

**The Construction of a People in Pluralistic Thailand:  
Its Promises and Challenges**

by  
Dulyaphab Chaturongkul

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## Abstract

The youth-inspired protests of 2020 have rocked Thailand to its very political and social core. However, aside from disrupting prevailing narratives about the country's society and politics—most remarkably its citizens' sense of national identity—another salient and important attribute of what can be dubbed as the Ratsadon Movement is its constitutive capacities and ability to rally not just the newer generations of Thais but also broad sections of the population. This research draws attention to how the movement's organicity and inclusivity conditioned and shaped the construction of a 'people' in the democratic sense of the term, and how this involved pitting ostensibly democratic conceptions of people against the conception of people as prescribed by orthodoxy. More specifically, it investigates how the movement led to the proliferation and articulation of different and potentially conflicting interpretations of people qua *demos*. This is connected to the idea of restoring democratic agency to a largely neglected and disempowered citizenry. But given the movement's nebulous character, coupled with the contested nature of both the concept of *demos* and the concept of people on which the former invariably rests, dissenting citizens were also bound to disagree among themselves. The argument of this research is thus two-pronged. First, it argues that the Ratsadon Movement is democratically promising, because it appears to widen the circle of participation to incorporate as many groups of dissenting citizens as possible in the construction of a people. Second, it demonstrates how left to its own devices the movement is also vulnerable to contestations from within. This is due to the persistence of differences along moral and epistemic fault lines. While contestation is not necessarily cancerous, it becomes so if or once it escalates into domination. The organic democratic pluralism of the movement thus paradoxically contains both the celebration of difference and the seeds of its own destruction. The research concludes by reflecting on how moral and epistemological stand-offs between competing democratic conceptions of people can be systematically tackled through the incorporation of cutting-edge insights from recent democratic theory.

**Keywords:** Protests, Pluralism, People, Democracy, Disagreement, Thailand

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Origins and Framing of Research Question

Youth-inspired, pro-democracy protests have taken Thailand by storm in the second half of 2020 and continue to undergo various phases of development, taking on many different monikers along the way—be it Free People, Ratsadon, Restart Thailand, Restart Democracy, Thalu Fah, Thalu Gas, and so on. Despite their decreasing frequency and magnitude at the time of this research, these protests already marked a new dawn in Thai politics.

Academic commentators variously emphasize how the 2020 protests sought to upend prevailing narratives about the country's society, culture and politics—most remarkably the role of the monarchy in the aforementioned spheres.<sup>1</sup> This is epitomized in the trending question, ‘Why do we have a monarchy?’ (มีกษัตริย์ไว้ทำไม?). How did it come to this?

The specific context from which these protests arose is ‘the military coup of May 2014, the subsequent suppression of political activity by the ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), and the flawed election of March 24, 2019, which conservative forces “won” by manipulating the voting system and suppressing opposition parties’.<sup>2</sup> The dissolution of the newfound, progressive Future Forward Party (FFP), which appealed to the younger generations of voters and managed to gain the third highest number of seats in parliament, in what many considered to be a highly arbitrary constitutional hearing proved to be the final straw. The subsequent reversion to rally politics is not something new or idiosyncratic, writes Duncan McCargo. He explains that ‘Since the 1970s, Thai politics has oscillated between two modes: party mode and rally mode’.<sup>3</sup> For McCargo,

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, ‘The white ribbon movement: High school students in the 2020 Thai youth protests’, *Critical Asian Studies* 53 (2021), pp. 206–218; D. McCargo, ““Disruptors” dilemma? Thailand’s 2020 Gen Z protests’, *Critical Asian Studies* 53 (2021), pp. 175–191; A. Sinpeng, ‘Hashtag activism: social media and the #FreeYouth protests in Thailand’, *Critical Asian Studies* 53 (2021), pp. 192–205.

<sup>2</sup> McCargo, *ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

what is striking about the latest recourse to rally politics is its remarkable ‘organicity’ or ‘purity’—that is, disentanglement from the machinations and politicking of mainstream political actors as found in standard party politics or any political strongmen within or without parliament for that matter. Indeed, grievances against the status quo and the powers that be ranged from material and economic concerns—be it poor economic performance or the more sinister charge of nurturing a ‘hierarchical capitalism’<sup>4</sup>—to more culture-based ones—be it issues with the proper signification of Thai-ness or dominant perceptions of gender.

That said, despite the youth’s role in spearheading and mobilizing nation-wide protests, different groups of people with significant age gaps were equally invested and involved in the movement. These people were even able to formulate and insert their own ideas about politics and democracy. As Saowanee Alexander was quick to underscore, cadres of activist citizens who previously formed the rank and file of the once nation-sweeping Red-Shirt movement entered the fray as they saw the latest wave of protestations as a continuation of *their own* unfinished business several years ago—before today’s youth gained a political consciousness of their own.<sup>5</sup>

This research draws attention to the construction of a ‘people’ that was immanent to the aforementioned grievances and concerns. This is connected to the idea of restoring democratic agency to a largely neglected and disempowered populace. However, given the multiplicity of protests groups and mix of voices to be heard, this raises important questions as to

- (a) *whether* the notion of people is contested or not.
- (b) If so, *how* contested is it, and
- (c) *should* this be viewed in favorable terms or not. To be more precise, under what circumstances, if any, are the vagaries of people conducive towards or at least compatible with the ideals of democratic inclusivity, diversity and unity?

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<sup>4</sup> Prajak Kongkirati, and Veerayooth Kanchoochat, ‘The Prayuth Regime: Embedded military and hierarchical capitalism in Thailand’, *Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6 (2018), pp. 279–305.

<sup>5</sup> Saowanee Alexander, ‘Sticky rice in the blood: Isan people’s involvement in Thailand’s 2020 anti-government protests’, *Critical Asian Studies* 53 (2021), pp. 219–232.

So far, scholarly work on what this research shall dub as the ‘Thai Spring’ typically fall into at least one of the two categories: Works focussing on

- (a) the *modus operandi* of the protests, which delineate its mechanics and organics, and
- (b) the *disruptive capacity* of the protests vis-à-vis such and such predominant narrative.

Surprisingly little has been said about the *constitutive* or *constructive capacity* of the protests when it comes to the articulation of heterodox, democratic understandings of peoplehood. At stake is a plurality of voices and identities each wanting to find concrete expression and consolidate itself over the course of the protests. Being canvassed, so to speak, is a ‘spring’ of sorts, where disempowered citizens, hailing from diverse social and ideological backgrounds, yearn to rewrite the futures that a few ‘others’ arbitrarily wrote for them and assert their claim as stakeholders in a country that continues to be helmed by those empowered few. People who lived such different lives are now coming together not only to fight what they separately perceive as unjust, but also articulate what they autonomously construe as the proper signification of the people or *demos*.

On a more conceptual level, being interrogated is the dynamic between a single united People *P*, wherein political authority properly resides, and a pluralism of particular groups of people *p*, which attempt to define the terms of the former. The research considers the possibilities and limitations, hopes and dangers, that such dynamic contains. In particular, despite each group being able to freely communicate their own conceptions of people in public-political spheres, opting to define *P* in terms of a one *p*’s preferred democratic conception may lead to domination over other competing *p*. The empirically ascertainable tensions that exist between various units of *p*, not to mention the underlying *modus operandi* of the protests, are some of the things to be conjunctively explored when conducting our investigation. Ultimately, what conceptual resources or lack thereof surrounding the notion(s) of people (*P/p*) does the Thai Spring elicit?

Indeed, the main democratic challenge of the Thai Spring, one might put it, is linked to the common present-day understanding that

For us, democracy is both a form of government and a political value [that presupposes specific conceptions of people]. We quarrel fiercely, if confusedly, over how far the value vindicates or indicts our own practices of government; but we also quarrel over how far the same value is practically coherent, or desirable in its prospective consequences in different circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

That is to say, circumscribed within the broader struggle *for* democracy lies a number of more specific, but no less trivial, struggles *over* (the proper signification of) democracy—such as disagreements about who ought to be included as part of *demos* or people proper and so on.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is to

- (1) better grasp and provide a critical appraisal of the democratic significance of the Thai Spring, especially with regards to the conceptions of people or *demos* being invoked by different protests groups and
- (2) determine how crucial it is for popular movements to come to grips with the persistence of pluralism and disagreement in politics lest the struggle for democracy be sabotaged by rampant internal struggles.

## 1.3 Scope of Research

To set the tone for our inquiry, this research concentrates on the phase of the protests that managed to widen the circle of political engagement in ways that can involve as many groupings of participants as possible *without* sacrificing much of what McCargo calls ‘the power of narrative disruption’.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, this research is not trying to understate the salience of other notable features nor diminish the importance of other phases of the protests.

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<sup>6</sup> J. Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. xx-xxi.

<sup>7</sup> McCargo, “Disruptors” dilemma?, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 176.



The idea is to pinpoint the ‘high point’ of pluralism and probe for any weaknesses that might or already have hazard the construction of a people.

A premise of this research is that such ‘high point’ corresponds to the intermediate stages of the protests (i.e. from early October 2020 to early December 2020), during which a wide range of independent protest groups from all over the country decidedly coalesced under the banner of ‘Ratsadon’ (ราษฎร)—a label which literally translates to ‘People’ or ‘The People’. The Ratsadon Movement (RM), as this particular phase of the protests shall be dubbed, consists of at least three overarching objectives:

- (a) depose a government deemed unfit,
- (b) amend a tendentious political constitution ordinary citizens had little to no part in its drafting and
- (c) reform an erstwhile unquestionable monarchy which has unceremoniously superimposed itself over said constitution.<sup>8</sup>

Note that although the name Ratsadon continues to be used by various protest groups to this day, it is no longer accompanied by *mass* protestations for reasons which will be discussed in due course.

#### 1.4 Contribution and Argument of Research

It seems worthwhile to broach the promises and challenges of Thailand’s emerging pluralist political landscape for at least three reasons.

- (1) This should contribute to the growing body of literature on Thailand’s youth-inspired protests in ways that accentuate how the articulation of the concept of people by an internally differentiated *demos*—no matter how implicit or unsophisticated the various specifications of people may be—not *merely* ‘the power of narrative disruption’, accounts for the democratic potential of the protests.
- (2) This should lead to a heightened understanding of *democratic pluralism* in Thailand, which by far remains marginally or tangentially discussed in

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<sup>8</sup> See Anon., ‘คณะราษฎร: ประกาศ 3 ข้อเรียกร้องก่อนชุมนุมใหญ่ 14 ตุลา ประยุทธ์ลาออก-เปิดสภาแก้ รธน.-ปฏิรูปสถาบันกษัตริย์’, *BBC News Thai* (8 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-54461248>.

academic circles despite how overtly pluralist the 2020 pro-democracy protests were. A possible explanation is that commentators typically fail to move beyond political ‘analyses that remain confined to justifying polarization’.<sup>9</sup> This shows just how *deep* polarization is and how successful it has been in converting ideologically diverse individuals and groups into narrowly defined, mutually exclusive political groupings, with pluralism thereby ‘cashed out as somewhere between irrelevant and obnoxious’ to mainstream politics.<sup>10</sup> To clarify, being suggested is not that Thai society has only recently been pluralist nor that social movements in Thailand were always initiated and represented by homogenous bodies of activist citizens, as evidenced in both the Yellow-Shirt and Red-Shirt movements. It is one thing for pluralism to be tolerated insofar as differentiated citizens do not actually attempt to gain full and equal access to the real sources of political power, and quite another for pluralism to no longer be curbed in the setting of political agendas, be it via social movements or within institutionalized party politics. The latter pluralism is democratic, whereas the former is not. Even now pitted against the Thai Spring, as it were, is an alignment of anti-pluralist and undemocratic establishment supporters. But unlike before, this is a far cry from attributing recent political developments to yet another reprisal or continuation of deep polarization. At any rate, it would be uncouth to dismiss the lingering presence of Yellow- and Red-Shirt sentiments *within* the RM itself—since many RM participants were veterans of the deeply polarizing Yellow-Red conflict—nor rule out entirely the possibility of new forms of polarization involving new and/or evolving actors and ideologies.

- (3) This should ascertain how the existential threat to democratic-pluralist politics, notwithstanding its hopes and promises, may be posed internally, not *merely* externally, and embodies a moral-epistemological problem. Appropriating insights from democratic theory, therefore, proves especially pertinent as a way of bolstering the defense mechanism of Thai pluralism (or pluralism anywhere for that matter) against internal challenges.

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<sup>9</sup> Dulyaphab Chaturongkul, ‘Thailand’s ideological struggle: Depolarizing Thailand’s polarized politics’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* (forthcoming), doi: 10.1080/13569317.2021.1873470.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

## 1.5 Execution and Structure of Argument

This research will first provide a preliminary overview of the RM, consisting of some background analysis (Chapter 2.1) and a review of the academic literature on the protests (Chapter 2.2). This is followed by a theoretical discussion on the concept of people and its contested nature (Chapter 3), which will help frame the empirical discussions to come. After that, this research makes the case for why the pluralism of RM paradoxically contains both the proliferation of difference (Chapter 4) and the seeds of its own undoing (Chapter 5).

To drive home our point, it proceeds by showing that the RM looks promising, because it appears to widen the circle of engagement in ways that can involve as many groups of people as possible (Chapter 4.1). This is in part due to the movement's ability to counter orthodox conceptions of people—i.e. conceptions that are inextricably linked to prevailing top-down narratives about Thai-ness—with heterodox, democratic conceptions of people (Chapter 4.2). Next, this research explains how left to its own devices the RM is also prone to rampant contestations from within. While contestation is not ipso facto a bad thing, it becomes malignant if or once it culminates in domination. More specifically, the research considers how three deep-seated and potentially combustible internal divisions exemplify the problem of pluralism best construed along moral and epistemic fault lines. The fault lines are as follows:

- (a) the rift among participants with differing views towards feminism and its role in democracy-building (Chapter 5.1),
- (b) the rift among participants with differing views towards monarchical reform (Chapter 5.2) and
- (c) the rift between socialist and non-socialist democratizers (Chapter 5.3).

In the final chapter (Chapter 6), the research concludes with a précis of its findings (Chapter 6.1) and offers some reflections on how moral and epistemological stand-offs between competing groups of people  $p$  can be systematically addressed by appealing to recent innovations in democratic theory (Chapter 6.2). The impending task is one of postulating a strong, publicly shareable commitment to non-domination among different and

potentially conflicting specifications of *demos*. This points to how a pluralist conception of democratic citizenship must be built around the mutually constitutive gap between People *P* and people *p*. Attempting to close this gap would be a pathway to domination.

## 1.6 Research Methodology

The empirical component of this research draws on a mix of primary and secondary sources. Due to the Thai Spring being a relatively recent phenomenon, the quantity of secondary sources remains scarce. There has only been a handful of journal articles, with research reports, not to mention books, being scant, if not entirely lacking. To substantiate this research's argumentative claims, it is therefore imperative to also rely on primary sources—ranging from Twitter and Facebook, where a lot of pertinent discussions and debates took place, to interviews and op-eds by various news agencies that were covering the protests. In fact, a major advantage of sourcing information regarding the protestors' views on such and such matter directly from Twitter and Facebook is that, unlike well-calibrated interviews, this is a surer way of expecting candid as opposed to filtered opinions. This is not to say that planned responses in interviews do not have their strong points, as certain ideas tend to be better articulated through deep and careful reasoning. Rather, it is difficult to establish which is more superior all-things-considered. Hence, this research will try to incorporate and strike a tentative balance between both methods.

As far as the theoretical and analytical framework of this research is concerned, being adopted is a 'conceptual approach' to navigating the promises and challenges of pluralistic Thailand. Such mode of qualitative political inquiry, as developed by Michael Freeden, treats concepts, ideas and ideologies as the main units of political analysis.<sup>11</sup> The reason for this is that at the center of both empirical and theoretical discussions lies the notion of people being alluded to and contested by various protest groups during the course of the RM. There are a couple of things worth bearing in mind here.

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<sup>11</sup> M. Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Listening to Edmund S. Morgan's acute observation that in the Anglo-American world at least 'the fictional qualities of popular sovereignty sustain rather than threaten the human values associated with it', perhaps the notions of people in the context of Thai politics may be mere 'fictions rather than self-evident truths'.<sup>12</sup> Morgan is referring to David Hume's inter-contextualist supposition that even the freest and most popular governments must be founded on and sustained by *opinions*.<sup>13</sup> And what are 'opinions'? The answer quite straightforwardly is the products of make-believe. It is thus besides the point whether the idea of people conforms to a self-evident truth or not. What matters politically is that the people believe themselves (qua the people) and the values they uphold to be real. Apprehending the very meaning and authenticity of peoplehood via the 'concept of people', therefore, proves apt in light of the view that concepts are neither facts nor fictions per se. Rather, concepts are *mediums* through which human beings *make sense of and order* the world around them. This world may be nothing more than a political world of make-believe. Or, conversely, it may constitute the 'real world', whatever that turns out to be. It does not quite matter. In the final analysis, what unites facts and fictions are concepts. The choice between fact or fiction turns on the outcome of metaphysical debates which are not only notoriously difficult if not virtually impossible to settle, but also, fortunately for us, beyond the scope of this research.

The conceptual approach under consideration is also indifferent to the centuries-old debate over whether the concepts being deployed in world-processing are always relative and hence 'particular' to the world-processor as exemplified in the idea of *weltansichten* or transcendental and hence 'universal' for each and every world-processor as exemplified in the idea of *weltbegriff*.<sup>14</sup> It is consistent with both, because 'concepts' are taken in its broadest and most generic sense as *mediums* between human subjects and their objects of mental processing. By the same token, concepts ought to be delimited from all those philosophical models and conjectures that purportedly color the most erudite and 'rational' forms of human reflection

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<sup>12</sup> E.S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> See R.A. Makkreel, *Kant's Worldview: How Judgment Shapes Human Comprehension* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021).

and introspection. For concepts, on the whole, also include what Freedman calls the ordinary ‘thought-behaviour’ of actual people.<sup>15</sup> As we shall see, when examining popular movements where the actual participants are also the authenticators of various conceptions of people and *demos*, the commingling of philosophical presuppositions and everyday political language, including the cultural specificities it elicits, is unavoidable.

Furthermore, it is important to pay attention to John Dunn’s caveat that ‘The political potency of democracy as a word is no guarantee of its intellectual potency as an idea’.<sup>16</sup> The same goes for the notion of people on which the word ‘democracy’ invariably presupposes. Despite the irresistible effectiveness of words like ‘*ratsadon*’ or ‘*demos*’ as political rallying cries, their indeterminacy and contestability as concepts is what demands scrutiny. In other words, in the absence of any agreement on the rational determinacy of the concept of people or *demos*, a critical appraisal of the democratic significance of popular but also pluralist movements like the RM is in order. A conceptual approach thus helps us lay bare and better respond to how moral and epistemological stand-offs between differing democratic conceptions of people as posed by different groups of people *p* within the RM are more pervasive than typically assumed and that with sufficient democratic theorizing (concerning the proper relation between *P* and *p*), domination *from within* can be properly attended.

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<sup>15</sup> Freedman, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 11, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Dunn, *Setting the People Free*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. xxi.

## Chapter 2: The Ratsadon Movement (RM)

### 2.1 Background and Overview

Embedded military rule, compromised rule of law, ultra-conservative shaping of public discourses and curriculums at schools and tightened surveillance of mainstream news outlets ranked among some of the shortcomings that bore too great a cost for the younger generations of Thais who still have their whole lives ahead of them. Members of the so-called Generation Z no longer felt complacent towards what their ‘elitist guardians’—be it senior politicians, schoolteachers and even parents—had in store for them. In fact, as Kanokrat Lertchoosakul pointed, they even began linking the authoritarian aspects of the educational system with the authoritative influences that key conservative institutions like the monarchy and the Buddhist clergy have in the shaping of social norms and practices.<sup>17</sup> Such is the state of ‘political awakening’ (สภาวะ ‘ตาสว่าง’) that many claimed to be undergoing. It was only a matter of time before the youth eventually took matters into their own hands and staged demonstrations across the country.

What initially emerged as pockets of dissent in late 2019 and early 2020 would attract the support of people from far and wide by mid-2020. These people were more or less fed up with the powers that be, albeit for varying reasons. At any rate, what materialized was the implementation of a new brand of political activism that different groups of people others could easily take part in and, in turn, appropriate as vehicles for their own specific sets of grievances and concerns. Organic springs of hope have blossomed into a full-fledged popular uprising that first declared itself the Free People and later the Ratsadon.

To be sure, the first official statement released by the representatives of various protest groups in the name of Free People on 12 August 2020 did not contain clause (c) as listed in the RM’s three overarching calls for change

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<sup>17</sup> Kanokrat, ‘The white ribbon movement’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1.

specified earlier.<sup>18</sup> The content of clause (c), which deals specifically with the hitherto taboo topic of monarchy, was first introduced at a mass rally organized by a protest group called the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD) on 10 August 2020. The group brazenly proposed up to ten demands concerning the much-needed reformation of the monarchy. These include abolishing the privy council and the highly controversial *lèse-majesté* law.<sup>19</sup> It would take almost two months later for the issue of monarchical reform to be made an official demand. By that time, the protest groups also agreed to rebrand themselves as Khana Ratsadon (คณะราษฎร), sometimes referred to as Klum Ratsadon (กลุ่มราษฎร), or simply Ratsadon (ราษฎร), after the instigators of the Siamese Revolution in 1932 who went by the same organizational name.<sup>20</sup> Like the revolutionaries of 1932, the Ratsadon of 2020 considered the monarchy as a focal point of democratic overhaul. In a sense, the RM thus marks an effort to carry on as well as breathe new life into a project of democracy that never fully materialized since its inception nearly a century ago.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, whereas the Free People sought to bring disgruntled citizens together *not* by confronting the monarchy, but simply by calling for new elections and the promulgation of a more democratic constitution, the Ratsadon viewed that part of what it means to restore power to the people is

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<sup>18</sup> See Anon., ‘ประชาชนปลดแอก’ ย้ำ 3 ข้อเรียกร้อง 2 จุดยืน 1 ความฝัน’, *Voice Online* (12 August 2020). Retrieved from <https://voicetv.co.th/read/isU07b6JB>.

<sup>19</sup> See Anon., ‘ประมวลชุมนุม #ธรรมศาสตร์จะไม่ทน “เราไม่ต้องการปฏิรูปเราต้องการปฏิวัติ”’, *Prachatai* (10 August 2020). Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/08/88977>.

<sup>20</sup> Despite not being official yet, calls for monarchical reform can already be heard in the mass demonstrations that took place on 16 August (the largest protest since the 2014 coup at the time) and 19 September (another equally if not even more massive protest). Both of these demonstrations still operated under the banner of Free People. See Masayuki Yuda, ‘Thailand's youth demo evolves to largest protest since 2014 coup’, *Nikkei Asia* (16 August 2020). Retrieved from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Turbulent-Thailand/Thailand-s-youth-demo-evolves-to-largest-protest-since-2014-coup> and <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/scenes-from-thailands-massive-protests-demanding-reform/>.

<sup>21</sup> See a synopsis of Kanokrat’s thoughts on this matter in Fahroong Srikhao, ‘ไขข้อสงสัย ทำไมคนรุ่นใหม่อ้างอิงตัวเองกับ 2475 ไม่ใช่ ‘14 ตุลา 16 – 6 ตุลา 19’ อย่างคนรุ่นก่อน’, *The Standard* (20 August 2022). Retrieved from <https://thestandard.co/new-generation-politics/>.



subjecting the monarchy to popular scrutiny. The aim is to transform the people en masse into something more than and qualitatively distinct from *mere* royal subjects—a *demos*, that is. More will be said on this in Chapter 4.2 and Chapter 5.2. At any rate, the RM was an amalgamation of the demands of Free People and the agenda of monarchical reform put forth by the UFTD. Although such development certainly signaled an increased awareness of the vulnerabilities and not so favorable qualities of the longstanding monarchy among the various chains of supporters who continued to stand their ground, it also unavoidably alienated a number of supporters. Most notable were those dissidents who went on to form an alternative movement called Thai Mai Ton (ไทยไมทน), meaning ‘Thais Can’t Stand [the government, but not the monarchy]’.<sup>22</sup> Even so, the RM retained much of its political potency: It remains a force to be reckoned with both in terms of its disruptive capacity and its ability to rally masses of people on the streets.

During its heyday, the RM spectacularly amassed up to several tens of thousands of participants in some of its demonstrations, with some sources even suggesting well over a hundred thousand.<sup>23</sup> Without being down in the specifics of a few hundreds or so staged protests leading up to and during the course of the RM, let us instead pinpoint the general mechanics of the movement and modes of participation that undergird the spontaneity of the protests and, most importantly, the RM’s inclusivity, heterogeneity and organicity. These include the lack of a centralized and hierarchical leadership structure as well as the youth’s adoption of virtual technology and ‘hashtag activism’ not only in disseminating movement information, but also as a way

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<sup>22</sup> See Cod Satrusayang, ‘Opinion: Is there appetite for a Red/Yellow alliance in 2021?’, *Thai Enquirer* (5 April 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.thaienquirer.com/26107/opinion-is-there-appetite-for-a-red-yellow-alliance-in-2021/>.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the mass demonstration in front of the Government House and nearby areas on 14 October 2020 and the demonstrations on 17 October 2020 which were spread out all over the capital. For sources that say tens of thousands, see Anon., ‘Anti-government protesters reach Government House, criticize monarchy’, *Prachatai English* (16 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/english/node/8843>; Anon., ‘Protests end peacefully at three sites’, *Bangkok Post* (17 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2003711/protesters-pick-3-sites-as-mass-transit-shut-down>. For sources that say over a hundred thousand, see Rungrith Petcharat, ‘16 ตุลาคม 63 จุดเริ่มต้นการสลายการชุมนุมด้วยรถจีโน่ แยกปทุมวัน’, *Thairath Online* (16 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://plus.thairath.co.th/topic/speak/100600>.

of creating collective narratives that were essentially amorphous and open to discussion, augmentation and possible revision.

It should be stressed that virtual networking platforms like Twitter became more than an anonymized safe haven where fledgling libertines can escape the harsh realities of the offline world and come to vent their dissatisfactions and share their opinions over an indefinite range of issues (from the personal to the political). More importantly for our purposes, such platforms also had a tangible effect on the way certain norms and practices would take shape in the offline world. This is evidenced in how Twitter became a hotbed of ‘suppressed’ wants and desires waiting to burst out in the form of large-scale offline demonstrations. As we shall see, what the ensuing mass rallies gained in openness and inclusiveness it lacked in unified leadership and organizational structure. This could be viewed as a merit rather than a demerit in that a movement’s ability in gaining a massive following of diverse individuals and groups did not have to rely on it possessing a well-defined organizational nucleus. Quite the opposite, it could even be argued that stratification risks marginalizing or, worst, segregating dissidents whose views do not exactly align with those of the central command structure. This will be evident once we witness the twilight of the RM in Chapter 5.3.

Because virtual technology and the use of hashtags—ranging from ones like #WhatsHappeningInThailand and #TagFriendsToMob to #WhyDoWeHaveAMonarchy and #PowerToThePeople—were the main mediums through which the bonds of association between previously disconnected dissidents were struck, it cannot be assumed that underpinning said bonds was a common *substantive* identity. It is one thing for virtual platforms to function as important sites for the proliferation and exchange of singularity and difference. But quite another for these very platforms to also incur the additional quality of instilling a strong, widely shared sense of community—that is, a common substance or bond that goes beyond private calculation—among participants whose substantive ends do not necessarily meet.

## 2.2 Literature Review and Rooms for Intervention

The extant literature on the modus operandi of the 2020 protests documents this, as witnessed in Aim Sinpeng's extensive survey of the new phenomenon of hashtag activism in Thailand.<sup>24</sup> Empirical evidence taken from the online activities of the so-called 'Free Youth, a newly established youth advocacy group that was a force behind some of the largest youth-led anti-government protests in contemporary history', shows that the collective narratives being constructed and reconstructed as the protests raged on through the participants' use of hashtags only managed to engender weak ties between them.<sup>25</sup> What began as a relatively low-key '#FreeYouth hashtag campaign in November 2019' would garner 'nearly two million followers on Twitter and Facebook' and become 'responsible for nearly 500 protests all over Thailand in 2020.'<sup>26</sup> Note that deployed alongside #FreeYouth is typically an assortment of other hashtags too. Sinpeng points that a single Twitter user may deploy as many hashtags in a single tweet as seen below:

Get ready to join the protest! Today we'll fight together!  
#SaveThaiDemocracy #ThisEndsWithOurGeneration #FreeYouth  
#DeadlineToEndDictatorship #TagFriendsToMob  
#WhatsHappeningInThailand #MilkTeaAlliance  
#TaylorFightwithSwiftiesTH #SexWorkIsWork #PowerToThePeople.<sup>27</sup>

As we can see, the above tweet serves the triple purpose of (a) protest mobilization, (b) grievance expression and (c) narrative construction.

However, in final analysis, Sinpeng concludes that the major technical incapacity lies in not being able to implement 'support ties across its online networks that will strengthen over time, or risk becoming an ephemeral network of convenience that can only be mobilized on an ad hoc basis'.<sup>28</sup> Obviously, any netizen could insert any additional hashtag to and accordingly refashion any trending hashtag or set of hashtags *at will* when retweeting said hashtag(s) or composing entirely new threads. This is why the re/production of narratives can be entirely subjective and tailored to individual participants'

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<sup>24</sup> Sinpeng, 'Hashtag activism', *op. cit.*, Ref. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192–193.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

or protest groups' specific sets of concerns. But this is as far as the discussion on the *constructive capacity* of the protests goes.

Witness how McCargo similarly stops short at his investigation that while the power of narrative disruption can be ascertained, the protestors, on the whole, were unfortunately too ad hoc and incoherent to articulate and stick with a clear programmatic agenda.<sup>29</sup> That is to say, with agency restored to the level of the individual, the RM was bound to be nebulous (and for this reason also inclusive) from the start. The question that remains understated is *what exactly*, notwithstanding how amorphous, is the 'collective narrative' being ushered in and constituted by its participants, and relatedly might this point to deeper explanations as to why the movement is prone to incoherence? For reasons which will be evident in due course, the modus operandi of the RM is neither the sole nor most crucial determinant of why internal divisions are rampant and incoherence difficult to overcome.

For reasons just highlighted, it can be extrapolated that the RM contains elements of New Social Movements (NSMs). Characteristic of NSMs are their loosely organized nature, issue-oriented focus, emphases on the social and cultural (rather than material and economic) aspects of identity and their broadly middle-class composition.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, advocacy groups like UFTD, Free Youth, Bad Student<sup>31</sup> and the Feminist's Liberation Front<sup>32</sup>, to name just a few, which multiply and thrive under the decentralization of the RM, *do* concentrate on certain issues more than others. It has become rather common to see representatives from each group take turns delivering speeches at mass rallies on topics ranging from non-compulsory school haircuts and uniforms to same-sex marriage and legalized sex work. Moreover, such groups are predominantly middle-class and culture-based. The upshot is the simultaneous and overlapping operations of sub-

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<sup>29</sup> McCargo, "Disruptors" dilemma?', *op. cit.*, Ref. 1.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, S.M. Buechler, *Social Movements in Advanced Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); A. Scott, *Ideology and the New Social Movements* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990); J. Habermas, 'New social movements', *Telos* 49 (1981), pp. 33–37.

<sup>31</sup> For their official webpage, see <https://www.badstudent.co>.

<sup>32</sup> See Jasmine Chia and Pear Maneechote, 'Gender-rights activists remake Thai feminism', *Nikkei Asia* (22 November 2021). Retrieved from <https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Life/Gender-rights-activists-remake-Thai-feminism>

movements, with sub-movements like the White Ribbon movement proving to be a particularly prominent example of how a subset of the youth managed to organize themselves around a very specific set of concerns.<sup>33</sup> In fact, this sub-movement was initiated and conducted exclusively by secondary-school students, some of whom also belonged to the protest group called Bad Student.

At any rate, it would be too quick to deduce that the RM, on the whole, is a middle-class movement or, conversely, that the various sub-movements ought to be apprehended separately from the RM. Instead, issue-driven grievances and concerns are formulated around the broader agenda of constitution amendment and democratic overhaul (which by extension also includes monarchical reform), whatever that means for each protest group. As Kanokrat remarks, what truly captured the radicalism of the youth can be found in the White Ribbon movement's ability to pose disruptive challenges to the hegemonic influences of the monarchy and state-induced religious dogmas in schools.

Again, as with Sinpeng's and McCargo's analyses, little has been said about how this contributes or is substantiated by a project of democracy, despite the protestors being more or less committed to the RM's overarching objective of democratic overhaul, or so it seems. Being put into question by different groups, this research adds, is the very definition of democratic citizenship and the constitution of a People *P*, wherein political authority properly resides. As will be shown in the coming chapters, the different and often incoherent interpretations of *P* being alluded to by particular individuals and groups of people *p* contribute significantly to the RM's failure to articulate a unified programmatic agenda.

That said, it is crucial to discern the many different markers of identity that pervade the RM—some of which ought to be dissociated with NSMs. Consider how the importance of economic and class-based distinctions within the RM should not be understated. Apart from the new waves of NSMs, caravans of traditional working-class Red Shirts from the countryside also entered the capital to 'reinforce' the youthful protestors at some major

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<sup>33</sup> See Kanokrat, 'The white ribbon movement', *op. cit.*, Ref. 1.

rallies.<sup>34</sup> The RM thus brought together both conventional and new forms of social movements and identities.

Saowanee, for one, draws specific attention to the participation of Isan people in the youth-inspired protests. These people take their name from the relatively impoverished northeast region of Thailand and comprised the bulk of the lower-middle-class factions in the RM. The Isan people were former vanguards of the once powerful Red-Shirt movement, which posed a major threat to the conservative establishment at its apogee.<sup>35</sup> The RM vis-à-vis this traditional grouping of participants can thus be viewed as a renewal of yesteryear's struggle against undefeated conservative oppressors.

This research, for another, wishes to focus more on both the inclusive and constructive capacities of the RM and how varied participants interacted with one another when constructing a people. It is worth mentioning that some of the participants were previously pro-junta or participated in the Yellow-Shirt movement (a movement which functioned, in a certain sense, as counterweight to the Red-Shirt movement) in some capacity. These people also felt no less compelled to take part in the RM compared to their Red-Shirt counterparts with whom they have a bitter history. Although initially optimistic about the coup, many of the so-called Yellow Shirts later felt that

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<sup>34</sup> Anon., 'เสื้อแดงใน "คณะราษฎร 2563" จากไพร่-อำมาตย์ ถึงเพดานศักดิ์ดินา', *Prachachat* (18 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.prachachat.net/politics/news-539525>; Anon., "คนเสื้อแดง" ผนึก "มือบคณะราษฎร" จัดชุมนุมถนอมหนักกะ', *Thansettakij* (22 November 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.thansettakij.com/politics/457747>.

<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that the only Isan people involved are those who identify themselves as first and foremost Red Shirts. The National Labor Assembly (สมัชชาแรงงานแห่งชาติ) and the Assembly of the Poor (สมัชชาคนจน) also represented Isan people in varying capacities during the Thai Spring. See Anon., 'สมัชชาแรงงานแห่งชาติชุมนุมหนูน 3 ข้อ 'ประชาชนปลดแอก' พร้อมฝันสร้างรัฐสวัสดิการ-ประชาธิปไตย', *Prachatai* (21 August 2020). Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/08/89154>; Thanyaporn Buathong, 'ประชาชนปลดแอก: ย้อนความเคลื่อนไหว 25 ปี สมัชชาคนจน ก่อนร่วมหนูน ประชาชนปลดแอก', *BBC News Thai* (23 August 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-53880598>.

the country was worsening under the military government (with some even blaming themselves for all this).<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, not much academic scholarship can be found on the Yellows' involvement and how this sheds light on the inclusivity and heterogeneity of the RM. As this research will set out to show, it is actually besides the point whether or not these former Yellow Shirts came to develop more sympathies towards the Red Shirts or found themselves aligning more with the Red Shirts' political ideology over time. Whatever the case, the RM's three overarching demands can be seen as an extension or embodiment of these people's ideological concerns. Despite a number of Yellow Shirts admitting that they have 'switched sides'<sup>37</sup>, it is perfectly plausible that no *substantive* ideological changes to their political leanings were made. I have

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Tisana Choonhavan, Sukanya Migel and Nat Thanakitamnuay. The first is the daughter of Kraisak Choonhavan, former deputy leader of the Yellow-Shirt affiliated Democrat Party. Following in her father's footsteps, she initially identified as a Yellow Shirt. Now, she is the co-founder and spokeswoman of a constitution-redrafting initiative called Conlab as well as an electoral candidate of the FFP's successor party, the Move Forward Party. See Pupush Kanitachai, 'ธิดา ชูณหะวัณ เพราะออกหัก จึกต้องเปลี่ยนใจ', *Way Magazine* (29 September 2021). Retrieved from <https://waymagazine.org/interview-tisana-choonhavan/>. The second is a music icon and Yellow-Shirt celebrity figure. She would later denounce the junta regime and wholeheartedly come to support the youth uprising. See Anon., 'อดีตนักร้อง กปปส. เปิดใจจุดเปลี่ยน "กลับใจ" แอนอกรับ รู้สึกแย่งที่ทำให้มีวันนี้', *Khaosod Online* (5 October 2020). Retrieved from [https://www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news\\_5048317](https://www.khaosod.co.th/politics/news_5048317). The third was once a Yellow Shirt fanatic who came to the media's attention after ramming his Porsche into a crowd of protesting Red Shirts in 2010. He was also a member of the DP's new wave of emerging politicians called the New Dem, but later left due to disillusionment with the party. See Sarawat Iemsiem, 'เปิดใจ ไฮโซลูกนัท ผู้ที่เรียกตัวเองว่า "สลิ่มกลับใจ"', *Spring News* (11 August 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.springnews.co.th/feature/813872?fbclid=IwAR1sEK7CfN45QatNbMEbUvCnDKWZHrv-HeDeInr-FTF5zAfOBDJEZakFRSQ>. Two of whom even issued formal apologies to the Red Shirts on social media! See Tisana Choonhavan, 'ดิฉันขอโทษพี่น้องประชาชนจากใจจริง', *Facebook* (last modified 19 September 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/100008889241513/posts/pfbid02uF7dE7GsfgC6TMcVambyxrMrZnnn13ihWraMRdbt7toGuZg7rMk4G6oAL5UCU9bpl/>; Nat Thanakitamnuay, 'คำขอโทษจากธนัตถ์ ธนาภิจอำนาจ ถึงประชาชนไทย', *Facebook* (last modified 31 July 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/541740647/posts/pfbid0WxXRGcCHNds66bdU9nPFTBAXmAWx9PvrPv1W6H4eeQMhq26SJ1Ycc63X1vnYVGzyl>.

<sup>37</sup> See previous footnote.

argued elsewhere that under changing political circumstances (e.g. diminished confidence in the junta regime), the Yellow Shirts can very well make *strategic* compromises (with, say, compromise-willing Red Shirts) and alter their political stance in doing so *without* compromising their ideological core.<sup>38</sup> The same, of course, applies to the Red Shirts.

By identifying both new and old distinctions, identities, and so on, within the RM (from generational and gender-based to Yellow-Red and class-based ones), the aim is to better appreciate the complex relationship between diverse actors and groups of people and how competing conceptions of people signified both the democratic potential and challenges of a pluralistic movement. Before divulging the pluralism of the RM, let us first discuss how best to *conceptualize* the notion of people to which Ratsadon translates. To be sure, in the most generic sense of the term, the word for ‘people’ in Thai is *pukon* (ผู้คน). But when asked *what kind* of people does the word *pukon* elicit, narrower senses of people—be it *ratsadon* (ราษฎร), *prachachon* (ประชาชน), *chonchart* (ชนชาติ), and so on— may emerge, depending on the context.

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<sup>38</sup> Dulyaphab, ‘Thailand’s ideological struggle’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9.



### Chapter 3: The (Contested) Concept of People

The notion of people is a recurring concept in political theory and arguably a placeholder for terms like *demos* (in Greek), *populus* (in Latin), *volk* (in German), *ratsadon* (in Thai) and so on. Throughout history, polities and states have felt compelled to *identify* with the people(s) whom they are governing. And what better way to achieve this than to control the definition of people and dictate the terms of peoplehood—that is, to be clear about what the people is and is not and the connotations (be it positive or negative) attached to word. Specifically, is the people a qualified community of co-rulers or an unruly multitude that needs to be controlled and listened to at the same time? Should the people be understood in their united capacity or should they be understood severally, writes Philip Pettit?<sup>39</sup> This is enshrined in the centuries-old principle of *vox populi, vox Dei*, which translates to ‘the voice of the people is God’s voice’—the idea that popular opinion or the will of the people somehow mattered.<sup>40</sup>

What is more, as John Stuart Mill famously pointed, is that the question this always raises is whether or not ‘The “people” who exercise the power’ or whose voice is to be heard and the people ‘over whom power is exercised’ are one and the same.<sup>41</sup> If not, then there is a problem. Such problem may be referred to as the problem of political legitimacy. Indeed, one iteration of this classic problem can be depicted along the lines of the discrepancy between a single united People *P* (to whom political power properly belongs) and a plurality of loosely related groups of people *p* (vying for control or influence over the determination of *P*). A discrepancy arises when the distribution of influence among the various components of *P* (presumably different *p*) is disproportionate or uneven, leading to one *p*’s potential domination over another.

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<sup>39</sup> P. Pettit, ‘Republican freedom and contestatory democratization’, in I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordón (Eds) *Democracy’s Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 163–190, p. 174.

<sup>40</sup> Though this does not necessarily foreshadow democracy as we shall later see in Chapter 4.2.

<sup>41</sup> J.S. Mill, ‘On liberty’, in S. Collini (Ed.) *On Liberty and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1–115, pp. 7ff.

Philosophers, theologians, politicians and ordinary citizens alike have variously sought to decontest the meaning of people by giving the concept of people a rationally, theologically or culturally determinate meaning. In the modern-day context, the relationship between people and state is further consolidated through the equation of political legitimacy with democratic legitimacy: For the exercise of political power by the state to be accepted as democratically legitimate, it is not enough that the people be heard by those in power. The people must also be in power or able to exercise some form of control over those in power. This shows how democracy first and foremost designates a *form of government*—namely, one where the people are invested and involved. According to Dunn, this basic understanding of democracy remains as pertinent today as it was in Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries BC when the term ‘democracy’ (*demokratia*) first appeared.<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding the equally important question of how democracy came to be valorized or diabolized by posterity, Dunn adds that one main difference lies in the nature and complexity of the institutions which enable the people to take part in government.<sup>43</sup> At any rate, for reasons which will become apparent, positing the intrinsic relation between political and democratic legitimacy does not foreclose the contestability<sup>44</sup> of the concept of people. It may achieve quite the opposite effect.

So far we have noted how ‘people’ is a normatively salient term. But what about its status as a *concept*? Put another way, what is the minimal definition of people that can serve as a baseline for demarcating it from other concepts as found in our everyday political vocabulary? Is there any agreement on the concept of people? As far as intelligibility or

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<sup>42</sup> Dunn, *Setting the People Free*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. xix.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

<sup>44</sup> To be sure, being suggested here is not that people is an *essentially* contested concept. The reason for this is that the notion of an ‘essentially contested concept’, as introduced by Walter Gallie in ‘Essentially contested concepts’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956), pp. 167–198, is too presumptive. In Gallie’s words, a concept is not simply contested, but essentially so, when ‘recognition of rival uses of it (such as oneself repudiates) as not only logically possible and humanly “likely”, but as of *permanent* potential critical value to one’s own use or interpretation of the concept in question” (emphasis added, *ibid.*, p. 193). To avoid making assumptions that this research cannot defend, this research is only committed to the weaker claim that conflicting interpretations of people makes logical sense and are likely given the plurality of voices yearning to be heard.

communicability is concerned, there *needs* to be one. That is to say, some form of agreement is always presupposed. Consider how when the word ‘people’ is uttered in a political way being signified is the entirety of persons that constitute a political whole. A common aim, identity or circumstance in politics—be it a common enemy, culture, race, class, gender, ideology, conception of justice, and so on—is what makes a particular grouping of persons *whole*. This, so to speak, constitutes what Freedon calls the concept’s ‘ineliminable feature’ or core, without which the word ‘people’ in politics becomes unintelligible to others.<sup>45</sup> This goes without saying that more is needed to discern the specific signification or detailed interpretation, that is, *conception*, of people in a given context, including the normative dimensions that can be ascribed to the people narrowly conceived.

To make matters more complicated, specifying a certain group of people as a *demos*—such as when uttering that the RM is democratic, because it promotes a democratic *conception* of people—only says so much about the normativity and nature of the citizens involved. To be sure, it does say something. For

What we mean by democracy is not that we govern ourselves. When we speak or think of ourselves as living in a democracy, what we have in mind is something quite different. It is that our own state, and the government which does so much to organize our lives, draws its legitimacy from us, and that we have a reasonable chance of being able to compel each of them to continue to do so.

But what that something amounts to is merely that political power properly belongs to and must, in some sense, be exercised by the People *P* (whoever they may be). More is needed to establish what the detailed interpretation of *P* is—i.e. who is to be counted among ‘us’ the *demos*—and why political legitimacy ought to be equated with democratic legitimacy in the first place. This is because the idea of democracy, which basically prescribes ‘rule of and by the people’, and the notion of people on which democracy rests are, to an ineliminable degree, empty signifiers. Both are normatively dependent on a range of other considerations—such as more fundamental issues of good

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<sup>45</sup> As Freedon formulaically puts it, ‘The feature is ineliminable merely in the sense that all known usages of the concept employ it, so that its absence would deprive the concept of intelligibility and communicability’, *Ideologies and Political Theory*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 11, p. 62.

and right, which may or may not link to national identity, religion, race, gender, class, rational capacity, common humanity or a combination of these. Differing conceptions of people qua *demos*, therefore, specify the reasons for the ineliminable components of the people qua *demos* in different ways, because of different normative theories and traditions. Moreover, as already hinted earlier, just as it remains open to contestation *who* is to be included among ‘us’ (the people qua *demos*) as equals or similars, so it is no less contestable what *manner of self-rule*—direct or indirect, active or passive, participatory or representative—democracy entails.

Consider how the Athenians were pretty discreet about whom to include in the *demos*. The extraordinary complexity of the institutions that rendered participation both possible and desirable also meant that so few by modern standards were qualified to rule. Non-property-owning and female inhabitants of Athens were summarily excluded from citizenship, because these inhabitants were judged by their property-owning male counterparts as ill-suited for civic life. It is worth adding that the more junior citizens were also deemed as inferior to their more senior counterparts due to their lack of experience. Viewed by the RM’s lights, Athenian democracy, then, does not seem inclusive at all!

The following table summarizes the concept-conception distinction used above:

Table 1.

	Concept	Conception
People	<p>Ineliminable component:</p> <p>An entire body of persons bounded together by a common purpose, identity or circumstance</p>	<p>Specific reasons for ineliminable component:</p> <p>The purpose, identity or circumstance that brings a people together and constitutes the criteria of its membership</p> <p>Example: <i>demos</i></p>

<i>Demos</i>	<p>Ineliminable component:</p> <p>An entire body of persons bounded together by a sense of collective self-determination and co-authorship of law</p>	<p>Specific reasons for ineliminable component:</p> <p>Reasons for basing political on democratic legitimacy and the criteria of democratic membership</p> <p>Example: Athenian citizenry</p>
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Moreover, different conceptions can be broken down in the following ways, with examples including but not limited to:

Table 2.

	Conceptions (linguistical, cultural, theological, economical, discursive, etc.)
People	qua <i>demos</i> , <i>populus</i> , <i>universitas</i> , <i>volk</i> , <i>ratsadon</i> , commons, citizens, subjects, multitude, rational agents, bourgeoisie, proletariat, youth, LGBT, etc.
<i>Demos</i>	qua Athenian citizenry, <i>Ratsadon</i> (per the RM), (passive or active) citizens, multitude, rational agents, bourgeoisie, proletariat, youth, LGBT, etc.

As we can see, there exists multiple conceptions of both people and *demos*, with varying levels of congruence and compatibility. On one hand, the people may be viewed in the sense of multitude, that is, a large gathering or confederation of loosely and contingently aligned individuals or groups. On the other, the proper signification of people may posit a more or less substantive political community, that is, a non-instrumental form of association between otherwise instrumentally related individuals or groups, and not equal, therefore, to the aggregate sum of all of its members. Note that

not only does the latter deviate from the former, it is also more compatible with people in the sense of legal subjects of a state. A people qua multitude need not presuppose any legal order. For it may by definition occur organically, without the interpolation of intermediaries or any third-party arbitration. In fact, it may even arise in diametrical opposition to all apparatuses of sovereign power!<sup>46</sup>

If prescribing the juridical relation between the state and its people is not a sufficient condition of democratic legitimacy, some political theorists turn to basing the normativity of a people or *demos* on a *discursive* justification of democracy.<sup>47</sup> The idea is that the ‘discursivity’ of human reason alone, which manifests itself in the form of ‘noumenal power’, informs ‘normatively right’ democratic reasoning that is the *logos* (rather than *ethos*) of democracy. In this sense, rational human subjects capable of exercising their noumenal powers constitute a *demos*, with democratization becoming a task of humanity. According to Dunn,

Athens gave democracy a name, and worked out an elaborate, highly distinctive, and astonishingly thoroughgoing interpretation of the political conditions required to achieve it. But it took the French Revolution, well over two thousand years later, to turn *democrat* into a partisan label and a badge of political honour, and first lend imaginative credibility to the idea of transforming human collective life, anywhere and everywhere, to fit those requirements.<sup>48</sup>

1789 was where confidence in human reasoning and enlightenment and the project of democracy coincided for the first time. Of course, the variety of justifications of democracy later employed by posteriority meant that the project of democratizing the societies to which an individual or group

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<sup>46</sup> This is why in the state of nature that is a state of lawlessness there is no People *P* but only a multitude of different groups of people *p*.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, theorists from the Frankfurt School: J. Habermas, ‘On the internal relation between law and democracy’, in C. Cronin and P. De Greiff (Eds) *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 253–264; R. Forst, *Normativity and Power: Analyzing Social Orders of Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Chapters from M. Hougaard and M. Kettner (Eds) *Theorising Noumenal Power: Rainer Forst and his Critics* (London: Routledge, 2020); Chapters from E. Herlin-Karnell, M. Klatt, and H.A.M. Zúñiga (Eds) *Constitutionalism Justified: Rainer Forst in Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>48</sup> Dunn, *Setting the People Free*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. xx.

belongs may be variously specified. Universal justification cannot simply be assumed, let alone shoehorned into different people's belief systems.

In the next chapter, the deliberate choice of the term *ratsadon* by the various protest groups, not to mention the way *ratsadon* came to be used interchangeably with the Thai term for citizen, *prachachon*, will be examined. This indicates the preference of *demos* over alternative conceptions of people—in particular, ones that remain heavily intertwined orthodox notions of Thai-ness. After which this research goes on to show how different components of 'We the Ratsadon' may very well generate dissonant conceptions of *demos*. That said, a question to keep in mind is this: Provided that the RM designates a *participatory* form of collective self-determination, what non-negligible effects does this have on the construction of a people or *demos* over the course of the protests? Putting this more precisely, to what extent does the intensely participatory nature of the RM reflect as well as facilitate heterodox and heterogenous conceptions of people? Ultimately, can a consensus ever be reached on the proper conception of *demos*? If not, what is to be done?

## Chapter 4: The RM and the Promises of a Pluralistic People

As evinced earlier, the RM brought together disparate and previously non-aligned segments of the general population. During the zenith of the RM, it is not uncommon to encounter people of vastly different stripes on the streets—from young and old people to traditional working class groups donning their red shirts, marching alongside cohorts of rainbow-themed pride groups. These clearly differentiated protest groups have a common goal—that of bringing an unjust and oppressive regime to its knees.

### 4.1 Ratsadon qua Multitude of Particular Peoples

The ‘We’ in ‘We the Ratsadon’ denotes a wide-ranging body of particular peoples *p* held together by a loosely defined notion of *ratsadon*, taken to mean *demos* in the present-day setting. Underpinning this, to echo Thomas Hobbes’s famous phrase, is more a ‘great multitude’ than a ‘real unity of them’ all, i.e. those who aspire, in their own ways, to become agents of democracy.<sup>49</sup> The minimally defined and hence *pluralized* Ratsadon is thus the mere sum of two or more *particularized* groupings of participants or peoples *p* with their own ideas and conceptions of democracy. Putting this more schematically, the Ratsadon is

- (a) *not* a People *P*,
- (b) but rather a *multitude* of particular peoples *p*, held together not by a shared common substance which runs deeper than each party’s sectarian reasoning, but the common fear of not having a real say in their country’s affairs.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* (E. Curley, ed. with intro and notes, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), Chapter 17 §13.

<sup>50</sup> *Fear*, as a motivational factor, has often been cited by political philosophers as fundamental to the formation of political association. Baruch Spinoza, for instance, writes that humans are naturally obliged ‘to choose the lesser of the two evils... For whether I discern things truly or falsely, it is the greater harm that I shall fear and, by nature’s design, strive by every means to avoid’, *Theological-Political Treatise* (M. Silverthorne, trans., J. Israel, ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 16 §6.



The durability of which is a function of relative strengths in bargaining power. If a particular group wields immensely disproportionate power over the rest, then the spontaneous and organic banding of dissidents that is the RM is likely to tilt in favor of the most powerful and become heavily unstable (as was the case during the twilight of the People’s Alliance for Democracy, where the liberal factions felt they had increasingly little to virtually no control over the direction of the movement compared to their more conservative counterparts).<sup>51</sup> This will become an issue later in Chapter 5.

At any rate, it can be said that the RM represents more of a *convergence* of diverse ideological reasonings and arguments for wanting to depose the government, amend the constitution, reform the monarchy and, most importantly for our purposes, become agents of democracy than a *consensus* with respect to some discursively justified moral prescription or common epistemic property among presumptively ‘enlightened’ citizens.<sup>52</sup> There appears to be no ‘democratically right reasoning’ or overriding ‘discursivity’ by virtue of which the participants can be seen as uniformly partaking of a common substance. This is empirically manifest in how there is only *mere* agreement that democratic overhaul is in order, but disagreement over the specifics. Namely, which constitutional provisions ought to be scrapped, amended and amended into what exactly? To what extent should the monarchy be reformed and for what specific reasons, and so on and so forth? These are just a number of broader concerns that can be

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<sup>51</sup> For a discussion on the decline of the People’s Alliance for Democracy, see M.H. Nelson, “‘Vote No!’: The PAD’s decline from powerful movement to political sect?”, in Pavin Chachavalpongpan (Ed.) *‘Good Coup’ Gone Bad: Thailand’s Political Developments since Thaksin’s Downfall* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2014), pp. 141–169; Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, ‘พัฒนาการและพลวัตของขบวนการต่อต้านทักษิณ: จากขบวนการเสรีนิยมอันหลากหลายสู่ขบวนการอนุรักษ์นิยมเข้มข้น’ (Bangkok: Thailand Research Fund, 2017).

<sup>52</sup> The original formulation of convergence-consensus distinction as proposed by Fred D’Agostino in *Free Public Reason: Making It Up As We Go* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 30, reads:

If both A and B share a reason *R* that makes a regime reasonable for them, then the justification of the regime is grounded in their *consensus* with respect to *R*. If A has a reason *R<sub>a</sub>* that makes the regime reasonable for him, and B has a reason *R<sub>b</sub>* that makes the regime reasonable for her, then the justification of the regime is based on *convergence* on it from separate points of view.

vexed from multiple angles, depending on the specific conception of *demos* being alluded to by the peoples involved.

Indeed, what was remarkable about the RM was not what protest leaders made of it and the sort of unity they wished to instill among their supposed ‘followers’ (which reflects the unity of the movement’s leaders rather than that of its constituent parts). Rather, it was what actual participants made of it and how they were in their own senses ‘leaders’ of the movement. Thanks to a combination of factors like virtual technology, the youth's way of running things, the indeterminacy of the concept of *demos* implicit in Ratsadon and the openness of its three overarching calls for change, the RM exemplified ‘mass protests [that] are supposed to be organic, and not orchestrated by politicians for partisan ends or to serve personal ambitions’.<sup>53</sup>

According to Sunisa Manning, author of *A Good True Thai*, ordinary citizens can finally relish in the fact that ‘A movement without pronouns [to designate hierarchical relations among its participants] and leaders is challenging Thailand all the way to the top’.<sup>54</sup> For her, this constitutes a new milestone in the evolution of Thai social consciousness—a break, as it were, with the stratified social movements of yesteryear. Orthodoxy’s attempts to impose social etiquettes and norms on an unsuspecting have finally failed. This caused veteran historian and social critic, Nidhi Aeusrivongse, to declare that being liberated from all sorts of cultural and socio-linguistic impediments is political language and imagination.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> McCargo, “‘Disruptors’ dilemma?’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 176. Although the protests were frequented by many notable politicians and prominent figures from the opposition parties, it would be a stretch to contend that these actors ‘orchestrated’ or were ‘behind’ the organic springs of hope. The truth is they did not even dare make a loud clamor, let alone public speeches, during mass rallies, preferring instead to limit their role to that of being a mere spectator or participant at most.

<sup>54</sup> Sunisa Manning, ‘A movement without pronouns and leaders is challenging Thailand all the way to the top’, *Thai Enquirer* (29 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.thaienquirer.com/20196/a-movement-without-pronouns-and-leaders-is-challenging-thailand-all-the-way-to-the-top/>. At one point, she even refers to the movement as a sort of hydra: decapitating its leaders will not kill the movement but will only add more ‘heads’.

<sup>55</sup> Nidhi Aeusrivongse, ‘เสรีภาพทางวิชาการ ในสภาวะเสื่อมถอย (video file)’, 5 April 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/100030552961658/videos/481740389521056/?d=n>.

Not so long ago, it seems as if only ‘the wisest and most virtuous’ or most socially recognized citizens were expected to lead or, at the very least, make a difference. Now, it seems like *anyone*—regardless of education, social stature or even ‘political correctness’—can articulate their idiosyncratic concerns and make themselves heard vis-à-vis crowds of thousands in public fora. Once traffic-congested intersections were transformed into mini-republics. In fact, a number of rallies even allowed participants to set up their own booths and exhibitions for the purposes of collecting signatures for petitions, fundraising and/or raising awareness about certain issues. All in all, the RM was not simply a spring but also a free market of sorts. Being exchanged ran the gamut from tangible commodities to lofty ideals.

The question postponed until now is: So what exactly was the specific conception of people orthodox pronouncements of Thai-ness brought to the table and in what ways was it undemocratic?

#### 4.2 The Orthodox Conception of People to be Liberated From

Tracing the origins of Thai-ness along with the Thai sense of nationhood is no simple undertaking. Historians continue to be divided over the question of Thai-ness, in particular the factors that go into theorizing Thai-ness.<sup>56</sup> Fortunately for our purposes, it is at least possible to agree that whatever the outcome of this debate may be, the associated conception of people views

- (a) people in terms of People *P*,
- (b) where *P* is *not* a *demos* but a hierarchical body politic.

The corollary is that adhering to such a view rules out any space for the possible contestation of *P* by different *p*. Orthodoxy dictates that *P*, including what it means to be a part of it, be specified by a predetermined sense of national identity. For this reason, *P* closely resembles a *universitas*—a

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<sup>56</sup> See Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994); Chapters from Somkiat Wantana et al., *เมื่อใดจึงเป็นชาติไทย* (Bangkok: Illuminations Edition, 2021).

corporation or corporate body of persons, to be precise—where the individual as such is not the prime legal unit but rather the corporate entity in which the individual is presumably absorbed.<sup>57</sup> Although this distinctly European term never entered Thai national discourse, let alone common parlance, some useful parallels can be drawn.

This term became entwined with the term ‘people’ (*populus*) in the Middle Ages, as elections became common practice in both public-political and -ecclesiastical spheres. The idea that the *populus* can elect someone into office implied that *vox populi* can be rendered consistent with the pre-given requirements of the office to be filled. This led to ‘a teleological, “top-down” perspective on the electoral process’, which places greater emphasis on discovering ‘*the rationality of the position*’ that is ‘God’s will’ than the fairness of the procedure itself.<sup>58</sup> The electorate had a *telos* to be guided by—hence, ‘*vox populi, vox Dei*’ in the sense that ‘the voice of the people’ must be made to mirror ‘the voice of God’. Note that in this iteration of the oft-quoted maxim, it was not that the will of the people was supreme *in the same way* that God’s will was perceived as unquestionable (as contemporary iterations understood it to be). Instead, its authority derived wholly through its realization or approximation of God’s will (or, to be more specific, what is perceived to be God’s will). This is what it means for ‘the many’, or *populus*, to resemble more of a purposive, non-instrumental corporation (that constitutes a legal entity in its own right), or *universitas*, than a voluntary association between consenting and instrumentally related individuals. This way the constitution of a people is determined not so much by the input of its members as their unswerving conformity to some higher, transcendental authority. Under such ‘descending’ conception of people, as it shall be dubbed, the Catholic Church accordingly functioned like spiritual ‘board of directors’ tasked with overseeing the affairs of the ‘corporate state’ and the various entities of people, or *universitates*, subsumed under it whose power can only be delegated from ‘above’—be it the crown or any representative of God here on Earth for that matter.

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<sup>57</sup> See Chapter 3 §2 of A. Fumurescu, *Compromise: A Political and Philosophical History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

Situating the idea of *universitas* in relation to the corporate nature of Thai-ness, the Thai People *P* can be apprehended via a standard of Thai-ness as prescribed by the corporate nation and its moral ‘board of directors’—namely, the conservative establishment<sup>59</sup>, its two hundred and fifty hand-picked senators and a jaundiced judiciary. It is suggested that Thai nationalism is centered around a long-standing monarchy, Buddhist faith, the ethnicity and language of the Tai race (which some historians trace to southern China), the notion of territorial sovereignty or, as is likely the case, a configuration of these. But the important point is that either way, much like the pre-modern European *universitas*, the Thai *P* appears too arbitrary, if not also too abstract, vis-à-vis individual citizens: *P* here is far from reducible to its constituent parts. If anything, membership of *P* is determined not through voluntary, i.e. ‘ascending’, agreement but through satisfying a minimum threshold of Thai-ness. In a word, the body politic in which all true Thais are invariably absorbed is hierarchical in the sense that it is bequeathed from ‘above’ rather than constructed from ‘below’.

This severely impinges on the democratic process of collective self-determination, as the conservative elites can then conveniently claim to rule for *P* (via the senate for instance) on the *behalf* of different *p* (or *universitates*). Therefore, unless the latter do identify as *universitates* and assent to the former’s prerogative, and that all this *is* a requirement of political legitimacy (which may have been the case during the reign of the previous monarch, King Bhumibol)<sup>60</sup>, political legitimacy cannot be seen to depend on rule *of and by* citizens (in whatever capacity). Moreover, citizens

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<sup>59</sup> This is variously qualified as ‘network monarchy’ per McCargo or a ‘deep state’ per Eugénie Mérieau. See D. McCargo, ‘Network monarchy and legitimacy crisis in Thailand’, *The Pacific Review*, 18 (2005), pp. 499–519; E. Mérieau, ‘Thailand’s deep state, royal power and the Constitutional Court (1997–2015)’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 46 (2016), pp. 445–466.

<sup>60</sup> Indeed, a number of Thai jurists and academics have claimed that the king’s authority derives partially from the will of the people (whatever that means). This is encapsulated in the principle called ‘*aneknikornsamosornsommut*’ (อนกนิกรสโมสรรสมมติ). See Chaiyan Chaiyaporn, ‘ก่อนเกิดการทําแผนที่ยสยาม (ตอน20): พระบาทสมเด็จพระจุลจอมเกล้าฯเสด็จขึ้นครองราชย์ ไม่ใช่ในฐานะพระราชโอรสตามสายโลหิตโดยอัตโนมัติ’, *Post Today* (5 August 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.posttoday.com/politic/columnist/659806>; Kasidit Anantanatorn, “ราชบัลลังก์ของกษัตริย์เมืองไทยเป็นของประชาชนเสมอมา”: ใครทรงไว้ซึ่งอำนาจสถาปนาพระเจ้าแผ่นดิน’, *101* (7 June 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.the101.world/who-choose-the-kings/>.

who are deemed un-Thai are likely to be marginalized or even excluded altogether from political rule.

To see how the ‘un-Thainess’ of the 10 August demonstration, which demanded the reformation of the monarchy, was accused precisely of being unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court, consider the precise reasoning for its verdict. By proposing to reform the monarchy, the organizers have violated the very integrity of the nation as prescribed in the political constitution: The explanation being that royal institutions have remained integral to ‘the history of Thai political rule, from the kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya to the Rattanakosin kingdom’, and is therefore inextricably linked to Thai nationhood and the very constitution of the Thai People, or ‘puangchon chao Thai’ (ปวงชนชาวไทย), as the Court puts it (where ‘puangchon’ connotes ‘multitude’, with ‘chao Thai’ serving as the qualifier or *telos* to be fulfilled here).<sup>61</sup> In the eyes of the Court, the organizers were attempting to place the sacrosanct institution *beneath* rather than *above* the rule of the people. This is absurd, because per the constitution the monarchy is a determinant of Thai-ness and by extension the Thai People, meaning that *P* cannot exist without a monarch. For *P* to will for the absence of the monarch (which is unprevented if the monarchy is truly under popular rule) would, therefore, be a contradiction in terms. Absurdity aside, such thinking is also blatantly dangerous, as it does not rule out revolution.<sup>62</sup>

To be sure, this is not to affirm that Thai nationalism and the very notion of Thai-ness is devoid of modern or Western influences. Quite the opposite, the consensus among historians is that, the concept of nation, unlike the Thai iterations of people, is a profoundly Western idea.<sup>63</sup> Before the ‘Thai nation’ was birthed during the reign of the modernizing monarch, King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910), ‘people’ were viewed as nothing more than mere inhabitants of the land or subjects of the crown at most. The words used to designate them varied from *pasoknikorn* (พสกนิกร), which means

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<sup>61</sup> Anon., ‘ศาลรัฐธรรมนูญชี้ ชุมนุม 10 สิงหาคม 63 "ล้มล้างการปกครอง" ในระบอบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข’, *BBC News Thai* (10 November 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-59217832>.

<sup>62</sup> The exact wording of the Court was ‘lomlang karnpokkrong’ (ล้มล้างการปกครอง), which basically translates to revolution, *ibid*.

<sup>63</sup> See Footnote 56.

grouping or coming-together (*nikorn*) of the ruled (*pasok*)<sup>64</sup>, and *phrai* (ไพร่), which translates to serf or bounded commoner, to *ratsadon* (ราษฎร), which, as we shall see, contains many possible iterations. In other words, it was only with the invention of the modern nation that the Thai People—variously designated as *chao Siam* (ชาวสยาม)<sup>65</sup>, *puangchon chao Thai* (ปวงชนชาวไทย), *chonchart Thai* (ชนชาติไทย) or, simply, *chao Thai* (ชาวไทย) and *kon Thai* (คนไทย)—as we know it, also surfaced. During the reign of King Chulalongkorn’s Oxford-educated successor, King Vajiravudh, to be a true Siamese/Thai became something that the people or *ratsadon* qua commoners<sup>66</sup> could aspire to and in doing so elevate their social and political standing.

Indeed, it is important to be clear that prior to the Siamese Revolution of 1932, from which the RM drew inspiration, the proper signification of *ratsadon* was not ‘citizen’, or *prachachon*, in the contemporary sense of the term, let alone *demos*. The term, which derived from the sanskrit *raj* (ราช), contains at least two possible iterations—ruler or ruled (or both within a single iteration)—since *raj* generically refers to ‘rule’.<sup>67</sup> To be associated with ‘rule’, then, does not necessarily mean ‘to rule’ (in the sense found in *demos*). It can mean ‘ruled by X’, where X can denote many different entities or things. What should be clear is that the ruled—call it Y—and the ruler—call it X—are not always identical. For instance, Y may connote ‘the many’ or a multitude of persons, whereas X may connote ‘the few’ and/or ‘the one’. Prior to 1932, X denoted the (one) king and subsequently the nation(-state) to

<sup>64</sup> Anon., ‘พสกนิกร (บาลีวันละคำ 389)’, *Dhamtara* (7 June 2013). Retrieved from <https://dhamtara.com/?p=2145>.

<sup>65</sup> Previously, Thailand was called Siam, with the people being referred to as ‘chao Siam’. Although Siam changed its name to Thailand under the premiership of one of Khana Ratsadon’s leaders, Plaek Phibunsongkhram, King Chulalongkorn and his successor King Vajiravudh are often credited with being the fathers of Thai nationalism.

<sup>66</sup> For *ratsadon* in the sense of commoners separate and distinguishable from the lords and the king, see Anon., ‘นัยจากความหมายของคำว่า “ราษฎร” ราชการเมืองในยุคสมัยการปฏิวัติสยาม’, *Silpawattanatham* (27 June 2019). Retrieved from [https://www.silpa-mag.com/history/article\\_10267](https://www.silpa-mag.com/history/article_10267).

<sup>67</sup> See Dulyasujarit Thawatchai, ‘ราช และ ราษฎร จากรากศัพท์เดียวกัน?’, *Facebook* (21 October 2016). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/SanskritLiterature/posts/1252570411451941/>.

some degree. Both were distinguishable from and morally superior to commoners or ordinary people *p* that is *ratsadon* in the sense of *Y*. Becoming a true Thai thus signified how *Y*'s political qualifications may derive precisely through its identification with a pre-determined *X* (in this case, the Thai nation or People *P*). That is to say, the concept of *ratsadon* eventually became normatively dependent on national identity. It only became enmeshed with the Western ideal of popular sovereignty once it got associated with the conception of people as *prachachon*, that is, citizens.

It should be stressed that the Thai word for king, *raja* (ราชา), and kingdom, *raja-anachakr* (ราชอาณาจักร) both derive from same *raj* in sanskrit as *ratsadon*.<sup>68</sup> When subordinating *ratsadon* to *raja*, then, in accordance with the iteration 'Y that is ruled by X', *ratsadon* may come to acquire a meaning equivalent to 'state' in the sense of *anachakr*, that is, dominion, which indubitably requires a *dominus*, or (over)lord. Only through the equation of state with nation, did conceptions of *ratsadon* become fused with notions of Thai-ness. This is why it helps to compare modern, albeit 'descending', conceptions of people with the conception of people as *universitas*. Orthodoxy in modern times did not simply take the people as *mere* 'subjects of the crown' or 'serfs'<sup>69</sup>. The people were more like *universitas*. But like members of a *universitas*, members of the Thai *P* still truly lacked collective self-determination.

As we can see, the battle over the definition of people in Thailand has been continually waged since the dawn of the modern era of nation-building. The person or persons that dictate the terms of peoplehood thereby gained control over the ways through which the state can derive its legitimacy. This explains why after the Siamese Revolution of 1932, the royalist historian and one of the key authors of Thai-ness, Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, did not hesitate to cross out words like *ratsadon* and *prachachon* from any document

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<sup>68</sup> See *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, even though the Red Shirts referred to themselves as *phrai*, or serf, as a way of pitting themselves against the so-called *ammatt*, or aristocratic bureaucracy, it is arguable that the conservative establishment did not view these people as *phrai* in the first place. The Red Shirts may be deemed as 'un-Thai' by their elitist adversaries and, for this reason, not worthy of political recognition. The extreme conclusion is their being treated on par with rebels and their falling outside the jurisdiction of law as appears to be the case during the extra-judicial killings in May 2010.



or writing he could lay his hands on. He replaced them instead with terms like *chonchart Thai* (ชนชาติไทย), which depicted the people in terms of race above all else.<sup>70</sup> Terms like *pasoknikorn* and ‘farmers’, or anything associated with the land or its inhabitants<sup>71</sup>, were also rendered acceptable. For neither of these terms contradicted what it means to be a ‘true Thai’ per someone like the conservative prince. Nonetheless, such efforts were of fairly limited success in the short- to medium-term. The revolution has already decreed that this country belongs to the *ratsadon* and not the king as the *ratsadon* were so often tricked into believing.<sup>72</sup> And it would take years if not decades to somehow reverse this trend. To be sure, the literal *ratsadon* back then did not actually participate in the so-called ‘popular revolution’ but acted more like curious onlookers. They probably even had no idea what the revolutionaries were rambling about in the first place! But in 2020, all this was about to change in an irreversible way: What appeared to be quite the stretch of imagination in 1932 would come to mean all that it could for anguished citizens who can no longer bear the consequences of Thailand’s ‘authoritarian turn’. The conception of *ratsadon* as *demos* would become an effective political rallying cry and steadily gain the status of gospel. On this account, rather than bringing politics to the people, the RM brought the people into politics.

In sum, being canvassed in this chapter concerns (a) how anti-individualistic and non-voluntary orthodoxy’s characterization of peoplehood is, (b) how referring to the comparable concept of *universitas* helps bring conceptual clarity to the specificity of Thailand’s curiously quasi-antiquarian modernity and (c) how the *Ratsadon* of 2020 have freed themselves from ‘descending’ conceptions of *ratsadon* and, in turn, ushered in the ascension of ostensibly more democratic conceptions of *ratsadon*. The fact that the protestors were literally crying, ‘Down with feudalism, long live the

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<sup>70</sup> Anon., ‘นัยจากความหมายของคำว่า “ราษฎร”’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 66.

<sup>71</sup> More precisely, it was the people qua inhabitants, not the land these people were inhabiting that formed the most basic political units in the past. This is because back then the former and not the latter constituted the object of conquests.

<sup>72</sup> This was announced by the de facto leader of *Khana Ratsadon*, Phot Phahonyothin, on the eve of revolution. The exact wording was ‘*Ratsadon tang lai peung roo terd wa prathet nee pen kong ratsadon mai chai kong kasat tharm tee kao lork luang*’ (ราษฎรทั้งหลายพึงรู้เถิดว่า ประเทศเราเป็นของราษฎร ไม่ใช่ของกษัตริย์ตามที่เขาหลอกลวง).

people!’<sup>73</sup>, signaled the revival of a project of democracy on a truly unprecedented and participatory scale.

This shows that *depending on the context* either ‘descending’ or ‘ascending’ conceptions of people may be accepted as truth and law. What is promising about the RM, then, is that it at least opens up space for the widest possible inclusion of different groups of people *p* and the articulation of their ‘ascending’ conceptions of people. No political representatives or intermediaries can claim natural or abstract entitlement to public fora and foreclose the possibility of organic pluralism. Its loosely organized network of ‘followers’ or ‘subscribers’ rather than ‘members’ greatly appealed to broad sections of the general population, with participants from each section wielding different but equally valid reasons to contest the meaning of people imposed by orthodoxy. The RM thus marked a normatively salient transition from mere people to *demos*. However, the immediate question that this raises concerns whether or to what extent does normative salience imply normative *determinacy* as well? Putting this differently but which converges on the same point, is it possible to posit the precise relation between the disarticulation of prevailing narratives about Thai-ness and the articulation of a specific alternative program of (Thai) peoplehood that all can accept as properly democratic lest competing conceptions of *demos* effectively cancel each other out?

In the following chapter, this research contends that what the RM regrettably lacks is any assurance that various groupings of participants will not attempt to dominate one another. The challenge posed from ‘below’, i.e. *among* those formerly oppressed by the undemocratic powers that be, may prove no less unsettling than the challenge posed from ‘above’, i.e. the undemocratic powers that be.

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<sup>73</sup> The exact wording in Thai is ‘*Sakdina jong pinat, pracharat jong jaroen*’ (ศักดิ์นาจงพินาศ ประชาธาจรังเจริญ). According to Chanan Yodhong and Pongkwan Sawasdiapadi, ‘*Sakdina jong pinat, pracharat jong jaroen*’ is an iteration of Khana Ratsadon of 1932’s ‘*Padetkan jong pinat, prachathipatai jong jaroen*’ (เผด็จการจงพินาศ ประชาธิปไตยจเจริญ), which literally translates to ‘Down with dictatorship, long live democracy.’ in ‘สิ่งที่ถูกละเลยในคำขวัญ "ศักดิ์นาจงพินาศ" | หมายเหตุประเทศไทย EP.350’, *Prachatai* (24 January 2021). Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/journal/2021/01/91344>.

## Chapter 5: The RM and the Challenges of a Pluralistic People

Granted that power-sharing constitutes the the main mode of interaction between otherwise dissociated elements of the RM, the more egalitarian the distribution of power is, the more inclusive and heterogenous the movement appears to be. However, whether or not this *also* amounts to an equal distribution of normative weight on all parties remains less clear and is what needs probing.

To be sure, while it is difficult to deny the transformative effects that different individuals and groups may have on one another's hearts and minds through the free use of reason—resulting in increased mutual understanding, adaptation of values, adjustment of preferences, and so on—as evinced in the youth's increased appreciation of the Red Shirts, many of whom risked their lives fighting against what the youth would eventually aspire to put down once and for all<sup>74</sup>, the argument here is that it is important to not overstate them either. This goes without saying how remiss it would be to conclude that when the struggle against extant forms of oppression is over, different peoples *p* will not attend to their *own* conceptions of good and right, which most certainly inform not only their interpretations of constitutional essentials, but also how they will come to define the People *P* (whatever these are at the end of the day). Perhaps it is even arguable that the tensions are as many and varied as the different groups of *p* that are involved in the RM.

To demonstrate our point, we shall limit our focus to three loci of principled disagreements within the movement, all of which exhibit the

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<sup>74</sup> See, for example, Anon., 'กลุ่มเกียมอุตมฯ ขอโทษ 'คนเสื้อแดง' เหตุ 12 ปีที่แล้ว คน รร. ร่วม Big Cleaning Day ทำลายหลักฐานการเสียชีวิต', *Prachatai* (19 May 2022). Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/journal/2022/05/98677>; Siriluck Kamta and Veeraphattara Siangyen, "'10 เมษายน 53 ในความทรงจำ" เขาวรุ่นคบเพลิง ม.อุบลฯ 12 ปี สลายชุมนุมคนเสื้อแดง', *Prachatai* (10 April 2022). Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/journal/2022/04/98072>; Feminista-เฟมินิสต์ต้า III, 'In praise of the Red Shirts who lost their lives in May 2010', *Twitter* (22 March 2021). Retrieved from [https://twitter.com/feminista\\_th/status/1373924258888388608?s=21&t=6Bke6lBpZz\\_W-MrAY-3lhQ](https://twitter.com/feminista_th/status/1373924258888388608?s=21&t=6Bke6lBpZz_W-MrAY-3lhQ). This explains the common saying among Gen Z protestors, 'Let it end with our generation' (ให้มันจบที่รุ่นเรา).

following two traits—(a) particularly divisive and also (b) disruptive of prevailing narratives and orthodoxies, as this is the feature that best accentuates the democratic potential of the parties to the disagreement. The three loci respectively stem from issues related to gender equality and equal rights (Chapter 5.1), monarchical reform (Chapter 5.2) and different alternatives to (hierarchical) capitalism (Chapter 5.3). Before proceeding, some preliminary remarks are warranted.

Firstly, are old divisions like the one between the Yellow and Red camps, which once dominated Thai politics, no longer important then? Not quite. I have argued elsewhere that they still matter and will continue to color Thai politics so long as the schisms remain inadequately addressed. In fact, it will even become apparent later on that some of the arguments that are involved in stoking the disagreements to be explored *are*, to a discernible extent vestiges of unresolved conflicts between the opposing ideological viewpoints of Yellow and Red. That is to say, while this research will not focus directly on the Yellow-Red divide, it nonetheless draws attention to the ways in which old divisions partially condition and frame a host of newly created divisions.

Another question one might raise concerns whether or not color-coded politics in the present context can *only* be explained with reference to Yellow and Red in the first place. Given the advent of the FFP, does its choice of the color orange not represent a tripartite colorization of politics such that the conflict is no longer between Yellow and Red, but also between Orange and Red/Yellow (or both at the same time)? Whatever the answer to this question is, what should be clear is that during the RM, some of the FFP's supporters, especially the Gen Z, deliberately sought to position themselves beyond the prescriptions of color-coded politics in its entirety. This does not mean that the newer generations were oblivious to or did not have any issues with the dispositions and arguments of both the Yellow Shirts and the Red Shirts. They simply chose not to color-code the politics of the protests. Indeed, the popular base of the FFP can be divided up in many ways, rendering it difficult to categorize them in either-or terms. The schism between Orange and Red only became apparent after the protests began to subside, with politics gradually reverting from rally mode to party mode once more. And once party politics was back in full swing, the Red-Shirt-affiliated Pheu Thai Party felt compelled to reinvent as well as differentiate itself from the FFP in

order to remain ‘politically updated’ in the eyes of the youthful protestors. Only then did the Orange-Red schism truly materialize in (party) politics.

Last but not least, what about the generational divide *within* the RM? As already discussed, the RM was not just comprised of youth groups. So why is this not treated as a locus of disagreement in its own right? After all, is this not an especially important marker of political identity in recent times? The truth is that even if we *can* treat this as another locus of disagreement, it is nonetheless likely to overlap with and shade into many other debates. The issue of generational differences can thus be broached from the vantage point of other debates. In what follows, the three aforementioned loci of disagreement constitute three different ways of apprehending the generational divide. To keep things simple and manageable, the remainder of the chapter will be organized according to the three loci.

### 5.1 Disagreeing About Feminism and Equal Rights

Consider the propensity for pro-democracy feminists to be intensely opposed to the toxic masculinity of many fellow male activists and protestors —some of whom represent the average working class male and were even veterans of the Red-Shirt movement. So severe may such antipathy be that said feminists may even prefer to have little to no association whatsoever with these people, let alone share the same conception of *demos*. If true, it would be no exaggeration to maintain that these two groups of people were compelled by sheer circumstance to join forces.

This barely concealed tension was played out most vibrantly in anonymous spaces like Twitter, where distraught feminists can be found lashing out at the patriarchal tendencies of many fellow protestors whom they chastise for operating under the veneer of struggling for equality and social justice. It is striking how many trending hashtags and widely followed feminist accounts on Twitter, colloquially referred to as ‘fem-twit’, sometimes do more to discredit a wide range of supposedly ‘pro-democracy’ male activists than act in concert with them when launching criticisms at the government and its legions of democracy-disavowing supporters.

Indeed, such skepticism has its roots in past traumatic experiences concerning the homophobic tendencies of previous democracy movements. One well-known incident, which had a scarring effect on Thai feminists and puts them on high alert ever since, was the disastrous pride parade that took place in Chiang Mai back in 2009. That was where LGBT participants in the parade were booed at and literally stoned by a group of Red Shirts called ‘Love Chiang Mai 51’.<sup>75</sup> This debacle, which came to be known as Sao Sao-Ed (เสาร์ชาวเอ็ด), was not a one-off incident. For a number of Red-Shirt leaders were also known to employ anti-gay rhetoric to the applause of crowds of protestors when slandering their political opponents.<sup>76</sup> A favorite target would no doubt be the allegedly LGBT arch-conservative statesman and president of the privy council, Prem Tinsulanonda: There were numerous occasions like this one where Prem was blamed for the country’s ills *due* to his ‘deviant sexuality’.<sup>77</sup> In the words of Daranee Thongsiri, the co-founder of a prominent feminist advocacy group called Feminista, the democracy movement in Thailand, on the whole, has always overlooked issues relating to gender equality.<sup>78</sup> Another prominent feminist activist, Waaddao (or Chumaporn Thaengkliang), similarly laments via an interview with *The Matter* that patriarchy may well be disguised in the form of ‘democracy’.<sup>79</sup> The military and the monarchy are not the only institutions that should be the polemical target of pro-democracy activists. Rather, the object of struggle should denote the patriarchal system in its entirety, which arguably includes said institutions. After all, is gender equality not a requisite of what it means for *every* person to be able to relate to one another as equal and separate

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<sup>75</sup> See Anon., ‘การละเมิดสิทธิและการใช้ความรุนแรงต่อกลุ่มผู้เดินขบวนงานเชียงใหม่เกย์ไพรด์’, *Prachatai* (17 March 2009). Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/journal/2009/03/20379>.

<sup>76</sup> See Chanan Yodhong, *ระบอบปิตาธิปไตยอันมีรักต่างเพศนิยมเป็นประมุข* (Bangkok: Textbooks Project, 2016).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>78</sup> Daranee Thongsiri, ‘ไพรด์แล้วไปไหน? ประชาธิปไตยกับสิทธิความหลากหลายทางเพศจากเชียงใหม่ไพรด์สู่พลชर्म็อบราชประสงค์’, *Feminista* (2 March 2020). Retrieved from <http://www.feminista.in.th/post/lgbtrightsanddemocracy>.

<sup>79</sup> Anon., ‘ประชาธิปไตยที่ไม่ทิ้งใครไว้ข้างหลัง ต้องมีความเป็นธรรมทางเพศ คู่กับ ชุมภาพรแต่งเก๋เลี้ยง’, *The Matter* (20 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akTS-WMSm8Q>.

members of a voluntary association in the first place? If so, would it not be absurd to ‘call for democracy before gender equality’, concludes Waaddao.<sup>80</sup>

More recently, the newer generations of pro-democracy male activists are also targeted by some of their female and LGBT counterparts. Consider how the hashtag #allmenaretrash, or simply #menaretrash, might have done more to create unnecessary divisions than raise awareness about the importance of gender equality in the process of democratization. More than anything else, employing such hashtags characterized the feminists’ attempt to purge the RM of any patriarchal elements and tendencies. And although rooting out grossly inegalitarian ideas and identifying spurious democrats may be ipso facto justifiable from a democratic point of view, it is less clear how all this entails targeting men indiscriminately. If anything, it is one thing to rule that toxic masculinity militates against the struggle of women and LGBT groups for greater social and political equality and thereby undermines the very pluralist spirit of the RM? But quite another to rule that ‘femocracy’, as one might put it, ought to take precedence over other alternative and possibly equally valid conceptions of *demos*. Put differently, it may prove possible for the RM, on the whole, to aim at gender equality *without* devolving into a matriarchal movement—that is, a sectarian movement for women supremacy rather than women empowerment.

To cite a concrete example, note how divisive is the idea of a curfew for men after six pm, believed to ‘make women a lot safer’ (for the streets at night are unsafe for women with men around and without enough bystanders to deter men from sexually assaulting and overpowering women).<sup>81</sup> Such an idea first made national headlines in Great Britain when it was entertained by Baroness Jenny Jones in the House of Lords following the suspected kidnapping and murder of Sarah Everard, and has since been picked up by feminists worldwide via platforms like Twitter. What is striking is that Baroness Jones did not actually treat this as an entirely serious suggestion. Amidst much hysteria and backlash from both male and female peers in

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> See A. McGuinness, ‘Sarah Everard: Baroness who suggested 6pm curfew for men says she wanted to make a point’, *Sky News* (12 March 2021). Retrieved from <https://news.sky.com/story/sarah-everard-baroness-who-suggested-6pm-curfew-for-men-says-she-wanted-to-make-a-point-12243462>.

parliament as well as the general public, one *Guardian* columnist had to remind that

Nobody seriously really thinks a curfew for men is a good idea... Jones was doing this little thing called *pointing out double standards*. As Jones later clarified (and it's pretty depressing that she had to clarify this), her remarks were not a serious policy proposal. Rather, they were a response to the fact that London police have advised women 'not to go out alone' after Everard's disappearance, and no one seemed to 'bat an eyelid'.<sup>82</sup>

It was simply a saucy way of placing men in a predicament on par with what women *always* had to endure.

Unfortunately, not all feminists wanted to limit themselves to what the baroness judiciously hoped to achieve. Some, namely the more radical proponents of #menaretrash, genuinely believed that compared to what they have gone through (all) men *deserve* to be treated as such. This, of course, drew heavy criticisms from both non-feminists and feminists alike. It becomes possible to assess how widespread such sentiments were via social platforms like Twitter and Facebook, as a growing number of Thai netizens can be seen employing such hashtags and in doing so propagate the idea that men are to be blamed for virtually everything, including the suggestion that a curfew for men may, indeed, be justified. The truth is that the line between polemical device and policy proposal may very well be blurred in favor of the latter. This is precisely what the so-called 'fem-twits' in Thailand have been accused of doing, and there appears to be ample evidence to arraign the accused.<sup>83</sup>

To elaborate, there are roughly two aspects to the reasoning behind the recommendation that a night-time curfew ought to apply to *all* men, irrespective of whether or not the individual in question has ever been

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<sup>82</sup> A. Mahdawi, 'Angry at the idea of a curfew for men? Think of all the ways women are told to adapt', *The Guardian* (13 March 2021). Retrieved from [https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/13/men-curfew-sarah-everard-women-adapt-violence?CMP=share\\_btn\\_tw](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/13/men-curfew-sarah-everard-women-adapt-violence?CMP=share_btn_tw).

<sup>83</sup> Search, for example, variations of #menaretrash or '*harm puchai ork jark baan*' (ห้ามผู้ชายออกจากบ้าน), which translates to 'men can't leave the house', on Twitter or Facebook, and one will find quite a spectrum of opinions and arguments.



charged or associated with any form of sexual offense—not to mention possible rebuttals to such reasoning as well.

The first line of reasoning is that men, no matter how innocent they may be, have the privilege of being oblivious to what women have to go through in a male-dominated society—that is, not knowing what it is like to be on the weak side of power inequalities and live under the constant trepidation that gender-based violence may be inflicted on them in all sorts of ways. As such, women have reason to be distrustful of men *in general*, and men should understand why such drastic measures ought to be taken to ensure the safety of women. In response though, an innocent man might object that it is unfair that *he* has to carry the burdens of the injustices that he did not *consciously* let happen, let alone perpetrate in any way. From this it follows that distrustful feminists have insufficient reason to deprive him of the right to freedom of movement, or so as the counter-argument goes.

Second, perhaps no man is *wholly* innocent to begin with. For men should take *collective* responsibility for or, even better, action against the *structural* injustices inflicted on women by *any* member of their gender-caste. However, the defensive male can reasonably object that this fails to respect his right to individual autonomy—i.e. the idea that humans, regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, ideological background, and so on, are separate and equal persons, not absorbed in nor subordinate to some collective entity (that claims to *P*) that s/he did not willingly partake of nor give consent to. By denying men their right to collective self-determination, these feminists are effectively ‘ruling’ on their behalf, with the *demos* here being defined along gender-specific lines.

As we can see, the moral and epistemological stand-off<sup>84</sup> here between the matriarchalist feminist and the defensive male implies that the former cannot so easily override the latter's undefeated, reasonable moral challenge without violating a basic norm of mutual and reciprocal justification. Unless the latter *is* convinced by and therefore willingly assents to the demands of the former, such demands, no matter how justified from a partisan point of view, risks substituting patriarchal forms of domination with more matriarchal ones.

While it is difficult to deny that any pluralist democratic arrangement must, on pains of contradiction, incorporate gender equality into its theoretical minimum, judgement about particular issues like the one above, which exceeds what is essential for everyone to give up in order to satisfy said minimum, ought to be subject to a degree of pluralism and indeterminacy. Indeed, the challenge that besets the RM is that the relatively equal distribution of power conferred among different and potentially conflicting groups of people *p* does not necessarily instill in feminists, or any *p* for that matter, an overriding political obligation to others with whom one may morally disagree such that an equal and equitable distribution of intrinsic importance among the different components (or *p*) of 'We the Ratsadon' can be attained. After all, who are they (e.g. the feminists) to decide for others what is the more equitable distribution of importance, one might quip. It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between inclusive and non-inclusive, dominating and non-dominating, forms of feminism as the preliminary first step to rendering feminism consistent with the notion of an internally differentiated *demos*. In fact, there are so many different iterations of feminist ideology, and the feminist sub-movement in Thailand remains far

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<sup>84</sup> This term is borrowed from G.F. Gaus. In *Contemporary Theories of Liberalism* (London: Sage, 2003), p. 215, Gaus explains that

Philosophers can keep arguing and publishing about these unresolved issues—indeed, *these* are just the issues that philosophers typically *do* argue and write about. However, as citizens we are in a different position. Whether animals are to be protected or income redistributed are pressing matters of practice, not just material for philosophical reflection. If, as seems likely, most of our moral disputes result in epistemological stand-offs, what are liberal citizens committed to public justification to do right here and now? If Alf has an undefeated, reasonable, belief that Betty's wealth should be redistributed to Charlie, but he acknowledges that he has not defeated her challenges, what should he do?

from unified.<sup>85</sup> Not all feminists are like Baroness Jones. But all feminists at least claim to advocate for gender equality in some form or the other, which often if not always presupposes a non-male-centric conception of *demos*.

Note that if the exclusion of a particular identity or group from agenda-setting is to be publicly justified, there is pro tanto reason for members of an inclusive democratic community to first give equal hearing to each party, no matter how idiosyncratic or ‘toxic’ their views may strike at first. This is to avoid potential arrogance on the part of the alleged ‘democratizers’ and the reduction of the RM to a mere battleground wherein dogmatic entities vie for total supremacy. Even though a person or group may not be impervious to public deliberation and the reasoned arguments of others, one must concede that sometimes disagreements are there to stay. It is wishful thinking to assume that all differences can be reconciled in the name of rational progress or some common substantive good that all can and ought to consent to. Surely, disputants can still find a way of *settling* any outstanding differences between them via procedures like simple majority voting or logrolling as method of creating complex majorities<sup>86</sup>. But the fact that reasonable people may continue to disagree about what the *substance* of rights, equality and justice is implies that an *epistemic* argument can be marshaled in support of the pervasiveness of disagreements in politics. We need not go so far as identifying the stuff of politics with conflict and domination simpliciter in order to vindicate just how difficult reaching a consensus on the optimal solution can be when differences run deep.

In fact, even if an overriding commitment to protecting everyone’s rights is shared among the protestors, this does not imply that democratic disagreements about rights cannot be had. Conversely, it would be undemocratic vis-à-vis different groups of *p* to limit the scope of possible disagreement about rights and other constitutional essentials. As legal and political philosopher, Seyla Benhabib, once wrote,

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<sup>85</sup> See Pattanun Arunpreechawat, ‘Debunking misconceptions: Feminism explained’, *Prachatai English* (6 August 2020). Retrieved from <https://prachatai.com/english/node/8699>.

<sup>86</sup> See J.H. Carens, ‘Compromises in politics’, *Nomos: Compromise in Ethics, Law, and Politics* 21 (1979), pp. 123–141, pp. 132–136.

At any point in time in the democratic conversation, we are in the midst of *recursive iterations* about the meaning, extent and validity of our rights claims as well as visions of the good life... [By having a say in the determination of law] certain interpretations of rights such as equality of participation in deliberative and voting procedures must be *always already* presupposed even while we continue to disagree about what such equality may mean. We are always in *media res* in the democratic conversation.<sup>87</sup>

The same applies to conversations sparked by the feminist advocacy for a more egalitarian society. Does this entail that men should have fewer rights than they already have, such as diminished freedom of movement after dark? Or should this *simply* be interpreted as a reduction on male privileges? Alternatively, is it the case that women and LGBT people should be granted the same amount of privileges as men? Whatever the case, there are probably as many different shades of feminism as the number of possible ‘recursive iterations’ of equal rights for women and LGBT people. Obviously, this is not to say that all strains of feminism are consistent with pluralism. For only those strains that presuppose inclusive dialogue and encourage democratic disagreements are publicly justifiable in a context of moral and epistemological diversity.

Now, suppose that a higher-level consensus on toleration can be reached where participants with no shared comprehensive moral background can nonetheless agree to tolerate one another on the basis of the universal right to freedom of belief and expression. In what follows, a commitment to toleration does not *eo ipso* amount to the building of equal political relations between the tolerator and the tolerated. Consider how a tolerant feminist might retort to a defensive male protestor whose views she might find morally objectionable: ‘I think it is right to tolerate your existence but wrong to give you an equal say in the setting of political agendas and the determination of law’. The tolerator here is clearly unwilling to reach a compromise agreement with the tolerated on legislative matters or any matters that are of constitutional significance. Listening to Christian F. Rostbøll, a leading proponent of democratic compromise, ‘A conception of toleration tells us why and how everyone should be treated as subjects of the law, while a normative theory of [democratic] compromise tells us how and

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<sup>87</sup> S. Benhabib, ‘A militant defence of democracy in hard times’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 20 (2020), pp. 1–6, p. 4.

whom to include in making laws that apply to everyone'.<sup>88</sup> By excluding the tolerated from the procedure of law, the tolerator may still be seen as tolerant. The tolerator imposes his or her conception of toleration on the tolerated, thereby elevating him- or herself over the tolerated and transforming toleration into a *hierarchical* relationship.<sup>89</sup> Instead of making democratic concessions to co-citizens whose conceptions of toleration may differ from theirs so as to reach a compromise agreement on a substantive conception of toleration that all can accept, albeit as second-best, the tolerator 'takes the meaning and implication of toleration as a given'.<sup>90</sup>

The upshot is that different groups of *p* in the RM may be able to form but *not* equally pursue and implement their own substantive conceptions of toleration at the level of agenda-setting and constitution-drafting. If one takes the *demos* to include just the tolerators and not the tolerated, then we may say that the concept of *demos* here is dependent on a particular conception of toleration rather than a normative theory of compromise between different and competing conceptions of toleration. More will be said about the nature of democratic compromise in Chapter 6.2.

Feminism and equal rights aside, another major locus of disagreement, which proved no less disruptive of prevailing narratives as well as threatening to the RM's internal coherence, concerns the issue of monarchical reform. Introducing monarchical reform as one of the three main umbrella objectives of the RM did not only infuriate many hardcore conservatives who wished to preserve the status quo as much as they could. More importantly for our purposes, it also stirred much controversy and heated debates among the protestors, pitting the newer generations against the older generations of participants for one thing and revealing another set of important ideological fault lines that may end up splitting the movement for another.

## 5.2 Disagreeing About Monarchical Reform

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<sup>88</sup> C.F. Rostbøll, 'Compromise and toleration: Responding to disagreement', in C.F. Rostbøll & T. Scavenius (Eds.) *Compromise and Disagreement in Contemporary Political Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 17–33, p. 24.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Despite the presence of an overarching agreement on the need to reform the monarchy, the reasons for reform and possible answers to the questions of what relevance the monarchy still has in this day and age, what aspect(s) of the monarchy should be changed (and changed into what exactly) and the extent to which the monarchy should be blamed for the country's ills remain far from settled. On one hand, some protestors feel less strongly about criticizing the previous monarch, the highly revered King Bhumibhol Adulyadej, blaming the incumbent monarch, his erratic and authoritarian successor, King Vajiralongkorn, instead for the monarchy's decline over the years. On the other, there are those more bent on polemicizing against the monarchical institution in toto, preferring not to make any qualitative or normatively salient distinctions between individual royals.<sup>91</sup> Such sentiments are exemplified in the trending motto, 'No God, no king, only human', an iteration of Ayn Rand's oft-quoted maxim made popular among the youth by the bestselling BioShock video game. At any rate, the RM decidedly dubbed the regime it hoped to usher in a 'democratic regime with the monarchy beneath the constitution' (ระบอบประชาธิปไตยที่มีพระมหากษัตริย์อยู่ภายใต้รัฐธรรมนูญ), thus signaling a departure from the more ambiguous and arguably more semi-democratic 'democratic regime with the monarchy as head' (ระบอบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์เป็นประมุข). Compared to previous democracy movements, this was something unprecedented.

In a Facebook post by high-profile entrepreneur and blogger, Pippo Pramewith Sreechatthiwong, which was shared almost thirteen thousand times, calls for the differentiation of preferences among people with contrasting ideological convictions have been made.<sup>92</sup> Pippo fears that the conflation of preferences along epistemic lines might do more to render the movement less appealing to a wide range of potential supporters than *persuade* them of what the most optimal, i.e. 'truthful', preference is—that is, convince everyone via the force of the better argument to modify their

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<sup>91</sup> Apart from the late King Bhumibol, his daughter, Princess Sirindhorn, also remains widely beloved and revered.

<sup>92</sup> Pippo Pramewith Sreechatthiwong, 'ประเด็นในหลวงรัชกาลที่ 9 ถูกพูดถึงหนาหูในช่วงนี้', *Facebook* (last modified 18 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/523895262/posts/10164177415430263/>.

substantive preferences accordingly. One must be open to the likelihood that a consensus on the truth about the monarchy is difficult, if not virtually impossible, to achieve in the short- to medium-term.

According to Pippo, four broad groupings of people can be discerned on the basis of differentiating between the various possible perceptions of the monarchy. The table below illustrates this.

Table 3.

	Pro-Reform (and by Extension the RM)	Anti-Reform (and by Extension the RM)
Group 1	Dislikes both monarchs	
Group 2	Ambivalent towards King Bhumibol, but dislikes King Vajiralongkorn	
Group 3	Reveres King Bhumibol, but dislikes King Vajiralongkorn	
Group 4		Reveres both monarchs

As we can see, the most obvious head-on collision is likely to occur between members of Group 1 and members of Group 4 (whom, by inference, are also most critical of the RM). And although Groups 2 and 3 both have similar reasons to reform the monarchy—namely, minimize the negative effects of a malevolent ruler should one happen to ascend the throne—their calls for reform are likely to be substantially different from and not as drastic as Group 1’s. Pippo also crucially remarks that Groups 2 and 3 probably formed the majority of the Thai population as well as the bulk of the RM’s networks of supporters.<sup>93</sup> As such, calling for sweeping reforms, not to mention the abolishment of monarchy, is not only potentially undemocratic vis-à-vis various groups but also likely to drive broad sections of people away from the movement.

A music icon and former Yellow-Shirt celebrity figure, Sukanya Migel, professed via an interview conducted by the Free Youth group that before

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

joining the September 19 mass rally, she vexed a great deal over whether the calls for monarchical reform to be made during the rally were anti-monarchical in essence or not.<sup>94</sup> Knowing that about a month earlier the UFTD issued ten points regarding the reform of the monarchy, Sukanya wanted to make sure that none of these points contradicted the *raison d'être* of the monarchy. She still avowed her allegiances to the monarchical and believed that the monarchy is still necessary for the country and the future of Thai society, all the while maintaining that the *lèse majesté* law needs to be repealed, among other things. For her, reform may indeed work towards the betterment rather than detriment of the monarchy.<sup>95</sup> Someone like Sukanya thus shows how it is perfectly plausible to revile an authoritarian government and the sort of ultra-conservative ethos it embodies but still value the monarchy and hope for its transformation into an ostensibly more democratic institution.

In truth, many protestors may fall within the same category as Sukanya. Prospective candidates are those who formerly identified as Yellow Shirts, or anyone who identified as more conservative-minded for that matter. But perhaps most noteworthy is that like their Yellow-Shirt counterparts, Red-Shirt participants in the RM were, on the whole, also not entirely as radical as the Gen Z protestors when it comes to matters pertaining to the monarchy. This, therefore, captures the generational divide *within* the RM and makes plain how the youth, many of whom arguably formed the majority of Group 1 (not to say that the youth do not also maintain a strong presence in Groups 2, 3 and 4), came to lament about how the older generations of freedom fighters lacked well-formed ideas about the monarchy. Notwithstanding the question of whether or not the older generations *are* what the youth deemed them to be, surely members of Groups 2 and 3 may adduce undefeated counter-arguments and ideological justifications to shore up their stances on the monarchy, as witnessed in the inconclusive scholarly

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<sup>94</sup> Anon., ‘ฟังความคิด "สุกัญญา มิเกล" อดีตกปปส.และพันธมิตร’, *Free YOUTH* (25 October 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKyW69BGm3A>.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*



debates between right-wing royalist academics and their left-wing academic critics.<sup>96</sup>

Problem arises when one group attempts to arrogate to themselves the right to define the *demos* qua People *P* in terms of their own particular and hence non-shareable understandings of the relationship (or lack thereof) between democracy and the monarchy. A notable example, as will be evidenced shortly, is Group 1 proposing to sever all links between *ratsadon* and the interpretation of people as ‘royal subjects’, that is, *pasoknikorn*. The danger is that this risks belittling and sidelining the convictions of people like Sukanya—which speak for quite a wide range of democratically-inclined royalists. If anything, these royalists have attempted to demonstrate how consistent it is for Thai citizens to identify as subjects *of* the crown while maintaining also that power ultimately derives *from* the non-coerced consent of those very subjects. In other words, royal authority and what it means to be a royal subject are seen as products of voluntary agreement. A people, on this account, is thus part royal subjects and part democratic citizens, as opposed to subjects in the sense of *universitas*, so to speak. As such, members of Group 2 may even insist that both qualities are intended to mutually reinforce one another rather than constitute a contradiction in terms. Of course, the pro-democracy protestors, on the whole, need not to converge on such line of thought or draw similar conclusions lest organic democratic pluralism be watered down. The important point is that Group 1, or any of the four groupings for that matter, lack epistemically and morally overriding

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<sup>96</sup> For a list of works from the conservative side of the scholarly debate on the role and relevance of the monarchy in contemporary Thai politics, see Mark Tamthai, ‘การปกครองระบอบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข’, in Santisuk Sophonsiri (Ed.) *วิถีสังคมไท สรรนิพนธ์ทางวิชาการเนื่องในวาระหนึ่งศตวรรษ ปรีดี พนมยงค์ ชุดที่ 2: ความคิดทางการเมืองการปกครอง* (Bangkok: Pridi Bhanomyong Institute, 2001), pp. 21–47; Nakharin Mektrairat, *พระผู้ทรงปกเกล้าฯ ประชาธิปไตย : ๖๐ ปีสิริราชสมบัติกับการเมืองการปกครองไทย* (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2006); Chaiyan Chaiyaporn, *ประเพณีการปกครองระบอบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข บทวิเคราะห์มาตรา 7 จากรัฐธรรมนูญแห่งราชอาณาจักรไทย 2540 ถึงรัฐธรรมนูญฉบับปัจจุบัน (จากมุมมองทางรัฐศาสตร์)*, (Bangkok: King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2019); Supamit Pitipat, *จุดเริ่มต้นสถาปนา ‘การปกครองระบอบประชาธิปไตย มีพระมหากษัตริย์เป็นประมุข’* (Bangkok: King Prajadhipok's Institute, 2020); Hathaikarn Treesuwan, ‘สถาบันกษัตริย์ : ไชยน์ต์ ไชยพร จาก “มวลงชนพันธมิตร” สู่หัวหน้าทีมวิจัยเรื่องมวลงชนในยุค ร. 9’, *BBC News Thai* (13 February 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-56036510>.

reasons to ‘conflate different preferences’ and impel other groups to adopt the same outlook on democratic citizenship as theirs. To insist otherwise, in spite of valid opposition, then, would only cost other groups their ideological integrities and undefeated ideological justifications. The result is none other than domination. The question we have stalled until now concerns how ample the body of evidence needed to corroborate such an incriminating case against members of Group 1 is. Evidence, as it turns out, is glaring.

Divulging the phenomenon of the one-million-member strong anti-royalist ‘Royalist Marketplace’ group on Facebook and the influence that it enjoys across and beyond online spheres, Ken Lohatepanont, a columnist at *The Thai Enquirer*, warns that Thais are not far from ‘the emergence of a new, unquestionable ideological standard’ and thus urgently need to remind themselves ‘where do old orthodoxies end and new orthodoxies being? What is education and what is ideological indoctrination?’<sup>97</sup> Ken points that veteran journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk’s questioning attitude towards the ‘facts’ propagated there have not been most welcomed. Subsequent calls for him to be removed from the Facebook group by its most stalwart members (most of whom can be identified as belonging to Group 1) attested to the fears ‘that the group is not “a real *marketplace* of ideologies where people argue and communicate freely, it’s merely [the group founder, Pavin Chachavalpongpun’s,] virtual ideological dominion”’.<sup>98</sup> What appeared to be unfolding then was people like Pavin and a number of his followers who look up to him as a sort of gatekeeper of the facts effectively canceling people like Pravit whose posturing and opinions pose a threat to the group’s waxing influence over Thai public opinion and the shaping of the protestors’ unofficial political creed. But suppressing difference and stomping out disagreement were hardly convincing strategies and will only push prospective interlocutors and allies away from the RM. The corollary is that once these people feel unwelcome they may grow more resentful towards the movement and become more ambivalent towards ‘old orthodoxies’ — namely, previous opponents who may nonetheless afford them the decency of not

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<sup>97</sup> Emphasis added, Ken Lohatepanont, ‘The war on salim and the problem with Thailand’s emerging cancel culture’, *Thai Enquirer* (8 September 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.thaienquirer.com/17988/the-war-on-salim-and-the-problem-with-thailands-emerging-cancel-culture/>.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

antagonizing them.<sup>99</sup> For this reason, should Pavin and his cult following ever succeed in holding sway over the RM in terms of agenda-setting, members of Groups 2 and 3 might summarily turn their backs on the movement for fear of domination, and perhaps even grow more sympathetic towards Group 4 out of spite for Group 1!

Another piece of hard concrete evidence comes straight from the reception of Pippo's widely circulated Facebook post. The post, for what it is worth, attracted mixed responses. While some commenters lauded it for its nuance and non-jaundiced assessment of a highly sensitive issue, others found his analyses to be grossly misleading. For instance, one Facebook user, who clearly sympathized with Group 1, mocked Pippo's attempt at epistemic differentiation as utter gibberish and a waste of time. Upon sharing the post, this netizen captioned what he believes to be the lack of any salient distinction between the previous monarch and the incumbent one. As such, this netizen can be seen as rather laying claim to truth than acknowledging the possibility that vis-à-vis other groupings of citizens his claim constituted nothing more than one preference among many other possible preferences. His candid statement thus conveyed the refusal to come to grips with the possibility of persistent disagreement between conflicting claims to truth, which is the underlying message of Pippo's post. In a sense, what this netizen revealed was precisely what Pippo fears most: The netizen's disgusted reaction corroborated Pippo's worries that certain self-styled 'democrats' might be more skeptical than welcoming of difference.

But in defense, what if this netizen retorts by stating that being eschewed is not difference *simpliciter* but more specifically *those* differences that lead people astray from what the essentials of *any* well-ordered democracy can demand from each and every citizen? Here, being sallied forth is the suggestion that the Thai monarchy is fundamentally at odds with democratic aspirations. For this reason, it follows that *all* groups of people *p* —regardless of whichever specific conception of *demos* they prefer—should accept as the democratic minimum, the minimization (if not the total eradication) of the monarchy's role in shaping national identity and peoplehood. Is this right?

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<sup>99</sup> This was argued in Dulyaphab, 'Thailand's ideological struggle', *op. cit.*, Ref . 9.

A counter-objection would be that entertaining such a line of defense is, again, *epistemically* questionable. After all, the monarchy's defenders also have much to say regarding the (possible) democratic sensibilities and tendencies of the Thai monarchy.<sup>100</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this research to determine which side is right (if there can ever be a victor), until then the impending challenge for disagreeing Thais is how to prevent one particular *p* from seizing control of *P* and dominating all other *p* within the movement in the process.

The third and final locus of disagreement to be examined pertains to the protestors' growing concerns towards the extremes of capitalism under the current political system and the question of how to best cope with that. It is worth adding that unlike the two loci of disagreement just covered, this locus actually managed to transform the RM from a pluralistic and inclusive movement of and by the people understood severally to a political sect with highly particularized and somewhat pre-determined aims and agendas. Being installed was a new and more distinctively *socialist* phase of the Thai Spring initially called Restart Thailand (RT) and shortly thereafter Restart Democracy (REDEM).

### 5.3 Disagreeing About (Hierarchical) Capitalism and its Alternatives

Compared to topics like feminism and monarchical reform, the issue with capitalism proved no less divisive among different proponents of the RM. The current capitalist system can be seen as contributing to the widening gap between rich and poor, perpetuating social and economic disparities at an unprecedented scale and causing many to call into question its very nature and links to the semi-authoritarian state apparatus under which it appears to thrive. While some protestors merely problematize what Prajak Kongkirati and Veerayooth Kanchoochat aptly call the 'hierarchical' nature of the present mode of capitalism in Thailand, which appeared to sit easily with 'embedded military' rule, others view capitalism, on the whole, as a systemic and permanent threat to democratic citizens everywhere.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> See Footnote 96.

<sup>101</sup> Prajak and Veerayooth, 'The Prayuth Regime', *op. cit.*, Ref. 4.

In fact, it turns out that disagreements on this matter span both inter-generationally and intra-generationally. To belong to Gen Z does not necessarily imply increased affinity towards socialist polemics and arguments in support of a robust welfare state as way of combatting capitalism. For some members might be more liberal- than socialist-minded, and hence more complacent towards capitalism, on the whole. Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that the project of socialism not only gained currency mainly among the youth. Its very existence was owed to a fraction of them, namely, the Free Youth protest group and their youthful followers. In what followed, the launching of RT in December of 2020 by said group catapulted such divisions to the fore.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Free Youth helped mobilize vast networks of protests via its widely followed accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so on. The group became instrumental in keeping the RM running like a well-oiled machine. However, its members were also closet Marxists who eventually unveiled their true markings when they reset the agenda of the movement at will. Combined with a number of other pressing concerns like the increasingly violent, anarchical and non-strategic nature of the protests this ultimately brought a premature end to a once powerful movement before various other schisms could deliver further blows. In a word, the people behind the Free Youth simply could not resist the itch of the Marxian grand narrative of history and the call for a socialist revolution of some sort. The price would be the Thai Spring losing the initiative it once had in rallying diverse groups of people.

In the Facebook post where RT was officially launched, criticisms from far and wide poured in.<sup>102</sup> Unlike the RM, RT opted to interpret the people not merely as *ratsadon*, but more specifically as *rangngan* (แรงงาน), which translates to workers, laborers or the proletariat. This is crisply summarized in the RT's official slogan, '*rangngarn sang chart mi chai maharaja ong dai*' (แรงงานสร้างชาติ มิใช่มหาราชองค์ใด), meaning 'the nation is built on the back of the work force, not by any great king'. As we can see, this not only stands in contrast to the idea that the 'nation', and by extension what it means to be a Thai People *P*, are determined from 'above'.

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<sup>102</sup> Free YOUTH, 'RESTART THAILAND', *Facebook* (last modified 7 December 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth/photos/a.115688233213576/411549110294152/>.

More importantly, it also equated the notion of Ratsadon in the RM with one particular conception of *ratsadon qua demos* at the expense of all possible others. Put another way, the Ratsadon was no longer a multitude of particular peoples *p*. It now signified a single united sense of people (or *P*), that is, the people understood collectively along the lines of economic class. Not surprising at all is how Marxist terminologies and arguments were also deployed by the Free Youth for the purposes of underpinning the palace's embedded-ness within the complex capitalist machinery that is the root cause of all extant forms of oppression, or so as they believe. To top it all off, the instigators of RT adopted the hammer and sickle motif as the movement's new logo, thus further conveying the desire to 'raise' the popular movement from a great convergence of different peoples with separate ideological reasonings to a unified proletarian revolution.

In the comments section of RT's opening post on Facebook, one netizen expressed concerns that the movement is edging in the direction of the extreme left.<sup>103</sup> This commenter goes on to warn that the concept of human equality, for example, cannot and should not be monopolized by a single political ideology. Rather than have the socialists wield the term 'equality' as they see fit—most notably by referring to idea of equality in all matters as their distinguishing core and the catchall concept for their grand political designs—such concept is best understood as being constitutive of and, in part, constituted by a spectrum of political ideologies running the gamut from left to right.

In response, another Facebook commenter quips that there is nothing amiss about the RT's decision to cast ordinary citizens as pitiful 'workers' toiling under the overbearing weight of the dehumanizing capitalist system.<sup>104</sup> The label of *rangngarn*, so to speak, unequivocally applies to *any* person or group exploited by the owners of capital. In other words, traditional working-class groups—be it manual or unskilled labor—are not the only people to whom the label of *rangngarn* properly belongs. The conception of people as *rangngan* is more ubiquitous than typically assumed because capitalism can be seen to manifest itself in countless numbers of ways under ever-changing circumstances and modes of economic production.

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

At any rate, the epistemological challenge here is: How can a socialist or Marxist sympathizer possibly claim to speak for everyone when there is no definite way of knowing what each person genuinely desires or is substantively good for them? Are people's value systems not 'mutually incommensurable'<sup>105</sup>, as Isaiah Berlin once admonishingly described?

On one hand, the socialist may have an undefeated reason to not alter his or her substantive position on matters of truth and morality. But on the other, the skeptic may also rightly insist how perfectly plausible it is for a great many people to not see themselves as *rangngarn* in the pejorative sense of the term, or in any sense of the term at all, and perhaps with justifiable reason. Consider how after careful deliberation these people may be content with being a 'corporate slave' after all—which includes making meritocratic distinctions, commodifying desires, dreaming about owning fancy cars and luxury handbags, and so on and so forth (no matter how unlikely fulfilling these desires can be). As such, in spite of what the Marxist has to say about toiling under the capitalist system and so on, they may most certainly brush aside all that and claim to *value* agency in the form of freedom of choice above all. That is to say, they may value such agency more than having to realize some 'inner potential' that is not necessarily of their own choosing but is what the Marxist prescribes as right for them based on the latter's specific understanding of human equality and freedom. Being intimated, one might say, is the famous distinction between liberal and socialist interpretations of freedom as first discussed by Berlin in his essay on the two concepts of liberty.<sup>106</sup> Therein, Berlin identifies the socialist, i.e. 'positive', understanding of freedom as 'liberating' only in the sense that one is required to act or realize one's life in a certain way in order to be free. This is connected to the idea that democracy, above all, is about 'self-realization' through collective control over political life, that is, rule of and by the proletariat. It is a valid ideal but is neither greater nor less important than 'negative' liberal freedom, which conveys the opposite ideal of removing as many obstacles to action as possible while leaving open the choice of

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<sup>105</sup> I. Berlin, 'The pursuit of the ideal', in H. Hardy and R. Hausheer (Eds) *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (London: Pimlico, 1998), pp. 1–16.

<sup>106</sup> I. Berlin, 'Two concepts of liberty', in I. Berlin (Ed.) *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 118–172.

action.<sup>107</sup> Indeed, this is what it means for values to be mutually incommensurable.

Hence, it would be arrogant and potentially dominating for the Marxist sympathizer to discount the skeptic's or the liberal's opposing epistemological and moral claims by instead allowing the Free Youth to have a free hand in transforming the Thai Spring into RT. Note that although many scholars and political commentators were known to employ a range of Marxist methods and tools of critical inquiry when conducting their own analyses of Thai political economy, they remain largely indifferent, if not outright diffident, towards the programmatic solutions that Marxism also offers.<sup>108</sup> Only a handful openly countenanced the prospects of communism —some of whom included the activist university professor and former Red-Shirt protestor, Kengkij Kitirianglarp, and Soravis Jayanama, the university professor who some even claimed was the main intellectual advisor to the Free Youth.<sup>109</sup>

If Marxism's failure to be a rallying point for varied dissidents was not already disconcerting enough for RT's instigators, it appears that Marx's main addressees, the traditional working class, were no less nonchalant towards the RT. Consider the following phenomenon: In a somewhat embarrassing turn of events, even the manual laborers and migrant workers of a deeply inegalitarian city like Bangkok failed to rise to RT's call for a

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, K. Hewison, 'Thailand's capitalism before and after the economic crisis,' in R. Robison, M. Beeson, K. Jayasuriya and Hyuk-Rae Kim (Eds) *Politics and Markets in the Wake of the Asian Crisis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 192–211; J. Glassman, 'Economic crisis in Asia: The case of Thailand', *Economic Geography*, 77 (2001), pp. 122–147; Kasian Tejapira, 'Toppling Thaksin', *New Left Review*, 39 (New Series) (2006), pp. 5–37; Chapters from Pasuk Phongpaichit and C. Baker (Eds) *Thai Capital After the 1997 Crisis* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2008); Puangchon Unchanam, *Royal Capitalism: Wealth, Class, and Monarchy in Thailand* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020).

<sup>109</sup> Free Youth even featured Soravis in an exclusive interview on Free YOUTH, 'ปลดแอก with SORAVIS EP.1', *Facebook* (last modified 30 January 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth/posts/446592230123173/>. Kengkij was also invited to a roundtable discussion on the welfare state in Free YOUTH, 'สังคมนิยม เป็นเรื่องมโน เพื่อเจอ?', *Facebook* (29 December 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth/photos/a.115688233213576/426587272123669/?type=3>.



proletarian uprising or, at the very least, incur the slightest stirrings of a ‘March of History’ intended to set them down the path to emancipation. In a Grab Taxi demonstration that occurred not long after the launching of RT, the Free Youth page announced ‘Grab Labor Awakens!... “Know that we are all proletariats, not independent partners as they [the owners of capital] have tricked us into believing”’.<sup>110</sup> Jasmine Chia, a columnist at the *Thai Enquirer*, recounts what happened next:

In response, the Grab movement’s Facebook page wrote: ‘What is this...?’ Instead, the Grab movement’s Facebook administrators declared that the movement was apolitical, and that they only wanted to raise one (middle) finger to the company. There was no intent to identify themselves as part of the collective the students wanted to term ‘labor’, nor any interest in allying themselves against any corporation other than the specific one they were contracted to work for. While they may come to take on a shared identity through further collective organizing, they still saw themselves as individual, independent contractors and entrepreneurs.

According to Jasmine, such an undertaking was seriously flawed because it failed to engage with ‘the specificity of the Thai context’.<sup>111</sup> If anything, without the sort of well-formed class consciousness necessary for fostering class solidarity and a collective ethos the way Marx would have wanted, it might even seem more alluring for both rural and urban working-class Thais to aim at having a share in the capitalists’ pie of ownership of capital as opposed to rejecting capitalism tout court! What is more, despite the ideology of the Red Shirts being *broadly* leftist in tenor, I have shown elsewhere that the Red Shirts—the majority of whom were farmers and migrant workers—cannot be classified as socialists or Marxists, let alone communists!<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Free YOUTH, ‘แรงงานแกร็บรวมตัว ลั่น!’, *Facebook* (last modified 8 December 2020). Retrieved from <https://m.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth/photos/a.115688233213576/412280966887633/>. Note that this announcement is a play on the Khana Ratsadon of 1932’s declaration, ‘Dear ratsadon, know that this country belongs to you and not the king as the you were tricked into believing’. See Footnote .

<sup>111</sup> Jasmine Chia, ‘Opinion: Another world is possible, and it isn’t communism’, *Thai Enquirer* (17 December 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.thaienquirer.com/21654/opinion-another-world-is-possible-and-it-isnt-communism/>.

<sup>112</sup> Dulyaphab, ‘Thailand’s ideological struggle’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9.

After facing persistent backlash over what citizens from far and wide similarly perceived to be the foreshadowing of a proletariat dictatorship, the Free Youth decided to rebrand the movement as REDEM, jettisoning the hammer-and-sickle motif, among other things. The rebranding, however, proved inadequate. Although it certainly tried to present more clearly and convincingly why ‘social democracy’ is the next major step of the movement, it remained unclear whether or not, all things considered, communism still figures as the terminus ad quem of the movement in the long-run.

In the Facebook post where Free Youth officially launched REDEM, it was announced that apart from reforming the monarchy and ‘expelling the military from politics’, REDEM also sought to make Thailand a full-fledged welfare state.<sup>113</sup> While some commenters expressed satisfaction towards what they saw as a more palatable ‘next step’ rather than ‘great leap’ forward in comparison to the eye-brow raising (communist) manifesto of RT, others still felt that the increased particularity of its calls for change is something that should be settled later.<sup>114</sup> To be more specific, the newly appended proposition concerning the welfare state constitutes a substantive detail that ought to be worked out post-reform. As one commenter remarks, before the substantive merits of the welfare state can be properly assessed, there exists procedural-institutional blockages—be it the 250 hand-picked senators, the compromised election and national anti-corruption commissions and the highly arbitrary judicial courts—that first needs to be systematically

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<sup>113</sup> Free YOUTH, ‘เปิดตัว! REDEM – ประชาชนสร้างตัว’, *Facebook* (24 February 2021). Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/FreeYOUTHth/posts/pfbid0S3hunX8FsBUC94EYH3VYNX5yJmaAPTPkqB1EgL1uneRMnQ4nihJvTi7fXbpZyCRz>.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

corrected.<sup>115</sup> These are matters that must be seen to undergird any substantive political arrangement, as they determine the ‘rules of the game’ upon which political debates can be waged and democratic disagreements can be had.

In addition, the Free Youth declared that another distinguishing feature of REDEM is the belief that no staffs, guards or protest leaders of any sort will be needed during the protests, as this is what ‘true democracy’ looks like.<sup>116</sup> Listening to Neo-Marxists like Soravis and Kengkij, both of whom appear to have a strong preference for anarchical methods and modus operandi, anarchism became viewed by the Free Youth as the method par excellence of democratic movements.<sup>117</sup> Against which Sakesit Yaemsanguansak and Chonlatit Chottsawas, two youth activists from another advocacy group, the UFTD, scoffed that beneath the superficial claim that the REDEM lacked any organizing power lies an implicit command structure and a pre-determined set of aims and objectives.<sup>118</sup> By serving as organizers in many UFTD-led protests, Sakesit and Chonlatit were well aware about the mechanics and anatomy of a protest and how implausible it would be to do away with all identifiable chains of command. Furthermore, by resetting the agenda of the movement at will REDEM’s instigators were effectively ‘in control’ of an allegedly ‘leaderless’ movement.<sup>119</sup>

Power accordingly was not fully restored to the people understood severally. Quite the opposite, REDEM only demonstrated that power truly

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* Unless the welfare state is described as a minimum requirement not of socialism nor social democracy per se but of what it means to be able to relate to one another on equal terms as distinct individuals or groups of people in the process of collective decision-making (something which can neither be deduced from RT nor REDEM), such advocacy may result in domination rather than liberation. For a democratic critique of capitalism and a non-socialist approach to vindicating the welfare state, see R. Bellamy, ‘Republicanism: Non-domination and the free state’, in G. Delanty and S.P. Turner (Eds) *Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Social and Political theory* (London & New York: Routledge 2011), pp. 130–138; S.M. Klein, *The Work of Politics: Making a Democratic Welfare State* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>116</sup> Free YOUTH, ‘เปิดตัว! REDEM’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 113.

<sup>117</sup> See Footnote 109.

<sup>118</sup> Saksit Yaemsanguansak and Chonlatit Chottsawas, ‘From the turmoil of movements to the merging of unstable consensus: A comparative study of the framing process of the current Thai democratic movement’ [paper presentation], *ICTS14* (2022).

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

lies with the people understood collectively as *rangngan*. For *rangngan* to these socialist democratizers constitute the one true *P* or *demos*.

In sum, just as there are many different and epistemologically equivalent ways of tackling the questions of feminism and reforming the monarchy, so the arguments for or against (hierarchical) capitalism are as likely to culminate in moral and epistemological stand-offs. What all three of the aforementioned loci of disagreement exemplify is the general predicament of an internally differentiated and epistemically diverse *demos*. A substantive ordering of preferences regarding the detailed interpretation of constitutional essentials and what it means to be a part of a *demos* are likely to be backed by a set of epistemological-moral claims and justifications. And although the combustion of any one of these disagreements, if left untempered, is enough to have fatal consequences for the vitality of the Thai Spring (precisely because at stake is the very definition of a People *P*), the presence of at least three loci shows just how pervasive and varied disagreement can be. Internal strife fail to be eluded by what appears to be a common struggle for democracy. This led one columnist to admonish, ‘what kind of democracy movement refuses to listen to dissenting voices?’<sup>120</sup> To which the verdict given by this chapter reads: One that ends up promulgating a particular conception of *demos* at the expense of other possible and equally valid conceptions, thus blurring the polemical distinction between orthodox and heterodox, ‘descending’ and ‘ascending’, undemocratic and democratic conceptions of people. It is, therefore, important for self-styled ‘democratizers’ to not flatter themselves with newfound promises of progress. Divide and conquer has always been the preferred strategy of those in power, and things are about to get much easier for them should the pro-democracy protestors fail to suture their gaping differences. Now more than ever it is important to cultivate a strong, publicly shareable sense of cross-ideological, democratic solidarity. The question is where to start?

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<sup>120</sup> Ken, ‘The war on salim’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 97.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary of Findings

This research has first and foremost argued that the advent of the RM and the normatively salient transition from mere people to *ratsadon* in the sense of *demos* sought to restore power to the people understood severally. This, in turn, freed up space for different groups of people *p* to have a say in the determination and construction of a People *P*. However, due to the different conceptions of people or *demos* put forth by different *p*—each of which possess clearly distinguishable ideological identifications, the ‘We’ in ‘We the Ratsadon’ represents more of a multitude of particular peoples than a real unity of them all that is *P*. Indeed, because the concept of people is itself open to contestation, a people's detailed interpretation (i.e. what purpose its constitution serves and its criteria of membership) depends on the specificity of the context surrounding its use. The more people are involved in its use the more contested the concept of people is likely to be as the RM has shown. Of course, such pluralism proved possible in the first place because the protestors were able to disrupt prevailing narratives about Thai-ness and contest the conception of people as prescribed by orthodoxy.

The democratic pluralism of the RM thus provided something refreshingly new and promising after more than a decade of deep polarization and reprisals of military rule. Furthermore, unlike previous democracy movements like the Red-Shirt movement, the sheer organicity and non-stratified modus operandi of the RM allowed for the unconstrained and unmediated exercise and authentication of power by the people understood severally, thus resulting in the construction of a people or *demos* variously specified. The RM was, in essence, a convergence of different iterations of Ratsadon (in the sense of *demos*). Even though the participants in the Red-Shirt movement viewed themselves as *phrai*, it remains dubious at best how the movement itself, all things considered, enabled the so-called ‘*phrai*’ to become a *ratsadon* in the democratic sense of the term. To be sure, this is not to deny that the Red-Shirt *phrai* were able to develop their own ideas about politics and democracy.<sup>121</sup> The problem is that mediation by politicians and political strongmen played a part in inhibiting their effective realization and

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<sup>121</sup> See Dulyaphab, ‘Thailand’s ideological struggle’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 9.

further development into a truly organic project of democracy. Be that as it may, a closer look at some of the democratic conceptions of *ratsadon*—be it non-male-centric notions of *demos*, *ratsadon* qua royalist citizens, or *rangngan*—as propounded by the differentiated components of the RM reveals how the break with orthodoxy's conception of *ratsadon* as being comparable to the medieval *universitas* was not so clearcut. The fact that the dissimilarities between competing conceptions of *ratsadon* or *demos* proved difficult to reconcile meant that in the absence of additional measures domination was a real possibility.

What this research demonstrated, then, was how it is wishful thinking at best and blatantly dangerous at worst to assume that over the entire duration of the protests and construction of a people qua *demos*, exposure to the most rational of debates and most transparent of exchanges of 'facts' will somehow lead to a consensus on a specific conception of *demos*. In Gerald Gaus's words, the scenario here is one where the interlocutors 'have two options: wait for victory or make moral demands based on [one's] (merely) reasonable belief'.<sup>122</sup> Whereas the first route is likely to involve the making of tentative compromises before victory is assured, the second route is more likely to culminate in the domination of one group over another if chance permits. To maintain that epistemically and morally differentiated citizens are not inexorable does not suggest that disagreement nor the likelihood of domination are bound to gradually disappear from democratic politics or, at the very least, lessen in intensity. Regardless of whether the notion of people or *demos* is, matter-of-factly, mere fiction, an artificial invention, so to speak, or an axiomatic truth, that is, a product/aspect of Nature, its users invariably treat it as having prima facie value, as 'an immediate jewel of [the] soul' that cannot be 'barter[ed] away', to be more precise.<sup>123</sup> This is why in the final analysis it is important to come to grips with the persistence of deep and pervasive disagreements in politics best characterized in this instance as moral and epistemological stand-offs between incoherent conceptions of *demos*: Otherwise, rampant and crippling antagonisms might take over what once was a vibrant pluralism.

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<sup>122</sup> Gaus, *Contemporary Theories*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 84. p. 215.

<sup>123</sup> E. Burke, 'Speech on conciliation with America', in I. Hampsher-Monk (Ed.) *The Political Philosophy of Edmund Burke* (Harlow: Longman, 1987), p. 126.

The discomfiting reality is that it takes considerably more than the organicity and purity of the RM to protect pluralism (paradoxically so) from the seeds of its own undoing. We have witnessed how the *pluralization* of ‘We the Ratsadon’ did not foreclose the possibility that incompatible groups of people *p* may compete for supremacy over the determination of the *demos* that is the People *P*. The pertinent question is how can insights from cutting-edge work in democratic theory assist in providing some normative guidelines on how disagreeing citizens can nonetheless be bounded by a publicly shareable understanding of inclusive citizenship and sense of democratic solidarity in a context of moral-epistemological diversity and ongoing ideological contestation. To keep the Thai Spring, or any popular movement for that matter, on an even keel—that is, to prevent it from tilting in favor of a particular *p* the need to rework the relationship between what it means to be a member of a particular *p*, on one hand, and what it means to *also* belong to a single united *P*, on the other, then, becomes paramount.

## 6.2 Towards a More Qualified Pluralistic People

As an entry point of envisaging democratic disagreement and sustainable political relations between members of different groups of people *p*, the idea is that *p* must enter into some form of mutually constitutive relation with *P*. This would enable each and every participant of the RM to *consistently* maintain that s/he belongs not only to a particular *p*, but also to a single united *P* that all can have reasons to accept. Let us briefly go through this step by step.

- (1) A particular *p* whose demands have a bearing on the determination and construction of a single united *P* must acknowledge that *their* specific set of moral and epistemological claims is merely one among many others that are also put forth by other *p* in the determination of *P*.
- (2) A pluralist account of democratic citizenship requires that a citizen—whose membership of a particular *p* is likely to reflect his or her substantive conceptions of good and right, commitments to a particular interpretation of constitutional essentials, and so on and so forth as specified by his or her ideological convictions—also identify with a conception of *P* that is *not* co-extensive with the citizen’s membership of *p* but rather the product of a principled compromise between different *p*.

Unpacking (2), a vague, albeit overriding, commitment to a procedural norm of coordination—variously qualified by democratic theorists as ‘deep compromise’<sup>124</sup>, ‘equal concern and respect’<sup>125</sup>, ‘democratic respect’<sup>126</sup>, ‘democratic recursivity’<sup>127</sup>, ‘agonism’<sup>128</sup>, and so on—must be seen as constituting the core of political relations between otherwise divergent components of the ‘We’ in ‘We the Ratsadon’. This way the notion of Ratsadon in the RM would no longer represent merely a great *multitude* of instrumentally related groups of *p*, each with their own different and potentially conflicting conceptions of *demos*, but rather ‘a real unity of them’ all. That is to say, what must be cultivated in the hearts and minds of the people understood severally is a general acceptance of the common political decision (whatever that turns out to be). Such decision comes from the people in their collective capacity and is likely to reflect a compromise agreement on substantive commitments that nevertheless goes beyond the purely partisan prescriptions of each *p*. Motivating the required relative moral concessions of all sides, as it were, is a more fundamental ‘second-order’ reason to compromise on what each side perceives to be their ‘first-order’ preferences. To borrow Rostbøll's words, if

[m]y first-order commitments are my views of what would be the best [conception of *demos*] to choose and implement if everyone else were or could be convinced to be in agreement with me... [then] *second-order political thinking is a type of thinking that provides a set of ideas and concepts that frames and regulates how we ought to relate to others in politics and how we should make political decisions for, with, or against them in pursuit of our first-order [democratic] preferences.*<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> H.S. Richardson, *Democratic Autonomy: Public Reasoning about the Ends of Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>125</sup> R. Bellamy, *Liberalism and Pluralism: Towards a Politics of Compromise* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>126</sup> C.F. Rostbøll, ‘Democratic respect and compromise’, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 20 (2017), pp. 619–635.

<sup>127</sup> Benhabib, ‘A militant defence of democracy’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 87.

<sup>128</sup> C. Mouffe. *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>129</sup> C.F. Rostbøll, ‘Second-order political thinking: Compromise versus populism’, *Political Studies* (2020), pp. 1–18, p. 3.



Having established that *P* must embody a norm of second-order significance *by virtue of (I)*, does this mean that the norm itself is also invariably subject to a degree of indeterminacy and contestation as posed by the various specific and non-generalizable conceptions of *demos*?

Rostbøll explains that an overarching and generalizable conception of democratic citizenship is possible only if it connotes ‘a more vague and general idea [of democratic respect] that is compatible with much, if not all, disagreements about the right and the good’<sup>130</sup>. Indeed, it would be anti-pluralist and non-voluntarist to treat *P* as always *fully* constituted. The ‘ascending’ character of *P* conforms to the understanding that ‘Democracy so conceived operates as a form of rolling contract for the construction of principles of justice that reflect the evolving character and circumstances of particular people’.<sup>131</sup> This way ‘in certain cases special rights granted to meet the peculiar requirements of certain groups, like reproductive rights for women’ can be implemented without jeopardizing other groups’ chances of voicing their own *p*-specific concerns.<sup>132</sup>

In sum, by positing a notion of *P* strong enough in disqualifying malignant forms of pluralism as an entry point of democratic politics, it becomes possible to work towards a more qualified form of organic democratic pluralism. This is ‘moralizing’ or ‘civilizing’ in the sense that being introduced into the protestors’ political vocabulary are civic terms like ‘mutual accommodation’, ‘reciprocal justification,’ ‘recognition respect’ and ‘democratic responsibility’, to name a few—all the while leaving room for possible disagreement over their detailed interpretations. To be sure, different theorists of democracy have placed varying emphases on which of these virtues to promote as well as the extent to which they can be interpreted, ranked and so on. Agonistic theorists of democracy, for one, treats democratic forms of respect in a distinctly *adversarial* way, as they view disagreements in politics from a more pessimistic and non-conciliatory

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<sup>130</sup> Rostbøll, ‘Compromise and toleration’, *op. cit.*, Ref. 88, p. 31.

<sup>131</sup> Bellamy, *Liberalism and Pluralism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 125, p. 111.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

light.<sup>133</sup> Deliberative theorists, for another, maintain a more optimistic outlook, as they generally believe that reasoned deliberation can more or less move hearts and minds and trigger the mutual adaptation of erstwhile conflicting preferences and values.<sup>134</sup> The objective of this research, however, was not to argue in favor one possible pathway over another. For this is a subject of further speculation. Rather, it was to show how pervasive disagreement *can* be *even* among supposedly ‘rational’ actors bounded by the common task of democratizing the society to which they belong, and merely highlights the importance of acting in the face of persistent disagreement.

Therefore, whatever the future of democratic disagreement holds, this research hoped to have demonstrated the case for qualifying organic democratic pluralism in the present situation and provided some additional conceptual resources on how to set about achieving this goal. The current state of pluralism in Thailand is marked by differences along economic, cultural, generational and, most importantly, moral and epistemic lines. The final determinant accounts for the specifically pervasive character of disagreements among those within the RM who nonetheless ubiquitously profess their allegiances to democracy. This mission so far, then, is best described as heuristic, since the purport of this research was merely to provide the Thai Spring with some normative contours without which the once promising movement remains hopelessly imperiled. More broadly, this is something that popular movements in general can learn and benefit from, since the phenomenon of pluralism is certainly not limited to the Thai experience.

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<sup>133</sup> See, for example, Mouffe. *The Democratic Paradox*, *op. cit.*, Ref. ; N. Urbinati, *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth and the People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); J. Tully, *Public Philosophy in a New Key: Volume 1, Democracy and Civic Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, A. Gutmann and D. Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Bellamy, *Liberalism and Pluralism*, *op. cit.*, Ref. ; D. Weinstock, ‘Compromise, pluralism, and deliberation’, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 20 (2017), pp. 636–655.

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