


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

New Wine in an Old Bottle? The Ideological Morphology of the Thai Online Right

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of online outlets aligned with the right has emerged in Thai politics. Though it is often assumed that such actors are merely an extension of the Thai state propaganda apparatus, as the moniker “IO (short for Information Operation)” implies, closer inspection of their contents suggests a more complicated picture. Employing the morphological approach of ideological analysis, this article argues that the Thai Online Right articulates a decidedly conservative worldview, upholding a social order centred around the monarchy, and opposing particular instigators of change, similar to more traditional Thai conservatives. The concepts and ideas they deploy to bolster these core ideas, however, seem to emphasise more materialistic and personalised elements, as well as draw from more contemporaneous “Western” right-wing conspiracy theories, making their conservative expression a strange blend of the old and the new. The findings have implications to the study of conservatism, both in the Thai context and comparatively.

Keywords: Conservatism; ideology; Thailand; internet; propaganda

Introduction

Following the 2020 anti-government reform protests and the meteoric rise of the progressive Move Forward Party in the 2023 general election, the role of the internet and social media as a driving platform of progressive forces in Thai politics is once again gaining attention (see Aim 2021a; Kanokrat 2021: 212–215; Tuwanont 2024: 11–12). This is because this online space has been the outlet of expression of various issues previously considered taboo in Thai politics, from reforming the monarchy’s political and economic influences, amending the lèse-majesté law, and ending military conscription, among other progressive agendas (McCargo 2021; Thongchai 2020: 235–240), which eventually spilled over to real-world politics. It may be tempting to view these developments as a promising reaffirmation of the progressive potential of the internet, despite the increasing pessimism on the issue given that the internet has fuelled the resurgence of the right in recent times, in many places around the world, from spread of anti-immigrant messaging by politicians (Hameleers 2019), articulation of nominally democratic but also illiberal tendencies (Dowling 2023), to the propagation of conspiratorial thinking in internet communities (Sommer 2023; Westmark and McMahon 2022).

The internet, however, is not the exclusive domain of Thai progressive ideological expression that the authoritarian state only seeks to repress. Indeed, in recent years, a number of outlets and public figures supporting the conservative cause, primarily operating on the internet, has also emerged in Thailand. Some pages appear to focus on articulating and disseminating right-wing worldviews rather than surveillance of political opponents in tandem with the Thai state as pointed out in previous research (Janjira 2020: 339–343): Thai Move Institute, THE TRUTH, Lue History, and Arnond Sakworawich, to name a few major examples (hereinafter “Online Right”¹). Along with right-wing online trolls, these outlets

¹Many accounts this research considers as part of the Online Right overlaps with those covered, with more details, by Janjira (2022c: 5–6).

are often counted as part of the army-led “Information Operation (IO)” apparatus, especially by progressives. Nevertheless, as Janjira (2022c: 3) points out, the extent of state involvement may have been overestimated. Indeed, this research’s findings also tracks with this more complicated picture, with the content of these conservatives’ ideological expression seemingly diverging from what have been typically associated with Thai conservatism.

First, the way they discuss and legitimise the monarchy in recent times seemingly contradicts previously deployed arguments and tactics. Around July 2023, a prominent online conservative commentator shared an infographic-like post showing “how much tax His Majesty pays,” which, according to the infographic, is around 3 billion Thai Baht. This was framed as a counterargument against the reformists’ criticism of the palace’s expenditure, that it is not funded by “my tax (*phasi gu*)” and His Majesty does, in fact “correctly pay His taxes”³ (Contents Wistfuller 2023). Connecting such extreme wealth with the monarchy, in defence of its status, seems like an important break from the active dissociation of the monarchy and wealth during the previous reign, when news contradicting the image of the “frugal king” (Puangchon 2020: 160) was criticised as foreign misinformation.

Such peculiar divergence also manifests itself in their commentary of international politics, with their open preference for Russia and disdain for Ukraine in the war (Janjira 2022a; 2022b: 16–18), as well as seemingly portraying the Palestinian Islamic group Hamas in a positive light, in the latest round of Israel-Hamas conflict.⁴ The notion that a Thai conservative outlet or figure would support a supposedly “communist” regime or an Islamic terrorist group is rather unexpected, considering the history and legacy of anti-communism during the Cold War and the experience of Southern insurgency and associated Islamophobia in the early 21st Century.

At times the divergence is not necessarily in the content of their argument, but the position they take on certain figures. Following the 2023 general election, the conservative establishment, defined as those with official positions of power such as military generals and politicians from conservative parties, manoeuvred to form a coalition government with the Pheu Thai Party, the so-called “Red Shirt” party aligned with the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.⁵ The Online Right expressed disdain, continuously referring to Thaksin with the term “*nakthot chai* (male prisoner)” (Thai Move Institute 2023b), ridiculing his return from exile, virulently expressing their belief that he deserves jail term for his corruption – despite the apparent compromise other conservatives in power, arguably including the King Himself, have made with this former enemy of the state. They have also harshly criticised, almost spitefully, other conservative figures who have expressed sympathy to the pro-reform youth protesters in 2020 (Thai Post 2020a).

The tangible political influence of the Thai Online Right should not be overstated, however, unlike that of the American counterpart (Parks 2021). It is true that the Thai Online Right were very active in

²The spelling of Thai terms and names in this article follows the Thai-to-Roman transliteration guide of the Royal Society of Thailand. If available, the official spelling of terms and names will be used, even if they contradict the transliteration guide (such as the name of this article’s author).

³According to Nalinrat Kunmethikawiwut, one of the Lue History page staff, they were the ones who first “collected information and make the graphic” to counter the “*phasi gu*” mantra, something she describes as a “discourse created by those holding ill will” (Top News 2024).

⁴To be clear, this is not something openly stated or advocated. Similar to the case of the Russian-Ukraine War as Janjira (2022a) notes, this tacit support is primarily expressed through the depiction of Hamas as capable fighters gaining advantage in the battlefield, often through inflammatory language (Yodtong 2023b; 2024b) and Russian President Vladimir Putin as a protector of the underdog in the conflict, in this case Hamas (Wangchagorn 2023; Yodtong 2024a). They also occasionally point to the atrocity committed by Israel, such as the bombing of the Jabalia refugee camp in October 2023 (Yodtong 2023a), though they generally do not focus on civilian death toll in the Gaza Strip, making it unlikely this is motivated by humanitarian concerns. Indeed, their criticism of the current Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin’s condemnation of Hamas revolves around how his “quick speaking, lacking knowledge” condemnation would lead to “Arab nations not trusting [Thailand]” unlike “in Uncle Tuu’s [nickname of the former Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha] time, when we could easily fly through Arab airspace” (Thai Move Institute 2023c).

⁵In the 2023 General Election, although the Move Forward Party won the most seats, it failed to form a coalition government. The Pheu Thai Party which came in second ended up forming a coalition government with a number of conservative, pro-military parties: the third-ranked Bhumjaithai Party, a Buriram-based conservative party; Palang Pracharat Party, a bureaucrat-military party headed by General Prawit Wongsuwan; and United Thai Nation Party, a party with former Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha as its figurehead.

spreading the narrative that various foreign donors, including the Fund for Open Society and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) from the US, have been funding NGOs and activists to interfere in Thai politics (Janjira 2020: 343–344), to the extent that the argument was deployed by conservative politicians and senators in Parliament (Thai Post 2020b). However, broader analysis of their impact (Goldstein *et al.* 2020), as well as the electoral reality suggest that they do not hold much sway. Indeed, the party of one of their associates, Warong Dechgitvigrom's Thai Pakdee Party, received less than one per cent of the 2023 general election vote.

Nevertheless, these developments seem to warrant a separate investigation, rather than assuming the entirety of their ideological content based on the label “IO.” While the influential concept of hyper-royalism correctly captures the broad, hegemonic presence of royalist worldview in Thai society, it does not supply an explanation to the idiosyncratic nature of the Online Right. What is necessary, then, is an approach that parses through both the similarities and differences among conservatisms to pinpoint how this particular manifestation relates to the others, perhaps beyond the border of Thailand. To that end, three questions are asked: How does the ideology of these conservatives look like? In what way is it similar to or different from existing understanding of Thai conservatives, and what may be the influences behind such characteristics? Should they even be considered “conservative” to begin with?

To answer these questions, the article employs Michael Freeden's morphological approach, which views ideology as an arrangement of various political concepts. It will be shown that the Thai Online Right displays conservative characteristics, consistent with existing understanding of Thai conservatism, articulating the ideological cores of an extra-human royal social order and a strong distrust of particular bearers of change. The concepts and ideas bolstering these core features, however, begin to show the divergence of this strand of Thai conservatism. On one hand, the divergence is in the emphasis behind similar arguments – the Online Right deploys a more materialistic, personalised version of their affinity with the monarchy. On the other hand, entirely new concepts, not even “Thai” in their origin, are deployed, as can be seen from their gesturing towards Western right-wing conspiracy theories, and their understanding of Thai and global politics through that lens.

This article is divided into six sections. The first section highlights the importance of analysing the ideological expression of online conservative voices as such, especially considering the messy nature of contemporary conservatism observed in previous studies. The second section reviews existing literature on Thai conservative ideology's manifestations. The third section introduces the analytical framework, the morphological approach, and the methodology this article employs. The following two sections present the finding, mapping out the structure and content of beliefs articulated by the Thai Online Right. The concluding section highlights key implications of the findings, both for Thai studies and ideological analysis writ large.

The Importance of Analysing Ideology as Such

The term ideology began as an intellectual methodology to study ideas as they exist in society during the French Revolution era, and eventually was attacked by Napoleon as an illusory theory divorced from political reality (Eatwell 1999: 4; Stråth 2013: 3–6). This pejorative definition was further developed by Karl Marx's analysis, viewing ideology as a tool of the ruling class to hide or legitimise the material reality of capitalism (Sargent 1969: 2–3; Stråth 2013: 8–9), which was in turn popularised by Engels' dismissal of ideologies as “false consciousness” (Eatwell 1999, 5). This generally critical attitude of “unmasking domination” (McNay 2013, 139) seems to be an implicit concern of much of the research into Thai conservatism, leading to inquiries focused on the content and history of the Thai ruling class's legitimising propaganda.

This implicit concern with domination – a real-world political action – leads to the analysis that discusses both who the Thai conservatives are, most of the time in terms of their socioeconomic background, and what their belief – conservatism – is at the same time (for instance, Apichat 2017; Apichat and Anusorn 2017; Thorn and Chanon 2019). This line of works often find correlation between higher socioeconomic status and conservatism, operationalised as anti-democratic, moralistic views on politics. The implication is, simply put, that conservatism is the ideology of the rich and powerful, standing against democracy and liberal values as these challenge the elite's status.

The limitation of this approach is that one's political belief is not necessarily structurally determined and is often much more diverse, even internally contradictory. Such limitation becomes apparent when relatively well-off individuals in Thailand, often considered conservatives, possess ostensibly progressive attitudes (Wannawiphang 2017: 28, 38–39). In fact, the latest general election's result, in which the typically "elite" Bangkok overwhelmingly voted for the Move Forward Party, illustrates this point best. Whether it is because of the Bangkokians becoming "*ta sawang* (awakened)" to progressive values, or the party's slick, expert-like campaigning style resonating with the Bangkokian's technocratic elitism (Matichon TV 2023), extrapolating the content of a conservative's belief system based on the presumed interests underlining their sociostructural position alone seems dangerous. This becomes particularly poignant, as the online space is where such sociostructural background becomes even more opaque.

A few works that have probed the nature of the intersection between Thai conservative forces and the online dimension further illustrates the necessity of avoiding making *a priori* assumptions of Thai conservative thought. Chief among them is Janjira Sombatpoonsiri's scholarship analysing the role and function of online right-wing media outlets and individual accounts, both apparent IOs organised by the Thai state and private actors, be they civic groups or random citizens (Janjira 2022c: 5–8). According to Janjira, by and large, these groups are not particularly successful in "winning hearts and minds" so to speak, and their actual impact has more to do with being part of the Thai state's digital repression tactics (Janjira 2022c: 3). Nevertheless, perhaps because the focus is with the assessment of the online actors' impact, the actual content being articulated receives less attention. While Janjira notes the Online Right's anti-American imperialism rhetoric and favourable view of Russian President Vladimir Putin (Janjira 2022a; 2022b: 14–17), the logic behind this almost 180-degree turn "diverg[ing] from their Cold War predecessors in their hostility toward the United States" (Janjira 2022b: 14) is not extensively explored.

Aim Sinpeng has also made a similar assessment regarding the limitation of the Thai Online Right's influence (Goldstein *et al.* 2020). Elsewhere, Aim has analyzed the behavior of online supporters of the 2014 People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) movement⁶, making a rather unexpected finding that "royalism did not feature prominently across the top five most popular PDRC Facebook groups before the coup" (Aim 2021b: 177–178), despite the movement leaders' at the time emphasising "fighting for the King" in speeches and slogans. Nonetheless, analysing the varying sentiments expressed in the conservative pages at the time, Aim concludes that "the PDRC has shown that it was the masses themselves who were propelling the antidemocratic movement" (Aim 2021b: 168). While this conclusion may be too hasty, the findings suggest that the connection between the concept of royalism and preference for autocracy may not be automatically linked, and more attention must be paid to the specific ways in which such ideas are connected and articulated.

Ultimately, these descriptions do show patterns of similarities and differences, both with "traditional" – loosely understood here as past iterations of Thai conservatism, be they the nobility in absolutist era or intellectuals and statesmen in the later 20th Century – Thai conservatives, as well as among the Online Right themselves. Nevertheless, descriptions alone do not sufficiently explain what these idiosyncratic displays of conservative ideology may imply about the nature of the contemporary Thai Online Right, and its relationship with other strands of conservatism.

Approaching the Idiosyncrasy of the Thai Online Right

This vacuum of analysis of the ideological content of the online actors means that these researches become reliant on other existing research into Thai conservatism to supply an explanation. However, for various reasons, they cannot adequately explain the quirks the Thai Online Right displays.

The intellectual history literature of Thai thinkers is, to be sure, extremely impressive – the work of Saichon Sattayanurak (2018) for instance is a great record of Thai conservative intellectuals since the absolutist era, as well as thinkers more active in the contemporary political conflict. Prajak Kongkirati

⁶The People's Democratic Reform Committee was a series of protests led primarily by Suthep Thaugsuban, a former Member of Parliament from the (conservative) Democrat Party, against the incumbent Yingluck Shinawatra government at the time. They staged marches and sit-ins from late 2013 to early 2014 in various locations in Bangkok, ultimately leading up to the military coup in May 2014.

(2005)’s study of radical students also portrays the vibrant, eclectic, at times messy terrain of the anti-military government youths of the Cold War era. Nevertheless, as their approach is more historical, the works are primarily descriptive, and certain curious observations – Saichon detecting “something authoritarian” from progressive figures in the past (Saichon 2018: 42), or Prajak being perplexed by how conservative and progressive ideas shared the same magazine space (Prajak 2005: 500–515) – are not pursued further. As it stands, it is difficult to connect the aberrations the Thai Online Right display with these past currents of Thai conservatism.

Works on more recent manifestations of conservatism, focusing on specific movements and the ideology as well as strategies driving them, suffer from similar limitations, as they do not necessarily show the relationship between their findings and the broader conservative thought, in Thailand or in general. Kanokrat’s definition is a basket of characteristics of conservatism across different contexts that may be too broadly applicable (Kanokrat 2020: 54–55), while Vasuchon’s is a gradational conceptualisation based specifically on the movements studied (Vasuchon 2023: 38). As a result, it becomes difficult to connect their intriguing observations to broader discussion of conservatism: for instance, what does the conservative-liberal alliance and disagreement in the earlier phase of the 21st Century conservative movements (Kanokrat 2020: 74–83) mean to Thai conservatism as a whole, beyond explaining the intra-movement rivalry? If anti-Thaksin sentiment needed to be combined with the traditional conservative triad of nation-religion-King in the far-right movements’ appeal to the public (Vasuchon 2023: 327–330), does that imply the weakening of the triad’s persuasive power to the conservative base? Does this mean those movements were being less conservative in those instances, despite their opposition to and expression against democratic election?

Further complicating this issue is the fact many critical understandings of Thai conservatism has seemingly been influenced, to varying degrees, by the concept of hyper-royalism. This concept refers to the intense, excessive royalism that dominates public life, governing behaviors, not just in top-down but also bottom-up fashion (Thongchai 2016: 7–10). It is composed of “three spells” broadly: royal-nationalist historical ideology, the king working tirelessly for his people, and royal democracy being most suitable for Thailand (Thongchai 2016: 14). The analytical implication is that the continuity and homogeneity of Thai conservatism around these themes is overemphasised – that it is a hegemonic project, bent on preserving and enhancing the social statute of the monarchy while crippling Thai democracy.

This framework, in effect, leads to what this study calls a “macro-ideology” conclusion of Thai conservatism – that various, micro-level deviation in ideological configuration and articulation could be easily subsumed into the overarching macro-level framework, unchangingly maintaining the hierarchy of Thai society since the times of absolutism. Although this is likely an accurate assessment of the broad historical trajectory of what the Thai conservative political actors articulated and pursued, it downplays the moment-to-moment variations and peculiarities, such as those listed in the introduction, and risks overlooking the specific repertoire of persuasion a given conservatism possessed that were more proximate to the audience it was speaking to. Some may be seen as more to the fringe or centre on a standard political spectrum model (for instance, Sibordee 2021: 28–30), but the characteristics relevant to understanding Thai conservatism is already set, almost *a priori*, by this macro framework.

This becomes an issue when confronting a conservative variation that do not neatly fit into the view of “modern Thai history as an epic clash between the sovereignty of monarchy and democracy” (Connors 2021: 5), especially when placed in the context of a broader intellectual milieu. For instance, Connors’s analysis of the Pramoj brothers, two prominent 20th Century Thai conservative figures, shows how they held deeply liberal concerns and positions, that Connors view their ideological configuration to be “conservative liberalism [...] with family resemblance to liberalisms elsewhere” (Connors 2021: 2). What this speaks to is the fundamentally flexible nature of ideological thinking in human society, even if ideological labels and political compass tests imply otherwise. As the era of what Kasian Tejapira dubs the “Bhumibol Consensus”⁷ has unravelled, it is particularly important to be cognisant of the variation within Thai conservatism, no matter how monolithic it may appear.

⁷This term is often understood to describe the state of Thai politics from the 1980s to the 2000s, in which the late King Rama IX achieved a near-hegemonic political legitimacy and respect, creating an elite consensus in which the monarchy could “manage power relations that existed during his reign” (Kasian 2018). On an ideational level, this meant the “paradoxical coming together

It is also important to recognise the fact that these are online formulation of right-wing ideology, which may involve certain features and dynamics unique to the internet environment of the contemporary 21st Century. Scholars have noted how the online environment allows both politicians and ordinary citizens to circumvent traditional journalistic avenues as well as restrictions that come with it (Hameleers 2019: 805–808), a specific cohort of conservatives “strongly influenced by ideas, ideologies and digital content originating in the US” (Busbridge *et al.* 2020: 731) to adapt US-originated conspiracy theory to their local political context, or average users to appropriate rhetorical strategy of the left to “[take] something *away* from liberals and [prove] them wrong” (Walberg 2023: 31, emphasis original). Beyond being a medium for right-wing messaging, the specific nature of different online applications and platforms may by itself transform “relatively unstructured grievances into a worldview” (Krämer 2017: 1305).

Taken together, what is needed is an analysis of ideological claims as such, taking into account the inherently complicated nature of how a given ideological expression may be structured and expressed, in order to identify the conceptual and rhetorical repertoire the Thai Online Right is drawing from. This seems to be an important step to be taken before engaging in normative critique of their lack of tolerance and critical reasoning (Surapot 2019) or critical assessment of the decline in adaptability and increased “sloppiness” of the contemporary conservatives (Somkid 2020).

Analysing Ideology and Conservatism

Here, the more neutral definition of ideology becomes instructive. In this conceptualisation, ideology refers to the “development of a world view by some group” (Sargent 1969: 3), “a relatively coherent set of empirical and normative beliefs and thought, [...] essentially the product of collective thought” (Eatwell 1999: 17). What this means is that a given ideology possesses a “morphology,” an empirically identifiable system of thought, composed of various political concepts that are defined and arranged into a discernible pattern that guides political thinking (Freeden 1996: 47–54).

The aim of morphological analysis, then, is to identify the pattern that “displays core, adjacent, and peripheral concepts” (Freeden 1996: 77). This empirical observation and analysis of the pattern of the core, adjacent, and periphery concepts, across different ideologies in the same period or the same ideologies at different times, is what allows the analyst to identify family resemblance between different manifestations of ideologies, so that categorisation and grouping become possible (Freeden 2013: 127–128).

This framework leads to a theoretical understanding of conservatism that takes into account the idiosyncratic contradictions it contains (Freeden 1996: 346). Historically, despite its terminology suggesting otherwise, conservatism is not opposed to change. Rather, it is opposed to particular kinds of changes, and is even capable of embracing revolutionary social tension in some manifestations (O’Sullivan 1999: 51, 58–61). Freeden’s schema of conservatism, composed of four key features, provides a map to this messy reality (Freeden 1996: 332–347).

The first two are substantive core concepts, relating to the content of a given conservatism. The first is the idea of history as organic growth, which defines the boundary of acceptable types of change. The second is the extra-human legitimation of social order. The term extra-human, rather than non- or natural, is deliberate, as this concept denotes the idea that “God, history, biology, and science [...] have served in turn as the extra-human anchor of the social order” (Freeden 1996: 334). The other two are underlying morphological attributes of conservatism, governing the specific choices and arrangements of additional arguments utilised to strengthen the conceptual cores. The first of this is the “mirror-image” deployment of adjacent concepts, in response to the challenges a given conservatism face. The final feature is the strategic flexibility conservatism has when giving meanings to concepts it deploys – in other words, the changes in their rhetoric and substance in different contexts. This reactive and flexible nature is what leads to the at times self-contradictory manifestation of conservatisms.

An analysis of conservatism based on this schema would identify the extra-human order envisioned, the boundary of acceptable changes drawn, the challenge being reacted to, and the flexibility being

of democracy and monarchy under his reign” (Kasian 2023: 117), in the form of “Democracy with the King as Head of State” as the national ideology that embodied such mixture (Connors and Ukrist 2021: 2–3).

employed by the conservative ideologues. This places the details of what a conservative says at front and centre of understanding their worldview, rather than making *a priori* assumption based on their socio-structural background or the linguistic assumption surrounding “conservatism.” Indeed, it is when they are inconsistent from or contradictory to other, past conservatism, as has been pointed out earlier, that further attention needs to be paid to how different concepts are arranged, what differences and similarities they have to others in the same ideological family, and how important their progressive adversary’s ideological claims is to their own conservative expression.

Connors (2021) and Dulyaphab (2023) employ the morphological approach to analyse Thai conservatives’ specific ideological characteristics. As mentioned earlier, Connors’s aim is to discover liberalism in Thailand, which he finds in some of the most prominent Thai conservative public intellectuals. Dulyaphab, on the other hand, focuses on more contemporary periods, delineating the nature of political polarisation in Thailand as well as the potential solution to it. Though the aim and focus of the two works differ from this article’s interest, they sufficiently show the utility of applying the morphological approach to studying Thai political ideologies. That is to say, they succeed in mapping out the dynamism and overlapping of concepts present in Thai political discourse – something this article aims to contribute to, by capturing the ideological formulation of a fairly recent and vocal expression of Thai conservatism.

To achieve that, this article examines two recent publications by prominent public intellectuals associated with the online Thai right-wing outlets. The first is Arnond Sakworawich’s 2022 book, “*Sathabankasat: Khwamjing Thi Thuk Bitbuan* [The monarchy: the truth that has been distorted],” a collection of articles Arnond has published for an online news outlet. Arnond is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Applied Statistics, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), and gained prominence when he debated one of the 2020 protest leaders on the issue of the monarchy’s property, live on national TV (Thai Post 2020c). The other is Thai Move Institute’s 2023 book, “*Ran Arirat Phai* [Battle, enemies of the King, defeated],” a collection of works by contributors to the so-called think tank.⁸ Thai Move Institute was founded in November 2019 by Sonthiyan Chuenruthainaitam, a media businessman also involved in right-wing outlets such as T-News and Top News, as well as one of the co-leaders of the People’s Democratic Reform Committee in 2013–2014 (Rat 2014). The two books were selected as they are fairly representative of the broader deluge of contents produced online by the Online Right, be it through news articles, essays, videos both long and short, or even memes. Nonetheless, these two sources will be supplemented by contents these actors have produced online where it is relevant.

It should be emphasised that the aim of this research is strictly limited to laying out and analysing the structure of the worldview these writings exhibit, and does not involve contesting the veracity of their claims. Indeed, for any serious observer of Thai politics or world events in general, much of the writings quoted in this article would appear either factually inaccurate or morally problematic – their lack of citation notwithstanding. For this article’s interest, such questionable worldview itself is the object of analysis, and challenging them is a project for a different time. The article also intentionally excludes these outlets’ audience reaction or responses from its analysis, as it may dilute the main focus of mapping out the Online Right’s conservatism. This is not to say the built-in interactivity of online communication is not a worthy object of analysis – on the contrary, it is a topic deserving a wholly separate study in the future.

The Royal Social Order

What anchors the Thai social order for the Online Right is certainly the existence of the monarchy. This conservative core is expressed both by deploying familiar concepts regarding the Thai monarchy, but also

⁸The book features the following authors. In order of their chapters: Sonthiyan Chuenruthainaitam, the founder of Thai Move Institute; Thepmontri Limpaphayom; Lieutenant General Nanthadet Meksawat; Pleo Singoen, a major columnist from the Thai Post newspaper, alias of Roj Ngamman; Wethin Chatkul; Thawon Senniam, former member of the Democrat Party who was involved in the PDRC movement; Arnond Sakworawich; Suwinai Pharanawalai, former faculty at the Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University; and Warong Dechgitvigrom, former member of the Democrat Party who played a major role during the PDRC movement, currently the leader of Thai Pakdee Party. Additional background of the authors will be introduced where relevant and necessary.

differs in significant ways, drawing from sources beyond the traditional Thai conservative logical and cultural repertoire.

In a manner familiar to most observers of Thai politics, the Online Right emphasises the importance of Thai society having a monarchy as its unifying force (see Thongchai 2016: 14–16), and argues for its continued existence in its current form. The book *Ran Arirat Phai* begins with Sonthiyan's 100-pages long chapter titled "The Chakri Dynasty Stands with Thailand," describing each of the 10 Kings' brief profile and their works. The history of successive monarchs, including those that predate the Chakri Dynasty, is positioned as the source of continuity of Thai society, that "the monarch has been with Thailand for more than 770 years, 4 capitals, 8 dynasties, and 53 Kings, under the soothing shadow of Buddhism" (Sonthiyan 2023a, 20). This continuity stems from on one hand, a pride in Thailand's long history, seemingly manifesting through the positive connotation they ascribe to words such as "long, everlasting" as well as their passing remarks that "the Americans is a young state, who is still foolish" (Wethin 2023: 354).

On the other hand, there is also always a reference to how the Thai people is close with/fond of (*phuk phan*) the King throughout history, which makes the King's status as the head of state "the form that is in accordance with Thai society" (Warong 2023: 445). This emphasis of the connection between the monarch and the people in Thai conservatism is, of course, well documented. The thinkers Nakharin Mektrairat calls the "Traditionalist School of Thought" – the legalistic and Western-educated nobilities – have legitimised the monarchy's status through precisely the Buddhist concept of *aneknikon samosonsommut*, that "Thai monarchs are put on the throne through the mutual consent of the political community" (Nakharin 2021: 66). This is where the oft-cited anecdote regarding the late King Rama IX fits in – Sonthiyan's chapter narrates the following:

His Majesty has written that [...] "I have never thought of being born into a King. I was only born to be a younger brother of my brother." [...] "On the street there were many people. At the Rachadamnoenklang Road, the people got very close to our car. I was very afraid that the car tire may get on someone's feet. [...] I heard someone's loud voice saying that... 'please don't abandon the people,' to which I wanted to respond... 'if the people has not abandoned me, how can I abandon you.' But the car has already gone far away..." (Sonthiyan 2023a: 80).

This narration effectively communicates the substance of the concept of *aneknikon samosonsommut*, albeit in a more humanistic manner, divorced from the religious and legalistic concepts underpinning it. This highly personalised mode of legitimation at times makes the issue appear less to be about the socio-political nature of Thai society, but simply about a personal, emotional connection, that "if the dear reader processes these feelings into your own heart, you should understand the extreme grief that a mother experienced for losing her child [in reference to Prince Mother Srinagarinda, King Rama VIII and IX's mother]" (Sonthiyan 2023b: 250).

Such portrayal of the royal family as a "normal" family – with a specific focus on King Rama IX as the "father of the nation" – would have been impossible a few generations prior (Kittisak 2022: 15–16). Kittisak notes that this "affective royalism" allows for the public to feel an emotional connection with the monarchy, making "sacredness easy to approach" (Kittisak 2022: 17) masked by its ostensibly secular appearance. By tracing the historical development of the discourse that the Thai King is a "father" of Thais, Kittisak points out how the language transformed from metaphorical to metonymical⁹, with the comparison becoming more direct since the 1990s (Kittisak 2022: 142). The way the royal family is discussed by the Online Right can be seen as the culmination of this long-term shift – referring to the King and the royal family as one's family member is no longer just something "unreluctantly" (Kittisak 2022: 57) done, but it is actively taken as part of the construction of the worldview itself. As the religious and

⁹Kittisak draws a distinction between the two modes of linguistic comparison and points out how the metaphorical language – both metaphors and similes that involve terms such as "like" or "as if" – gave way to metonymical language, or direct substitution of "King" with "father," such as the oft-repeated phrase "doing good for father (*tham di phua pho*)."⁹ Kittisak observes that such metonymical discourse "was disseminated across different types of media during the latter half of the 1990s" (Kittisak 2022: 191).

legalistic concepts seem to be pushed away from adjacent to peripheral positions, what remains is this direct, affective, secular imagination of the relationship between the King and His people.

This secular, personalised framing of the argument also affects how the King's works are discussed. The more religious functions and ceremonies are practically untouched, in favour of directly listing the historical significance of past Kings to the Thai nation building, and more recently the Royal Activities (*prarachakoraniyakit*) that has improved the quality of life of the Thai citizenry, emphasising the ingenuity and caring nature of the monarchs. The language surrounding this topic also break from the religious or spiritual undertone, and instead uses more materialistic descriptions, or “Western-sounding” management principles such as “Charismatic Leadership, Servant Leadership, and Transformational Leadership” (Arnond 2022: 25–30, English in original).

The scarcity of religious reference is striking, considering that one of the most recent conservative writings that sparked the People's Alliance of Democracy mass protests in 2006, “Royal Power” by Pramuan Rujanaseri, still emphasised the spiritual and religious underpinning of the monarchy in great details (Pramuan 2021, 174–177), not diverging from the mixture of the secular and sacral as described in Kittisak (2022). Yet, in the case of the Online Right, the oft-cited Buddhist concept of *thosaphitrachatham*, or the Ten Royal Virtues, was seen only twice in the course of this study, both appearing in the chapter¹⁰ by Thawon Senniam, a politician currently part of the United Thai Nation Party (Thawon 2023: 395, 402).¹¹ This omission is peculiar, considering that this concept, as well as other Buddhist principles, continues to be attached to the monarchy in Thai student textbooks and standardised tests even today (Phinyaphan 2023: 70–99). When religion is brought up by the Online Right, it is in the context of explaining the material patronage of the monarchy (Arnond 2022: 29, 48), or highlighting how Thai society has been, and continues to be, a pluralistic society for people of various beliefs (Sonthiyan 2023a, 20). For them, religion, or rather, a Buddhist cosmology of hierarchy (Streckfuss 2011: 152–153), seem to at best occupy a peripheral position in their articulation of the Thai social order.

This materialist and personalising inclinations are perhaps what leads to explicit framing of the monarch as “human with the same feeling as us” (Sonthiyan 2023b: 255–256) and not “a mysterious, faraway ‘deva (god),’ but just a ‘father’” (Thawon 2023: 396, the original text can be found in Borwornsak 2009: 14) all Thais feel closeness to. This explicit reduction of the relationship between the monarch and its subject to a metaphorical kinship tie may be a logical and literal conclusion of the Traditionalist School's “Father-rules-Child system (*rabop pho pokkhong luk*)” (Nakharin 2021: 66), but it may not be a particularly respectful one that those of nobility originally intended (Nidhi 2006).

Ultimately, these adjacent concepts do not substantially differ from well-identified features of Thai conservatism. Religious and spiritual concepts are deemphasised or ignored, the works of monarch are presented in a more materialistic language, and the kinship metaphors are taken to their logical conclusion. These choices do not seem entirely implausible when considering the socioeconomic background of these thinkers, as well as the discourse surrounding the late King Rama IX they have lived through. As more urban-based middle class, they are likely less attached to the traditional Thai nobility and its cultural outlook (Nidhi 2008), and are more economically precarious, making them seek a direct sense of protection the monarchy offers (Saichon 2021: 188–194). The hardworking model bourgeois King, who was ingenious in His work and frugal in His private life (Puangchon 2020: 133–140), but also enjoyed sophisticated leisure activities (Arnond 2022: 129–143; Sonthiyan 2023a: 83–86), resonated with and stuck in their worldview. This ideological arrangement, then, can be seen as a translation of existing Thai conservative thoughts into the context of a particular group of Thai citizens, an old wine in a new, or different, bottle.

Nevertheless, the Online Right articulates two distinct adjacent features. The first is, as mentioned in the introduction, the association of the monarchy with wealth. To be sure, this does not mean wealth is

¹⁰This chapter largely references verbatim, without citation, legal scholar Borwornsak Uwan's 2009 article “*Lèse-majesté*: A Distinctive Character of Thai Democracy amidst the Global Democratic Movement”. Of the chapter spanning 33 pages, only the text from pages 378 to 385, and from the final paragraph of page 401 to 404 were not part of Borwornsak (2009). Certain parts of the original were also omitted from Thawon's reproduction. Thawon claims this is “an article I, Thawon Senniam, have written for a presentation hosted at Faculty of Law, Thammasat University” (Thawon 2023: 404).

¹¹A politician who used to be a member of the Democrat Party, serving ministerial position in 2010s. He later quit the party to join the PDRC movement, reportedly organising the armed guards of at the protest sites (Nation Weekly 2014).

directly used as a justifying reason of monarchical rule. The argument by Arnond, who appears most invested in the topic of the palace's finance, is twofold: first, principally framed as a counterargument against reformist youths, the palace's budget does not come from "my tax (*phasi gu*)" but are personal funds of the monarchy, and second, such money is used for mundane bureaucratic needs or on projects for the people, not for personal enrichment (Arnond 2022: 147–169). Regardless of the factual accuracy of his claims or the political implications of his responses, through developing this string of thought, he narrates in great details the history of the palace's purse and its development and places figures of billions of Thai Baht alongside the Thai monarchy (Arnond 2022: 155–156, 164–171). The online media Lue History also created the aforementioned infographic describing how much tax King Rama X pays based on the holdings under His name in a number of large Thai corporations, with the total value of His tax supposedly numbering "3.357 billion Thai Baht" (Lue History 2022c). Such control over wealth is something preferable, as it enables the monarch to more effectively spend the money on needed projects, according to principles of "Organisational theories and design" (Arnond 2022: 194, English in original; also see Lue History 2023c). In these instances, criticisms of lack of democracy is "not in line with assets management according to ordinary financial and accounting principles" (Arnond 2023: 414–415).

What is remarkable about this treatment of the issue of wealth is how it contrasts with that of the previous King, the late Rama IX. During the previous reign, wealth was something to be dissociated from the monarch, as His image was that of a hardworking, frugal, benevolent King, cultivated through down-to-earth anecdotes such as the flat tooth paste, the worn-out shoe soles, the used-up pencil, and the dry fried rice (Puangchon 2020: 133–137). These supposedly folksy ethos personified the concept of "sufficiency economy (*setthakit phophiang*)" and how it ought to be practised on an individual level, constantly featured in textbooks and other educational materials (Phinyaphan 2023: 70–81). The response towards suggestion of extreme wealth of the monarch, often foreign or Western in source, was to label them as misinformation, or at best a misunderstanding, by those who falsely associate the assets under the Crown Property Bureau or certain governmental budgets with that of His Majesty's personal wealth (Thai Rath 2016).

Put another way, it appears that, in their reactionary, mirror-image deployment of these arguments to counter the contemporary reformist criticism, the Online Right may have unwittingly transformed the Thai monarch's relationship with wealth. No longer is it a peripheral issue that is merely a small part of the hard working, frugal King ethos, but it is an adjacent concept that reflects the monarch's sense of responsibility to society (through His immense tax payment) and His organisational foresight (through His clever investment for important efforts).

Another distinct feature is their consistent anti-Western attitude, expressed both directly or in passing. To be sure, a critical attitude towards the West, particularly in relation to the concept of "Thai-style democracy" (Thongchai 2016: 16), has a long, well-documented history in Thai conservatism. The sense of grievance towards the imperialistic, land-grabbing West, has also been reactivated among conservatives since the early 2000s, when the border dispute with Cambodia entered the centre of politics (Puangthong 2013: 106–120). In Thongchai's interviews of former right-wingers involved with the 6 October 1976 massacre, they "without exception, [...] all pointed to the United States and capitalism" as the most serious dangers to Thailand (Thongchai 2020: 207). It is also worth noting that this is not dissimilar from the articulation of the distinct "Asian values" that are in opposition to the liberal "Western values" (Jayasuriya 1998; Robison 1996), or the anti-globalisation, anti-free trade sentiments expressed around the turn of century, both of which Thai conservatism has at times incorporated into its ranks (Pye and Schaffar 2008: 40–50, 55). The anti-Western attitude of the Online Right certainly checks out against this backdrop.

Nevertheless, upon inspecting the historical narrative Sonthiyan weaves, it becomes apparent that the Online Right's anti-West perception has a distinct militaristic hue. The pre-Chakri Dynasty chronicle almost immediately begins by topics with headers such as "not having a nation, a land...is something painful and bitter," "losing our sovereignty," "the first time was losing the capital (*sia krung*) – the second was destroyed – not losing the capital" and so on (Sonthiyan 2023a: 26–42). This focus on conflict and threat spills over to his depiction of the Chakri monarchs, giving more focus to incidents of major conflicts. Common themes usually cited to describe the ingenuity of past Kings, but are not related to this theme of threat and conflict are overlooked: namely Rama III's ability in international trade, Rama IV's

scientific achievement, many of Rama V's domestic reforms, and Rama VI's literary works (Sonthiyan 2023a: 44–65). Reading this formulation of the Thai nation, one is less likely to see a peaceful, bountiful land with unique culture and achievements narrated in the traditional Sukhothai mythos (Kittisak 2022: 45–50), but a society under constant threat and invasions, barely surviving only because of the military and diplomatic ingenuity of past Kings.

This version of anti-West sentiment is not necessarily informed only by the nationalist dichotomy of “Thais against the West,” which, in Thailand, is almost synonymous to “conservatism against liberal-leftism,” as it deploys ideas from a more eclectic range of sources. The framing of the Cold War as “between the capitalist democratic world and the communist world” (Arnond 2022: 24), or Suwinai's discussion of his own communist, revolutionary past (Suwinai 2023: 435–442) as a failure but not necessarily a threat, suggest that the Online Right's relationship with left-leaning ideas is rather ambivalent. Indeed, Wethin cites Noam Chomsky, likely one of the most famous left-leaning academics in the world, to bolster the argument that the US's National Endowment of Democracy (NED)'s promotion of democracy is “actually only a rule by the rich and powerful” (Wethin 2023: 346). This affinity with left-leaning ideas and rhetoric, both domestic and international, also predates the Online Right as it was present since the early 2000s protests (Motoki 2023: 448–449). Nevertheless, as Thongchai points out, they are most certainly different from “leftist discourse [...] based on the vision of a desirable future” (Thongchai 2020: 207).

This is, however, not only because of the general conservative conclusion of the Online Right, seeking to preserve their conception of the suitable social order for Thailand. It is because the Online Right may directly be drawing from Western, right-wing conspiratorial concepts and world view that leads them to hold a broad anti-liberal West attitude, not only when it concerns Thailand. Wethin's writing cited a number of sources, many English-language, when developing his critique of the US interference in politics around the world. One specific instance was his reference to “the exposure by the media called UK Column” regarding the Syrian White Helmets, a humanitarian aid group, actually being an armed mercenary aiming to topple the Assad regime (Wethin 2023: 345). UK Column is rated by Media Bias/Fact Check as “a strong right-wing biased conspiracy website that frequently promotes false or misleading information,” such as the conspiracy theories of New World Order (also abbreviated to NWO), World War 3, and COVID-19 denialism (“UK Column – Bias and Credibility”). Wethin's chapter also speculated on a possibility of a major war between the US and China in which Thailand would be dragged into (Wethin 2023: 363–367), possibly hinting at a coming World War 3 because of the West.

Elsewhere, Lieutenant General Nanthadet, an author of another chapter, referred to the term New World Order in English, that “at the time, there was no push for every country to have a democratic system (New World Order) by the Western countries, unlike the present” (Nanthadet 2023: 172). On Thai Move Institute's website, articles labelled “News” also feature this term, with headlines such as “Putin orders an escalation of war against the NWO” (Wangchagorn 2022b) or “deep dive into ‘Macron,’ a lame leader? His abuse of lower-class citizens exposed – following America's butt! Promoting the New World Order [translated into Thai as *rabiap lok mai*] at APEC in Thailand” (Melon 2022b) to name a few examples.

The New World Order conspiracy theory has anti-Semitic roots and connotations, as the idea of a secret cabal of global elites orchestrating world events through the power of finance would easily match with the Jewish stereotype particularly in the US (Flores 2022). Considering this, the Online Right's fixation with NED and its major billionaire funder George Soros gains new implications. The Thai conservative, or middle-class writ large, disdain for Soros is unsurprising considering the impact of the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Saichon 2021: 204–205). At the same time, the right in the US also targets Soros in their conspiracy theory, viewing him as a liberal, Democratic Party-aligned benefactor seeking to destroy America from the inside (for instance, Harb 2023; Koenig 2023). The Thai Online Right's view seem to merge both strands of anti-Soros thinking, highlighting how his funding is leading to foreign influence meddling in Thai politics, but also how Soros has “advised Hillary [Clinton] to intervene in Albania” and “provided support to the leaders of the Black Lives Matter” (Wethin 2023: 344), or how “the Republicans condemn Democrats buying out 18 Hispanic radio stations with Soros's help [...] to brainwash Hispanics” (Wangchagorn 2022a).

This may have led to a broader anti-Semitic view beyond Soros himself, as some articles in their website directly draws connection that “the CIA was established by the funding of the Zionist Jewish capitalists since the beginning, and [...] was established to take care of the New World Order policy”

(Melon 2022a), or Sonthiyan, for no significant reason, off-handedly refers to “the Jews [...] had to establish an underground organisation called the ‘Zionists’ to establish their country” (Sonthiyan 2023a: 26).

While it is impossible, and is not necessarily relevant, to gauge the actual extent of their anti-Semitism, this affinity with Western conspiracy theory related to world politics helps explain some of the puzzling position they express regarding world politics: their vehement support for Russia against Ukraine, and the rather supportive coverage of Hamas against Israel. Logically, they can be seen as comrades-in-arms resisting the global takeover by “the West” that is also threatening the Thai social order. In a more immediate sense, these are contemporary conflicts that have seen increased coverage by the Western right in the recent years – in other words, the Online Right may be culturally more adjacent to these non-Thai right-wing concepts than they are to concepts propagated by past Thai conservatives, simply because these right-wing conspiracy theories are more accessible to them via the internet.

Such narrative of a Western imperial threat, from the past to present, at times borrowing from ostensibly Western conspiratorial thinking, seem to be articulating a sense of fear. Sopranzetti (2024) has noted that the shift in governing style under King Rama X appears to emphasise fear, in contrast to His predecessor’s affective governance based on love (Sopranzetti 2024: 206–208). While Sopranzetti’s analysis points to the present reign focusing more on “inward fear,” wielded against elite networks and critics or dissidents (Sopranzetti 2024: 220), the sense of fear the Online Right articulates is still decidedly “outward,” though its object may not be a straightforward, monolithic West. It may be too soon to discount the importance of an outward fear within conservative thought, though to whom exactly that fear is directed to may need more careful delineation.

Importantly, this flexible deployment of ideas that go beyond the classic Thai conservatism’s characteristics does not make them less conservative *per se* – indeed, for every left-leaning idea and rhetoric they deploy, the Online Right also pushes far more things that are arguably even more right-wing than the traditional Thai conservatives. What this means is that they are a different kind of conservatives, legitimising their conception of an everlasting Thai social order through some of the classic religious and legalistic arguments, but also highly contemporaneous, internet-era Western right-wing arguments.

The Acceptable Characteristics, or Bearers, of Change

Although conservatism being accepting of or praising change may appear internally contradictory, research of conservatism’s actual intellectual practises has shown that they are simply particular about changes, as pointed out in the earlier section. Likewise, the Thai Online Right also do not shy away from positively discussing changes – especially when they happen under the purview of the monarchy. The institutional reforms of the palace, related both to finances and personnels, is one of the major focuses of Arnond’s book, spanning more than a hundred pages (Arnond 2022: 144–263). The notion that kings of the Chakri Dynasty were already preparing to promulgate a Constitution is also noted, with an emphasis that figures from the People’s Party said “had we knew this, we would not have instigated a revolution” (Nanthadet 2023: 149). Arnond also approaches the issue of *lèse-majesté* law by tracing the historical changes surrounding it, arguing that “Thailand has not had an actual *lèse-majesté* law” since the absolute monarchy era (Arnond 2022: 271–281).¹² This leads into the argument that the current Thai *lèse-majesté* law is, unlike what the progressives claim, in line with Western democratic standard and conception of protection of private individuals and state institutions (Thawon 2023: 376–379¹³). Thawon takes a step further, admitting that King Rama IX has stated that “He is

¹²The premise of this argument is that Arnond defines *lèse-majesté* law, based on both the Latin meaning and Western European history, as a law that protects the monarch and state functions, having both a broad application and severe punishment. Based on that, Arnond claims that historical evidences suggest Thailand had an all-encompassing *lèse-majesté* law from the reign of Rama I, but had been changed into a law against only “the crime against the highest representative of the state” (English in original) during Rama V’s reign (Arnond 2022: 267–281).

¹³While this portion of Thawon’s chapter is drawn from the original article, what is omitted bears highlighting. In the original, Borwornsak delineates the differences within democracies (presidential and parliamentary) and monarchies (those that the monarch only reigns but not rules and those that do both) to generalise how heads of state across political systems are treated differently from ordinary citizens (Borwornsak 2009: 3–4). Presumably this would have made Thawon’s argument stronger, which makes the omission rather puzzling.

troubled¹⁴ by the misapplication of the law, and discussion of ideas to change the law is normal and acceptable (Thawon 2023: 401–403).

They fall short of articulating their kind of change, however. Thawon's trail of thought ultimately concludes by emphasising that "those who propose or call for changes must tell the truth to the people as to how the law currently exists" (Thawon 2023: 378, 403), implying that many Thai legal scholars and activists are lying, hiding "the truth" his writing brings to light. Ironically, these accusations and aggrievement are the "original" part of Thawon's otherwise borrowed chapter. Importantly, Borwornsak's original article in fact stated what the change should be, recommending that Thailand should "adapt the Nordic legal method" so that only the Attorney General could bring *lèse-majesté* charges, to "prevent the rampant accusations we see today" (Borwornsak 2009: 19) – a clearly articulated solution to the identified problem, which is somehow untouched by Thawon. The Online Right's consistent fixation with their opponent's character, rather than their ideas, highlights how conservatives can often be less concerned with what the change itself is, and be more concerned with who the instigators are.

Here, Corey Robin's observation of conservatism becomes instructive. Conservatism is a "theoretical rendition of – the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back," most concerned with "not a threat to freedom but its extension" (Robin 2011: 4–8). Criticising the bearers of change is built-in to conservative ideas – a logically necessary step to specify who the threat is, and how they are illegitimate. This also allows conservatism to articulate how the natural order of change should look like, without proposing what the change may be, beyond gesturing to "Thai morals, Thai cultures, and Buddhism, which are unique characteristics of Thai society" (Thawon 2023: 398). It is also ironic that, as Freeman points out regarding the supposed "Asian values," the defence of the unique "Thai" values against the universalising liberal "Western" values is, at its core, not different from conservatism in the West resisting and reacting to social changes (Freeman 1996: 355–356). What is distinct, then, is the characters defined as bearers of change, as conservatives in different countries evidently face different challengers.

For the Thai Online Right, three bearers of change are the main target: the People's Party, instigators of the 1932 Siamese revolution; former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, as well as the movement and associates surrounding him; the reformists of 2020s, both the Future Forward/Move Forward parties and the youth-led movement. Their de-legitimation of these bearers follows a number of common themes.

First is the suggestion that these are lying, corrupt actors who should not be trusted. The original instigators of change, the People's Party, were ill-informed, deceitful, and self-serving, power-hungry politicians. The claim is that the People's Party used the monarchy to bolster their legitimacy, simultaneously employing increasingly authoritarian tactics to stay in power (Nanthadet 2023: 146–149, 173–180). Both Nanthadet and Thepmontri highlights a picture of leaflet by the People's Party declaring "currently, the People's Party is holding the royal family hostage. If any would stand in the way of the People's Party, they shall be punished and the royal family will also be hurt," and claim that they quite literally held the Chakri Dynasty hostage to take power (Nanthadet 2023: 168–170; Thepmontri 2023: 129, 132–133). This story of the last century is then connected to the present, with Thaksin's so-called "Thaksin regime (*rabop Thaksin*)" similarly maintaining the appearance of respecting the monarchy while attempting to usurp power by authoritarian and capitalistic means (Sonthiyan 2023b: 270–314), and history and political science academics pushing a false narrative that prioritises their feelings to trick some people who do not know better (Thepmontri 2023: 139–140).

Furthermore, the Online Right portrays these bearers as a nebulous network of schemers, plotting and coordinating their nefarious action against the Thai social order. This critique of their political opponents takes up arguably the majority of their writing, considering that nearly half of the chapters in Thai Move Institute's book, as well as many chapters in Arnond's book, are positioned as some incriminating exposé, and chapters seemingly discussing legal or historical matters almost always contains a reference to and denouncement of such schemes either explicitly or in passing. Even articles discussing contemporary legal cases of the reformist youth protesters contains a preamble emphasising that "nowadays there are dissemination of false information as well as distortion by the media" (Lue History 2021). Though

¹⁴Borwornsak's original writing extensively quotes the King's address (Borwornsak 2009: 17–18), while Thawon's chapter only refers to it.

they do not have a sophisticated “databases and interactive maps” unlike Western populist right-wing politicians, their active cataloguing and highlighting of the reformists’ posts and tweets, both from public figures and ordinary accounts alike, functions to “demonstrate that the threats are omnipresent [with] systematic evidence [justifying] the fear” (Krämer 2017: 1300) of such untruthful bearers of change.

These claims are full of signs of conspiracy theories – they are complicated, in that they involve multiple actors and incidents, to which ample esoteric evidences are cited, but they are never complex, as they reduce social processes to the ill-intent of specific actors (Butter 2020: 34–38). The articles by Thai Move Institute and Pleo Singoen are most emblematic, as they refer to very specific incidents, such as Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, co-founder of Future Forward Party, funding the founding of Fa Diew Kan, a highly progressive Thai publication (Thai Move Institute 2023a: 315), or specific quotes by Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, another co-founder of Future Forward Party, showing how he is “ordering his followers” (Pleo 2023: 330) and the like. This almost systematic narration of posts and tweets – anecdotal evidences available online (Krämer 2017: 1299) – draws attention to the supposedly secretive, yet somehow also “in plain sight” dangerous behavior of a nefarious political network. The West is also a constant backdrop of these networks – People’s Party figure such as Field Marshal Phibun was “educated in Europe, therefore he had a European style democratic thinking” (Sonthiyan 2023b: 260), Thaksin was making his most anti-royalist statements through Western media interview (Sonthiyan 2023b: 281–291), and the US has been funding the reform movement as part of their imperialist agenda (Lue History 2023d; Wethin 2023: 339–363).

This conspiratorial analysis of their opponent leads to a confusing framing in terms of the extent of power such network holds. On one hand, they are weak and uninfluential – their Western theory-based blueprint for change was resoundingly rejected by the Thai people who revered the King, and His Majesty Rama VII accepted the usurpation of power, despite actually being able to win a civil war, because He “did not wish to see fellow Thais killing each other” (Sonthiyan 2023b: 234–235). On the other hand, this network is apparently highly influential. It could “make the King the victim” and the young King Rama VIII afraid that “Phraya Pahon¹⁵ will scold me” (Sonthiyan 2023b: 248). Presently, it can “portray history [...] praising the People’s Party as a revolutionary party with bravery who fought with their lives for democracy” (Thepmontri 2023: 133), leading to “the people not knowing the details, possibly because there are only positive portrayals regarding the People’s Party [...] as if to prevent the people today from knowing the shortcomings of the People’s Party” (Nanthadet 2023: 147), as “there are people who believe in the propaganda [...] and controls most of ‘the media’ in the country” (Nanthadet 2023: 208).

Combined with the Online Right’s conception of the role of academics¹⁶, this framing is not dissimilar from the attack against (liberal) colleges by the American right (Tanenhaus 2023), which has a firm root in the broader intellectual tradition of American conservatism (Nash 2017 [1976]: 305–316). The disconnect emerges because the progressive historians, political scientists, or legal scholars the Thai Online Right view as nefarious are not as prevalent, and certainly not as public, in Thai academia, unlike the stronger liberal inclination in the American counterpart. Nevertheless, the popular, online imagery of “young left-wing protesters” leading the charge for reform both in the West and in Thailand may have prompted the Thai Online Right to find the American right’s assessment of “insiders, manipulating from positions of political power [...] forcing the arms of institutional leaders who were bending to their will for fear of retribution” (Spencer 2022) to also be applicable to the Thai case.

This fixation with a series of tangible enemy – arguably receiving more elaboration than their conceptual defence of the Thai social order detailed earlier – helps explain the final feature, the intense antagonism the Online Right displays. Arnond’s chapter regarding the standard of applying the royal defamation charge is illustrative here. He argues that the law’s standard must be easier to apply than ordinary defamation charges, must protect past kings and the royal family, and, ignoring basic legal

¹⁵The short name of Phraya Phahonphonphayahasena, a military leader of the People’s Party and the second Prime Minister of Siam.

¹⁶The bulk of the anti-academic content comes from Lue History, a website and Facebook page known for its “debunk” of academics critical of the monarchy and Thai nation, such as Thongchai Winichakul and Nattapon Jaijing. Their content ranges from responses to academic arguments (Lue History 2022b; Lue History 2023b), opposition to certain activism by academics (Lue History 2023a), and critique of progressive abstract principles (Lue History 2022a), always accompanied by colourful language such as “biases,” “distortion,” “lies,” “corruption,” or “criminal.”

principles, must treat an academic critique that damages the security of the state as automatically having an intent to do so (Arnond 2022: 290). Seen in tandem with the highly personalised attachment the Online Right has to the monarchy, it may indeed be an almost literal sense of “someone insulting your father” (Thawon 2023: 397) that fuels their antagonism, and leads Arnond to insist that the law protects not the institution, but the King Himself (Arnond 2022: 288–289). The respect they may have for establishment conservatives may not override this personalised disdain for the enemy – be it Thaksin or “fringe, back-alley ideology from college campuses” – and does not prevent their disappointment when the establishment does not do enough to combat the enemy (Thai Post 2023).

Conclusion: New Wine in an Old Bottle?

The findings of this article show that the Thai Online Right’s ideological expression combines existing Thai conservative arguments with more eclectic elements, some “Western” in their origin, some entirely reactionary to the immediate challenge they face. In doing so, they have without a doubt articulated a fundamentally conservative worldview: that the extra-human social order of Thailand, centred around the monarchy, is most preferable, and those who propose unnatural, sudden changes to such arrangement are not to be trusted.

However, in substantiating these ideological cores, they have broken from more traditional conservative legitimisation, and have favoured more materialistic and personal arguments over religious and legalistic ones, as well as drawing on Western right-wing conspiratorial view of global politics to bolster their anti-West sentiment. This highly personalised framing of the argument also informs their reaction against the bearers of change, rather than change itself, leading to intense antagonism from the Online Right, despite the seemingly compromising stance of the conservative establishment at the moment. In more conceptual terms, the adjacent concepts they deploy, both for logical or cultural reasons, are significantly different from the ideal-type of Thai conservatism as currently understood. The Thai Online Right is certainly conservative – the wine – but they may be a different, new sort of wine, attempting to place themselves in the old bottle of Thai conservatism.

The utility of the morphological analysis of ideology shown here is twofold. First, to Thai studies, the core-adjacent-periphery line of analysis allows for a framework that is able to account for the eclectic range of ideas Thai conservatives have utilised, without losing sight of what makes conservatism, conservatism. Second, to broader comparative analysis of ideologies, this research shows how concepts and arguments can “travel” across perceived cultural divides, and that at times, a family resemblance of a given ideology may be found outside of its cultural context. This ought to encourage comparative analysis of ideologies from different backgrounds.

It bears repeating that the Thai Online Right is, at least at the present moment, not particularly influential in the realm of real politics in Thailand. Even though this article is not independently verifying such observation, it may be the case that the “non-Thai,” esoteric right-wing expressions are what keeps them at the fringe, as they are not easily accessible to the average Thai conservative audience. Nevertheless, considering the broader rise of right-wing politics and legitimisation around the globe, in which this strand of Thai conservatism seems to share a degree of resemblance with, it is best to be aware and keep track of how their ideological expression, and adoption, develops.

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