand from self-imposed exile without having to serve his jail term. With fears for Thaksin's return already lingering in the air, this triggered a mass demonstration that occupied Bangkok almost a year and paralyzed the economy. Eventually, her government was deposed by Gen. Prayut Chan-ocha – nicknamed "Defender of the Thai monarchy" – via a coup in May 2014, mainly due to the aggravating protests and alleged corruption scandals.

People's populism versus Royalist populism

While the figures like Thaksin and Chávez corroborated the theories of populism's claim that populists are born within democracy through electoral means, the case of the military juntas in Thailand seemed to prove otherwise. Unlike other cases of populist phenomena in Republican nations or solid democracies, the juntas found in Thailand's revered monarchy institution an "alternative" legitimacy that is much more powerful, universal, and inclusionary than the electoral one. Echoing Laclau's observation, populist rhetoric is not limited to a democratic regime, and populist strategies can be employed by a dictator.

Like the coup in 2006 and the military governments of the second half of the twentieth century, Prayut legitimized his rule not on the people proper but on the monarchy and the promise to rebuild peace and order. Without any kind of participation from the people, he meticulously constructed a homogenous type of the "we, the Thai people" through the so-called "Twelve Values" which he bestowed to the nation in a televised broadcast in July 2014. This was a central pillar which he called on all Thais to practice. Noteworthy here is the fact that out of the 12 values, four are directly related to the King and the rest involve morality:

1. Loyalty to the nation, the religion, and the monarchy
2. Honesty, sacrifice, endurance, and noble ideology for the greater good
3. Gratitude for parents, guardians, and teachers
4. Diligence in acquiring knowledge, via school studies and other methods
5. Preserving the Thai customs and tradition
6. Morality and good will for others
7. Correct understanding of democracy with the King as Head of State
8. Discipline, respect for law, and obedience to the older citizens
9. Constant consciousness to practice good deeds all the time, as taught by his Majesty the King
10. Practice of self-sufficient economy in accordance with the teaching of his Majesty the King
11. Physical and mental strength. Refusal to surrender to religious sins.
12. Uphold the interest of the nation over oneself.[147]

Through this long list, Prayut resuscitated the Cold War dichotomy centering on "the good people" versus "the enemies". But instead of claiming that he himself represented the homogenous people like Chávez did, Prayut claimed he was an ardent defender of the monarchy. To be sure, even if he had boasted he represented the people, such a statement would fail to convince anyone because he rose to power through a coup, not election. But as mentioned in the previous section, what makes Thailand's case especially unique is the role of the monarch in politics as well as his symbolic significance as the embodiment of the people and a moral compass. As Prayut's coup was endorsed by the virtuous King Bhumibol, the benevolent general automatically counted on a legitimacy that was not only the most powerful but also supposedly included all the people in the Kingdom. On one hand, the "good people" were constructed based on such values and were embedded within the figure of the Dhammaraja King, morphing into as one single entity. On the other, the enemies "of the good Thai people" were those who did not espouse these values and, crucially, did not respect the monarchy institution. Since supporters of the Shinawatra sibling – especially the Red Shirt movement and Thaksin himself – had been largely accused of being anti-monarchist, Prayut usually saw them as the "un-Thai" foes who were disrespectful and inclined to spark disorder and turmoil. In fact, Prayut made it clear in his first policy

[147] *Khaosod English*, "Prayuth Asks Media To Stop Asking Kids About '12 Values,'" January 24, 2015. https://www.khaosodenglish.com/life/2015/01/24/1422080185/.

statement before the military-appointed National Assembly in 2014 that his government's first priority was the monarchy institution:

> *The most important duty of this government is to respect the monarchy institution with full loyalty and to protect his Majesty's honor. The government will use legal, psychological, and technological measures to act against those that speak ill of, have bad intentions for, or try to undermine this nation's key institution.*[148]

When King Bhumibol died at the age of 88 in late 2016, the Prayut government's popularity became even more widespread. Hailed as the last Prime Minister of King Bhumibol's era, the benevolent general weathered the country through the nationwide sorrow and allocated the government budget as much as $90 million for the lavish funeral of the late king.[149] During the preparation of the King's funeral in July 2017, he explicitly reiterated how he considered who the real Thais were:

> *[King Bhumibol's lifeworks and philosophies] have made Thailand the nation we see today. Thailand remains independent like this because of the monarchy institution, which is the most important. We do not need to completely change this long tradition we have for a new one. We must live based on our history. If you don't know your own history, how can you learn to love your nation? That's why it's important to know our history. Her Majesty the Queen has privately spoken to me and my colleagues many times of that – that if we the Thai people don't know our own history, we won't know we come from. (…) Therefore, if you don't love the nation, you are not Thai*.[150]

Although a dictator, Prayut was far from having a static image of an elitist, bureaucratic

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[148] *ILaw*, "Khorsangked Tor Khamthaleng Nayobai Khong Rataban Thieb Jak Pol Ngan Kor.Sor.Chor. [Notes on the Government's Policy Statements Based on the NCPO Performance]," September 16, 2014. https://ilaw.or.th/node/3242.

[149] *Reuters*, "Thailand Rehearses Lavish $90 Million Funeral for Late King," October 21, 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-king-funeral-rehearsal/thailand-rehearses-lavish-90-million-funeral-for-late-king-idUSKBN1CQ02G.

[150] *Prachachat Turakij*, "Phra Merumas Khueb Kwa 60 Percent Triam Tid Pha Thong Yon-Jamlong Plaeng Na Roob Lek Kao [The Royal Crematorium Finished by 60 Percent, Ready to Be Adorned with Golden Cloth. 9-Shaped Farm to Be Built]," July 13, 2017. https://www.prachachat.net/general/news-4768.

autocrat. He employed a number of strategies that could be considered as populist. In fact, some scholars have argued that as much as he and his advisors were anti-Shinawatra, he followed almost exactly the same path of Thaksin. The only difference is that Prayut was not elected. For example, he introduced the *Pracharat* policies ("*Pracha"* means *people* or *popular*, while "*Rat*" means *state*) to substitute the Shinawatra's *Prachaniyom* (populism), but the new policies' redistributive characters were identical. Throughout his first three years in office, he always claimed that he "was not a politician who likes to make deals" and he only "cared for the people".[151] At 8.15pm every Friday, Prayut would appear on a television program "Returning Happiness to the People", publicizing his government's achievements in alleviating the poor's misery as well as advancements in industrial sectors. In honoring King Bhumibol's legacy and stressing his regime's loyalty, he baptized the program in 2016 as "The King's Philosophy for Sustainable Development".[152]

Furthermore, the general also toured the country extensively and was usually photographed among the smiley, enthusiastic crowd. In addition to listening to the hardship stories of the people, he would also hug, eat and dance with them as if he were part of their family. In an effort to stress that he indeed was the man of the people, he was staged to perform a number of challenges. For instance, the general went beyond refusing to wear suit and tie and manned a rundown public bus as well as the luxurious Yamaha motorbike.

[151] *BBC Thai*, "Prayut Lan 'Phom Mai Chai Nakkarnmueang' Kao Krang Korn Perd Tua Pen Nakkarnmueang [Prayut Said 'I Am Not a Politician' 9 Nine Times before Admitting He Is One]," January 4, 2018. https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-42562643.

[152] *Thai PBS*, "Har Pee Rai Karn 'Pol Ek Prayut' Prab Boi Tae Mai Pang [5 Years of Gen. Prayu's TV Programs: Loads of Changes, Less Popularity]," February 15, 2019. https://news.thaipbs.or.th/content/277760.


Figure 8 and 9: Gen. Prayut (left) on the motorbikes in Buriram (northeast), May 2018; Gen. Prayut (right) visiting a market in Prachuab Kirikhan (west), March 2015
Source: https://www.thairath.co.th/gallery/25257 and https://www.nationtv.tv/main/content/378449949/

In addition to his "populist" discourse and images, public opinion polls conducted following the 2014 coup revealed that the Prayut regime was particularly popular. For example, NIDA Poll released in 2015 polls on the junta's performance after one year in power. The study found that 85.3 percent favorably approved Prayut's premiership.[153] Another study revealed that 55.76 percent praised him for bringing back peace and order and wiping out political conflicts.[154] Also in 2015, Suan Dusit Poll conducted a survey on the requirements and characters of an ideal Prime Minister. The result showed that 87.65 percent would like to have a Prime Minister that was "good, honest, loyal [to the monarchy institution], moral, just, and unbiased".[155]

Interestingly, Prayut seemed to fit in almost every theory of populism this paper reviewed in the beginning. Following Laclau's discursive approach, Prayut did divide the society into two camps, constructed his own version of the people, and employed divisive antagonistic discourse. Through a strategic view like Weyland, Prayut employed the same set

[153] NIDA Poll, "Nueng Pee Khong Nayok Ratamontri Pol Ek Prayut Chan-o-Cha [1 Year of Gen. Prayut Chan-o-Cha's Premiership]." 2015. http://nidapoll.nida.ac.th/index.php?op=polls- detail&id=328.

[154] NIDA Poll, "Nueng Pee Kor Sor Chor. Kab Karn Khuen Kwan Suk Hai Khon Nai Chat [1 Year of NCPO and the Returning of Happiness to the People of the Nation]." 2015. http://nidapoll.nida.ac.th/index.php?op=polls-detail&id=307.

[155] *Manager Online*, "'Suan Dusit Poll' Peuy Prachachon Luek Nayok Ratanmontri Ma Jak Sor Sor. Rue Mai Kor Dai Nen Pen Khon Dee-Suesat-Jong Rak Pak Dee ["Suan Dusit Poll" Reveals: People Nonchalant with PM's Status, He/She Can Be MP but Must Be Good Person, Honest, and Loyalty]," November 15, 2015. https://mgronline.com/politics/detail/9580000126805.

of strategies as elected populists do in his quest for power. His distinction of friend versus foe was obvious, so was his promise to protect the people from a pernicious enemy. Although not as charming as Thaksin or Yingluck, he was charismatic in his decisiveness, straightforward language, and personal interactions with people. Indeed, he did not show any slightest sign of commitment to pluralism. Like Chávez, his ways of doing politics were Manichean and moralistic. Those who opposed the junta were labelled as entirely anti-monarchist, and therefore inimical to the good people, immoral, unscrupulous, and corrupt. Through control of mass media, Prayut also mastered his public image as the man of the people and loyal servant of the King. Ironically based on the Shinawatra's initiatives, Prayut's economic policies were heavily aimed at favoring the rural poor, which one could also argue that they fit into Dornbusch and Edwards' meaning.

A number of populist traits described thus far called into question the argument on populism and democracy that Finchelstein, Weyland, De la Torre, and Pappas presented. If looked through Pappas and Finchelstein's lens, Prayut's regime is autocrat and fascist, not populist. Likewise, De la Torre, Weyland and the theorists of the ideational approach would also contend that the benevolent general is not populist because he did not use electoral means and did not aim to rupture the elite or institutional systems. Following these views, Thailand seems to have had one and only populist: Thaksin Shinawatra.

But as this research has demonstrated, the source of ultimate legitimacy in contemporary Thai politics is not to be found only in ballots as in Western democracies. In fact, the very existence of two Cold War- style military putsches during the first two decades of the twentieth-first century alone renders Thailand a very special case to rethink about populism and its relationship with democracy. Four decades of US-funded propagandas under the pro-monarchy military regimes had nurtured and cemented the idea that the monarchy institution – essentially the Dhammaraja King – is the body and soul of the nation. The people are believed to live happily inside him. When Thaksin rose to prominence through elections with unprecedented popularity thanks to the 1997 Constitution, two sets of popular legitimacy collided: Thaksin's popularity *versus* King Bhumibol's royal hegemony. Viewed this way, Thailand's political turmoil throughout 2006 to 2014 can be explained as a struggle over who truly represented the people. Whereas the Shinawatra held the electoral legitimacy, the network monarchy and the military were blessed by the popular King. As a result, in spite of not being elected, Prayut managed to make use of populist rhetoric and strategies the same way that Thaksin and Chávez perfected. In the name of King, he could connect with the

people. Instead of challenging the elites like Chávez did, Prayut skillfully equipped himself with his own version of populism to uproot the Shinawatra's populism.

As pro-monarchy political scientist Anek Laothamatas put it, the ideal type of Thai politicians and Prime Ministers – like Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda and perhaps Prayut – "does not entail those who frequently boast that their successes emanate from their very own skills and ability. Rather, it should be those who prove to the people, whenever they can, that all the successes and virtues they achieve essentially derive from following the King's footsteps".[156] It is precisely in this context that we have seen a variant of populism that is *without* the people, a royalist populism.

[156] Anek Laothamatas, 67.

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