Political Vulnerabilities of a Primate City: The May 2010 Red Shirts Uprising in Bangkok, Thailand

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Abstract

Dynamics of the May 2010 'Red Shirts' uprising in Bangkok are examined through literature about the primate city, a city that is exponentially larger than a country's other cities. Employing news coverage of events, history about Bangkok's urban and political development, and analyses of class-based inequalities and nationalisms that the city harbors within its confines, attributes of the primate city are expanded to include its perennially vulnerable political status. Such a rendering of the politically vulnerable primate city is employed to theorize how the primate city – when functioning as a national capital – is more than a large urban center, but one that collects much of the nation's hopes, dreams, and political struggles.

Introduction

On 5 July 2011 the *Pheu Thai* political party of Thailand, a third incarnation of a party with members who supported ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, was officially declared the winner over its Democrat rivals. It was a victory rendered more dramatic in that the new prime minister of Thailand was Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister. The victory represented a just comeuppance for the defeat their supporters, informally known as the 'Red Shirts,' suffered during April and May 2010 as it engaged in an urban uprising in the heart of Bangkok, the capital of Thailand. For scholars of urban development, Bangkok – affectionately referred to *Krung Thep*, or 'City of Angels' by Thais – is classified as a primate city: a type of city that is exponentially larger than the country's other cities (Jefferson, 1939). The uprising occurred in the city's more opulent areas, one which ultimately faced a violent government crackdown. By the time the insurrection was dramatically quelled on 19 May 2010, 85 people lost their lives and over 1,378 were injured, but not before many parts of Bangkok burnt in the worst uprising the only major city in the country had seen in 18 years (Laohong et al., 2010).

This set of events behooves scholars to consider how a primate city serving as national capital fares when it is contested politically. Mark Jefferson (1939), the progenitor of the term, alluded to

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the political symbolisms of such a city, but did not fully elaborate on the attributes of a primate city's political dynamics given his background as a geographer. As such, after exploring the literature on Bangkok as primate city, my main task will be: (1) to illuminate the inordinately frequent episodes of destabilizing politics that has afflicted Bangkok during the 20th and the first decade of the 21st centuries. (2) My next task will be to discuss how the most recent conflagration in the city was one that was more explicitly class-based in character than any other destabilizing political event to befall the history of Bangkok. (3) My final task is to consider how the class-based uprising could have been a result of globalization dynamics as well, thus enhancing and 'updating' the utility of Jefferson's concept of the primate city by situating it within the context *and* consequences of globalization, a world market that had yet to find prototypical expression in the 1930s.

In the preceding months leading up to the crescendo, thousands of supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra descended on the city to protest the Democrat-led government that was placed in power by supporters of a military coup that purged him in 2006. Indeed, I was able to witness many caravans of Red Shirts arriving during late March 2010 when I was in Bangkok to analyze the political situation in the country. The Red Shirts, an informal moniker anti-government protesters employ to signify their movement, reached Bangkok with much fanfare in vans, pick-ups, buses, as well as small-displacement 250cc motorcycles, many of which flew red and black flags with political slogans printed on them. At the time the Red Shirts did not yet appear to possess the acumen to engage in the violent crescendo that was to come, descending upon the city only to support their social movement led by the political pressure group, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). The UDD was aggressively agitating against the Democrat government of then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

Founded in 1946 after Thailand transitioned from absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, the Democrat Party aimed, at least nominally, to serve the interests of the working class and the poor. However, the volatile nation-construction process of Thailand since the party's founding has seen it often work to uphold imperatives by the military and royalists as well. Detailed on the official Democrat Party website, its initial orientation during the mid-1940s was to function as an opposition to the left-leaning government of Pridi Banomyong. Pridi was part and parcel to the contingent of Thai revolutionaries that ended absolute monarchy in 1932. Since then, the Democrat Party has intermittently gone into hiatus when particularly strong dictators would abolish the constitution and political parties, only to return when political conditions proved favorable, forming coalitions in certain periods while attempting to be entirely hegemonic in others (Connors, 2007, 2008; Connors and Hewison, 2008). Led by a variety of leaders that were implicitly and explicitly allied with royalty, the party has come to be seen as one that upheld the ethos of *amathayathipathai* – a value system that honored aristocratic and elitist orientations toward governance – despite its stated mission to provide a 'responsible political alternative to the money-fueled political environment' by upholding principles of 'democracy, freedom, transparency, and public participation' (Democrat Party, 2012: para. 18). Currently it has returned to its opposition status to contest the pro-Thaksin *Pheu Thai* government led by Yingluck, harnessing pro-royalist ideas to weather continuing power plays by pro-Thaksin constituents (Connors, 2008). That the Democrat Party continues to be led by the Oxford-educated Abhisit Vejjajiva, former prime minister and current leader of the opposition believed to have supported the removal of Thaksin, has thus not endeared the party toward any rapprochement with the pro-Thaksin constituency.

Atop their pickup trucks euphoric supporters pounded their drums, waved flags, sloganeered ideology through their megaphones, and blared Thai country music, or *lookthung*, through large loudspeakers mounted in the bed of their trucks. Many supporters on the streets danced with alacrity as the motorized caravans passed and intermittently stopped at intersections. As I watched this

particular caravan arrive with many hundreds of supporters onto the historical Sukhumvit Road, a major and perennially congested road in the Bangkok, I had to remind myself that it was only part and parcel to the many caravans that preceded it weeks earlier, and followed it weeks later.

The blaring of *lookthung* music, a musical genre often associated with people from the rural hinterland – a region conventionally referred to as *Isan* – is highly significant. Although the gathering of the Red Shirts and UDD supporters comprised Thais from all walks of life, the self-fashioned populist movement exhibited a high degree of class consciousness which aimed to topple a government it perceived as reinforcing *amathayathipathai* values. As an antipode, *lookthung* music was employed by the Red Shirts to remind the country that there was, indeed, great class divide. *Lookthung* music sung of hope and hopelessness, of dreams and despair, of being cheated by unscrupulous city folk, of being heartbroken when a lover left for Bangkok and no longer returned; the songs all pointed to how urban dynamics during Bangkok's spring was making visible the problematic and complex class tensions and uncertain conceptualizations of democracy in Thai society (LoGerfo, 1996). Thailand's capital of Bangkok now had to hear this forceful Red Shirts cacophony resonate through the city's skyline more used to a soundscape, of honks, automobiles, autorickshaws known as *tuk tuks*, vendor chatter and their caterwauls.

Bangkok as Primate City

Mark Jefferson described the primate city as a city that is a 'supereminent' city not only in terms of size but in national influence as well. It also is a city that represents the 'culmination of national life,' containing 'all exceptional products' for consumption by the country's inhabitants. A city is primate if it is 'at least twice as large as the second largest city' (Brunn, et al., 2012: 20). Other descriptions of the primate cities can be found in Ayal (1992), who noted how they dominate 'over all others' (p. 355), or Ginsburg (1955) who noted how a primate city is one that contains 'many times the population of the next largest city' (p. 455). There are a few notable primate cities. In Africa, Cairo, Egypt and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia are examples. In Europe, Paris, France, has often been cited as a primate city, as has London, United Kingdom. Mexico City is a prominent primate city as well, while Jakarta, Indonesia, and Seoul, South Korea are other noteworthy examples. That there are even primate cities 'suggests an imbalance in development,' with social inequalities that will later allow us to transition into our discussion of attempts to politically rectify them (Brunn et al., 2012: 20).

By the 20th century, Bangkok was also ascribed the dubious distinction of being a primate city. Demographer Sidney Goldstein noted that 'Bangkok's urban primacy is among the most striking in the world' (1971: 209) while historian Larry Sternstein described Bangkok as the 'world's pre-eminent "primate city"' (1984: 43). Eliezer Ayal (1992), for example, noted how Bangkok is indeed 'an extreme case of primacy' that 'cannot be found in any other country at a similar level of per capita income' (1992: 355). He continues:

> Almost all of the very substantial industrialization during the last three decades . . . has taken place in Bangkok and its surroundings. The percentage of the population that lives in rural areas is still close to 80%, which, again, is the highest of any country with similar per capita income. (1992: 355)

Indicators of a city's degree of primacy can be found through two main indices. The simplest equation is the two-city primacy city index, acquired by dividing the population of the country's largest city by the population of the country's second largest city. During 1996, Bangkok's primacy city index was 51, meaning that, at approximately 6 million, it was 51 times larger than Thailand's

next largest city of Chiang Mai at 117,000 residents (Schwab, 2005: 66). Another commonly used primacy city index is the four-city primacy city index, calculated by taking the population of the largest city and dividing it by the sum of the populations of the second, third, and fourth-ranked cities (Arriaga, 1975; Sokona, 1985; Yu, 1999). As of 2010, Hat Yai (with 158,007 residents), Nakhon Ratchasima (142,645 residents), and Chiang Mai (142,632 residents) are the respective second, third and fourth largest cities of Thailand. By 2011, a four-city primacy city index accords Bangkok 13 times the size of Thailand's other cities (Department of Provincial Administration, 2010; Ministry of Interior, 2010).

Decades ago, Ginsburg (1955) noted that, although Southeast Asia is renowned for its large evocative cities, Bangkok is still without exception a 'true primate city,' one that fulfills a 'multiplicity of functions and attractions' which allow it to function as the heart of Thailand (p. 455). Even in 1947, a two-city primary city index showed that the capital exceeded Chiang Mai, then Thailand's second largest city, 21 times in size. By 1955, Ginsburg was able to note how half the country's inhabitants still resided in the city, while its next largest cities averaged approximately 35,000 people. The same index by 1960 showed Bangkok as 27 times larger than its second largest city while, by 1967, the index increased to 32 times (Goldstein, 1971: 209). Such a consistent perennial increase in Bangkok's primacy was already seen by Jefferson over seven decades ago, noting that Bangkok already 'was a well-marked primate city of Siam' (1939: 231), superseding Thailand's other cities and drawing 'away from all of them in character as well as size' (1939: 227). Today, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA, 2011) records close to 6.3 million inhabitants in the city proper, with a population of 6,522 people per square mile (4,051 people per square kilometer). The population figure jumps close to 12 million if one includes the five other smaller adjacent provinces that closely orbit the city, provinces that constitute the greater Bangkok Metropolitan Region (BMR): Nakhon Pathom, Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, Samut Prakan and Samut Sakhon. The BMR covers 3,027 square miles (7,761 square kilometers). The city proper covers approximately 605 square miles (1,568 square kilometers) while exhibiting an annual population growth rate of approximately 1%. As of 2011, the BMA continues to measure the city's land use with four distinct categories, with residential and housing consuming 23%, agriculture consuming 23.58%, and other land use consuming 23.78%. Governmental institutions, industrial establishments, and commercial structures consume the remaining 29.64% of the city's real estate (Ministry of Interior, 2010).

Although statistics about Bangkok as a primate city allow for an understanding of its size, population, density and demographics, there also exist many debates about the nature of primate cities and their perceived inimical effects upon the hinterland. The debates have often focused upon the primate city's role within the urban/rural divide, as well as in how social inequalities are generated in the relationship. Such views tend to accord the primate city a sort of parasitic character in that it inhibits the growth of lesser cities due to its demands for excessive public investments and expenditures. As a result, smaller cities and rural communities suffer from a lack of resources and quality of life deteriorates (Ginsburg, 1955; Henderson, 2002; Tolley et al., 1979).

Past literature on the primate city also contains slight apologias that excused its high degree of urban concentration of institutions because they were deemed vital for economic efficiency (Hansen, 1990; Williamson, 1965). Later findings, however, revealed that urban over-concentration was indeed inimical to economic growth (Henderson, 2002). Richardson (1987) found that the costs of absorbing an extra family in large cities of Bangladesh, Egypt, Pakistan and Indonesia is three times that of rural environments' abilities to do the same, and this rate increases as the city of its respective countries grow larger. Ginsburg noted how growth of smaller cities and communities may be disadvantaged by such growth, given that only 'a limited number of services' exist there

while 'the great cities continue to possess a virtual monopoly of these services' (Ginsburg, 1955: 457). That is, a city that is too large is one that 'reduces economic welfare' for the rest of the nation (Moomaw and Alwosabi, 2004: 149).

The view of primate cities is thus not favorable. Some scholars argue that a primate city's growth is a deliberate strategy encouraged by the state polity to encourage over-concentration and development so as to promote hegemony first in the urban area and later in the nation (Ades and Glaser, 1995; Henderson, 2002). Henderson specifically cites Bangkok, Mexico City, Jakarta, Seoul, Sao Paolo, and even Paris as complicit in this process (Henderson, 2002). Such favoritism has been documented in Indonesia where economic activities are controlled by bureaucratic and corporate entities in the capital of Jakarta (Henderson and Kuncoro, 1996; Kaiser, 1999). Indeed, the Thai language *Thailand – Is It Bangkok?* published by the country's Thammasat University's Faculty of Economics, compiled a variety of articles that focused on public policy 'biases' that 'favored Bangkok over the rest of the country' (cited in Ayal, 1992: 358). Henderson argues how such favoritism for the primate city has denied 'hinterland locations necessary transport and communication infrastructure benefits,' which in turn protect the pro-urban polity competition from hinterland producers (Henderson, 2002: 97).

Such a pattern echoes Dayley's findings that the utopianistic rural communities idealized by Thai elites – what he termed the 'agrarian myth' – is contradicted by rural populations that actually prefer pragmatic, technologically-oriented and self-interested planning for quality of life improvement rather than 'concerns about cultural purity, nostalgia, or religious renewal' (Dayley, 2011: 343). If migrants from rural areas are unable to secure material culture of modernity for their respective regions, they migrate to the capital city. Although many find temporary jobs, the jobs are often low-paying and do not conclusively improve the quality of life for the long term. Compounding the complexity of poverty in Bangkok is how such migrants mesh with what Krongkaew described as Thailand's ultra poor, constituted by general laborers rather than farm laborers. This contingent exhibits unique demographic characteristics such as having 'a higher incidence of widows as heads of households, fewer number of working days, and greater burden of chronically ill and disabled persons in the family' (Krongkaew, 2002: 128). Furthermore, Krongkaew notes 'surprisingly, despite the Thai government's large number of social assistance schemes, very few of the ultra poor report receiving any assistance' (2002: 128).

Some cautiously optimistic scholars provide an alternative reading of a primate city's fortunes. This group criticizes how the use of an oversimplified dichotomy based on the urban–rural divide tends to situate the primate city in a predator–prey relationship with other smaller cities. More complex arguments, however, can be found in Ayal's incisive criticism that 'mostly sociologists' cite urban parasitism of the rural in ways that normatively view an unequal distribution of power as undesirable, a human condition that can (and should) be remedied. For Ayal, an equal distribution of power in Thai society and culture has 'never happened' in Bangkok, or in Thailand, for that matter (1992: 360). Ayal criticizes those who view Bangkok as parasitic for harboring an idealism that views 'the world as . . . a zero-sum game' (1992: 360; see also London, 1977). Ayal continues, 'What is missing in such presentations is that the decisions made by those who hold power, whatever their motivations, have tremendously increased the size of Thailand's national pie' (1992: 360).

Ayal is not entirely incorrect in his observation. London (1977) notes the argument that a primary city is parasitic upon others has 'been overstated . . . and denies the possibility that primate cities may well prove to be generative in the long run' (p. 51). A cultural reading of Thai society and culture does not depart too far from his view. Thai society emphasizes strong vertical relationships based on power asymmetries that have their embryonic roots harking back to a world view

that defers to paternalism as flowing from the mandates of its kings (Fong, 2009). Such vertical relationships make Thailand a hyper status-driven country where a social ethos exists to encourage deference – and frequently sycophancy – to idealized educational degrees, occupations, gender, and material wealth. Bangkok has always been a city that welcomed the exploits of aristocratic and bourgeois, not proletariat, angels.

Bangkok as National Capital

The issues in the preceding paragraph create a segue for us to enter into the discussion of the primate city when it serves as a national capital. To undertake this task, one must now consider the culturally emotive and power articulations of citizens as they negotiate the technocratic configurations and consequences of their urban setting. We need to focus on the role of power, conflict, and crises as additional considerations that make the primate system comprehensible beyond infrastructure and demographics. Again we can appreciate Jefferson for his prescience in noting that nationalisms will crystallize most readily in a primate city serving as a national capital since it 'expresses the national disposition more completely than any other city . . . an earmark of intense nationalism . . . the nation's mind and soul' (Jefferson, 1939: 229). Bangkok, like all primate cities serving as national capitals, is the 'front office' of the country as 'equally Paris is the front office of France' (Jefferson, 1939: 229).

Bangkok was founded as a new capital by the Siamese in 1768 after their capital of Ayutthaya was sacked by Burma. Ayutthaya was the second city-state of Siam when it ruled much of Southeast Asia, with the city-state of Sukhotai acknowledged by historians as the first manifestation of a Siamese nation. Although Ayutthaya would occupy a longer duration of hegemony than Sukhothai, approximately four centuries between the 14th and 18th centuries, the second Burmese attack on Ayutthaya that occurred in 1767 delivered the *coup de grâce*. Refugees and the polity from Ayutthaya migrated south along the Chao Phraya River, eventually leading them to the site that is today Bangkok (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005; Terwiel, 2005).

The city of Bangkok and its absolute monarchs ushered in dramatic changes for the entire Siamese nation. By the time the Chakri Dynasty was promulgated in 1782 through the exploits of King Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke (Rama I), Bangkok, as the national capital of then Siam, would modernize through two scions of Chulaloke: King Mongkut (Rama IV) and King Chulalongkorn (Rama V; Thananithichot, 2011). Mongkut was credited with laying the foundations of 'modernization' while Chulalongkorn succeeded in warding off British and French colonialism as well as abolishing slavery (Terwiel, 2005; Thananithichot, 2011), but not before the country was forced to cede large tracts of Laotian lands in the northeast to France in the aftermath of the naval Franco–Siamese War of 1893.

Bangkok found its urban footing first as a land-oriented agrarian state. It relied on the land's productive capacities since its harbor, nested in the Gulf of Siam, was too shallow and distant from major shipping routes of the South China Sea. However, 'exceptional problems of poor drainage plagued the city from the start' (Ginsburg, 1955: 461). By the late 19th century, Singapore's fortuitous geographic position meant that international trade would swing by its port rather than the port of Bangkok. Yet even with this development Bangkok was unequivocally 'primate'. Compared to Singapore, it was more 'indigenous rather than Western . . . a case of an indigenous capital acting as a revolutionary medium for socioeconomic change' (Ginsburg, 1955: 461). With the aviation age, however, the city over time became as an important node for air transport logistics between Europe and the Far East, as well as between Australia and Europe (Ginsburg, 1955: 462). With the Suvarnabhummi International Airport that replaced the ageing Don Muang International Airport in

2006, Bangkok is now an important international air center in Southeast Asia and the third busiest in Asia (Airport Council International, 2011).

Never colonized by any European power while its neighbors of Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, India and Indonesia fell under the yoke of British, French and Dutch colonialism, imperialistic pressures from Europe did force the city's polity to envision the Thai state through new constructions of territorial boundaries, but primarily on its own terms (Winichakul, 1994). In this regard Bangkok was able to render Thailand's trajectory in ways that were distinctly different from that of its other Southeast Asian neighbors. As far back as 1865, a member of the Board of Foreign Missions noted how Bangkok was 'at once the seat of government, of religion, of foreign commerce, in short of nearly all public life in the kingdom' (Sternstein, 1984: 49). In contrast to Jefferson's observation, 'Bangkok is more to Siam than Paris to France' (Sternstein, 1984: 49). By 1949, the polity's vacillation in changing the country's name from Siam to Thailand was resolved and the name change became permanent.

During the 1950s, a national bourgeoisie based on banking and finance enhanced the city's role as an import–export hub, developing its industrial base (Brown, 1994; Hewison, 1989). Throughout its post-World War II 20th century growth, Bangkok was where the vast majority of new factories were built. The city also included comprehensive institutions that were headquarters for nationalized utilities, subsidized public transportation, financial services, a variety of educational, cultural and entertainment facilities, as well as military institutions (Ayal, 1992: 358). When the aforementioned pull factors combined with the push factor of a chronically poor quality of life in many areas of the hinterland, rural migrants hastened their flight to the 'relative security of the city' (Ginsburg, 1955: 457–458). Spurring economic growth, the city collected many of its migrants in ways that allowed for the majority of them to be absorbed into the employment stream. This pattern ran counter to the Todaro Migration Model which predicted that aggressive urban public sector employment policies would actually result in a large population of unemployed workers from the rural periphery. The vast majority of migrants to Bangkok, due to how informal networks are instrumental in securing resources in Thai life, tend to find at least temporary employment 'very soon after or even before their move' (Ayal, 1992: 358).

Political Vulnerabilities of Bangkok from the 1940s to May 2010: Expressing the National Disposition

It should be emphasized, however, that throughout much of the city's history, a metaphysical and sacred *zeitgeist* was never far from Thais given the continued staying power of monarchy and its current monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX: 1927–present; Fong, 2009). As he matured into a young king his visibility in the Thai political landscape increased as well. Much of this was a result of General Sarit Thanarat, who ruled the country from 1958 until 1963 (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005; Fong, 2009; Handley, 2006). At a time when the communist threat against Thailand was very real, any political crises that appeared to threaten the nation would prompt Bangkok to suspend local autonomy in the rural hinterland, a tendency that saw its first explicit use in 1952 when a Muslim separatist in the primarily Islamic south, Haji Sulong Tomina, was abducted and jailed, only to later 'disappear' (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005; John and Parashar, 2005). In 1959 Sila Wongsin, a religious healer from the *Isan* province of Khorat known for his separatist tendencies, was publicly executed after Thai troops attacked his village. In 1961 Sarit ordered the executions of Khrong Chandawong and Thongpahn Suthimat, leftists from the *Isan* region that bemoaned the continually increasing centralization of Bangkok while severe conditions of inequality remained in the hinterland. Similarly, Sarit's successor, a returning general named Thanom

Kittikachorn, bombed and napalmed hill villages when the Hmong hill tribes launched a rebellion in the country's northern provinces between 1967 and 1968 (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005).

Unlike the previous dictator of the country, General Phibun Songkram, who helped usher in a relatively more democratic Thailand by severely constraining the powers of its new constitutional monarchy, Sarit freed the king to roam the capital and the country. Sarit's gesture cannot be under-estimated for its historical significance *and* irony: whereas constitutional monarchy was ostensibly now weaker under a maturing and nascent Thai democracy, King Bhumibol would yield a moral and righteous legitimacy that was as great, if not greater, than his absolute monarchical predecessors, so much so that even today politicians defer (those with republican sentiments rather grudgingly) to the sacrality of their king. More importantly, many in the population praise and revere his charity, along with his ability to weather and resolve a variety of acute political crises that erupted in Bangkok during 1973, 1976, and 1992.

The political crises of 1973, 1976 and 1992, where many student protesters and civilians were killed by various hyper-nationalist factions as well as the military, were only alleviated when the king, according to royalist narratives, successively intervened to save the country from unraveling. In the 1973 episode, over 400,000 thousand students and civilians challenged the rule of the Field Marshall Thanom Kittikachorn by mobilizing around Bangkok's Democracy Monument on 13–14 October 1973. The iconic monument, one of two highly symbolic structures (the other being Victory monument), was built in 1939 to commemorate the 1932 *coup d'état* that established Thailand's parliamentary democracy. The bloody crackdown that followed was countered when King Bhumibol opened up his Chitralada Palace to allow in a group of student delegates to have an audience with him (Handley, 2006: 210–211). Seventy-seven were 'officially' killed, but the exact number is not known. Realizing his cause was lost given the king's large moral footprint, Thanom fled the country, only to attempt to sneak back in 1976. Thanom's return sparked another set of massive protests. Fearing a leftist incursion in the country, nationalist paramilitaries killed 46 students at Bangkok's 'people's university,' Thammasat University, founded by left-leaning Pridi Banomyong in 1934, unequivocally the most progressive university in Thailand.

During 1992, under the rule of General Suchinda Krapayoon, Bangkok's population again grew restive. Having seized power in a military coup a year earlier, his political machinations managed to result in the Thai parliament appointing him prime minister. Up to 200,000 people filled Bangkok's Sanam Luang, a massive public park near the Grand Palace. Between 17 and 19 May 1992 these supporters protested Suchinda's appointment, and in a scene Thais are all too familiar with, the government again launched a bloody crackdown that claimed 52 lives. Even though the protests climaxed on 18 May 1992 with government troops shooting into the crowds, tens of thousands remained at the park, prompting royal appeals by the crown prince and princess of Thailand. Again King Bhumibol intervened. On 20 May 1992 he summoned Suchinda and his rival, protest leader Chamlong Srimuang, to be reprimanded. At Bangkok's Chitralada Palace, both approached their monarch in a prostate position, televised for the nation to see. Protests were called off by Chamlong forthwith, and Suchinda resigned his prime ministership by the end of the week. Thus, for much of the populace, the king had become their interventionist monarch and is revered as a sacred leader by the vast majority of Thais (Connors, 2007; Fong, 2009; Handley, 2006; Hewison, 1997).

During the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of the king's 60th year on the throne in June 2006, a surfeit of pomp and pageantry spanned a five-day celebration where a gathering of kings and queens from over a dozen countries attended festivities in Bangkok, and throngs of royalist supporters celebrated as well. Over one million Thais in their yellow shirts – the birth color of the king – congregated outside Bangkok's Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, completed in 1915, while almost

as many amassed at the Grand Palace. King Bhumibol also controversially legitimated the 19 September 2006 military coup that purged the government of the autocratic yet popularly-elected Thaksin Shinawatra while he was in New York City, paving the way for another iteration of military rule to briefly return. Yet the blurring of Bangkok, Thainess, and a politicized royalism has had previous iterations in the city, namely in 1982 when the city celebrated its bicentennial, in 1987 when the king celebrated his 60th birthday, along with the king's 80th birthday, celebrated in 2007 (Thananithichot, 2011). By the May 2010 uprising, however, the ailing monarch was in a much more subdued role. Sensing his political inefficacy, Red Shirts aggressively rallied around the Victory Monument – built in 1941 to commemorate Thailand's victory over the French in the brief Franco–Siamese War – and Democracy Monument as well, only three miles apart as the crow flies.

Thus one cannot employ purely an economic lens to read the dynamics of Bangkok. In the capital city, political monuments function to romanticize, sacralize and charge Siam and Thailand's histories. The city also contains the prestigious Chulalongkorn University, founded in 1917 by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) to honor his father King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), whose diplomatic acumen was credited with singlehandedly preventing colonial Britain and France from colonizing Siam. Near the banks of the Chao Phraya River that snakes through Bangkok is the aforementioned Grand Palace, a massive palatial compound that was the official residence of kings from the 18th century until after World War II. Indeed, across the Chao Phraya, the early 19th century Wat Arun, the 'Temple of Dawn,' stands watch over a massive and volatile political capital that has seen 18 military coups or attempted coups since 1932, and almost as many constitutional changes.

The most recent destabilization erupted after discontent over Thaksin's 2006 ouster by the military. His populist base remained convinced of his legitimacy. By 2010, these supporters were galvanized enough to descend into Bangkok, a context that framed the beginning of this paper. Yet prior to 2010, protests by pro-government and pro-Democrat 'Yellow Shirts' occurred at many different venues in Bangkok. In 2008, they protested against a pro-Thaksin prime minister, Samak Sundaravej at the city's Government House, forcing Samak to vacate the premises. They organized regular street protests and rallies, and descended upon Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang international airports, disrupting operations. By the time the Yellow Shirts succeeded in removing Samak and, later, another pro-Thaksin prime minister Songchai Wongsawat (Thaksin's brother-in-law), Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Democrat Party rose to power. These developments exponentially amplified the overall indignation of the Red Shirts.

By 2009, hundreds of Red Shirts had raided a hotel where political leaders from Asia had gathered to attend the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, forcing the cancellation of the summit. Victory celebrations were held at the Victory Monument thereafter. By April 2010, Red Shirts descended on the parliament building, forcing some politicians to climb over walls and fences to escape.

Street rallies and protests were already frequent at different areas of Bangkok by spring 2010, with surreal Orwellian scenarios such as an exiled Thaksin appearing on large projection screens set up at various rally sites to inspire his supporters, most of whom congregated at the democracy and victory monuments. Having declared a state of emergency, Abhisit attempted a crackdown on 10 April 2010 at the Democracy Monument area and 25 deaths ensued; earlier a group of Red Shirts attempted to storm the first army headquarters but was turned back with water cannons and tear gas. The bloodletting had begun. In the following days, Red Shirts and government forces battled with grenade launchers, machine guns and homemade rockets. In the adjoining province of Pathum Thani, part of the BMR, Red Shirts forced their way into a Thaicom satellite station. By May, shots were fired at banks and grenade launchers were used against police outposts.

The Class-Based Nature of the May 2010 Uprising

During May 2010, thousands of Red Shirts had headquartered their operations at the inordinately affluent Ratchaprasong shopping district, transforming approximately 2.5 square miles (4 square kilometers) of adjoining city blocks into a fortressed compound. Were one to enter any of the opulent shopping complexes, smartly dressed retail workers sycophantically attend to consumers; all the while, visitors are cooled with air conditioning that makes them forget about the perennially torrid heat and humidity that is typical of the region, as well as the chaos of traffic, noise pollution and small streets known as *sois*, or tight residential roads. The bustling cacophony on the ground is comparatively less explicit in the Ratchaprasong area, hidden by a world of shadows created by the city's commercial high rises, closely-clustered skyscrapers and the elevated Bangkok Transport System's Skytrain, or BTS. Near the opulent Central World – the third largest shopping complex in the world – security guards blow on their whistles to direct traffic into and out of the structure. In the vicinity toward the southeast of the area is Lumpini Park, frequently used by Thais to exercise. Its thick foliage serves as an important, albeit small antipode to the concrete and glass-centric Ratchaprasong skyline that includes many lavish world-renowned hotels as well. The Red Shirts' occupation of the Ratchaprasong area was thus a brilliant ideological proclamation by those who have little or nothing, to those who have plenty. Many Red Shirts would hardly be able to afford the items that wealthy Thais, expatriates and tourists could conspicuously consume at Ratchaprasong.

By mid-May there were few smartly dressed people in the area and even fewer tourists: a state of emergency had been declared during this period. Indeed, the Red Shirts at Ratchaprasong had already been surrounded by government troops that nested the Red Shirts' occupation area within their own 12 square kilometer cordon, in effect creating a noose that would tighten in the coming days. It was not a wholly encompassing noose, however, as residual urban battles would ensue outside of the area as well, claiming five more lives and 960 injuries. But it was at Ratchaprasong that Red Shirt leader 'Seh Daeng' (Commander Red) was shot in the head by a sniper on 13 May 2010 while granting an interview to a *New York Times* journalist. On 14 May clashes intensified in the Ratchaprasong area as gunfire, sniper attacks and again, grenade launchers, were employed by both sides. By 17 May over 37 fatalities were recorded as government troops retook sections of Ratchaprasong. On this same date, four days after being shot, a comatose Seh Daeng died from his wounds. Sensing the tide turning, the government ordered helicopters to fly over the Ratchaprasong compound to drop flyers urging protesters to leave.

The crescendo was reached on 19 May 2010 when armored personnel carriers stormed the barricades of the Red Shirts in an all-out assault. Seeing their imminent defeat, Red Shirts leaders took to their makeshift stage and ordered their supporters to end the fight. Disappointed in the outcome, militant Red Shirts shifted their tactics toward surgically oriented political arson: hardcore rank-and-file Red Shirts broke out of the Ratchaprasong cordon, dispersed and began to burn certain structures throughout Bangkok while others continued to fight the Thai army. By 10 May a total of 85 people lost their lives: 80 men and five women; two were journalists and three foreigners of Japanese, Burmese and Italian origin.

A veritable class uprising did ensue if one examined the patterns of collateral damage upon conspicuous consumption infrastructure as indicators. Thailand's Center for the Resolution of Emergency Situation (CRES) identified the 36 structures that were torched in Bangkok (see Table 1).

Thirty conspicuous consumption infrastructures that were set alight were of four main categories: (1) private banks; (2) state-owned agencies/banks; (3) high-end conspicuous consumption establishments; and (4) commercial/corporate high rises. The remaining six miscellaneous structures that were torched were adjacent to the 30 structures and were likely burnt inadvertently.

Table 1. List of 36 places in Bangkok hit by arson (*Nation*, 2010).

Structure	Classification
1. Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB)	State agency
2. Commercial building in Bon Kai community	Commercial/corporate high-rise, floors unknown
3. Kasikorn Bank, soi Ngam Doo Plee branch	Private bank
4. Siam Paragon Shopping Complex	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – high-end shopping complex
5. Central World Shopping Complex	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – high-end shopping complex
6. Maleenont Tower	Commercial/corporate high-rise, 35 floors
7. Government Savings Bank, Sam Liam Din Daeng branch	State-owned bank
8. Metropolitan Electricity Authority, Klong Toei branch	State agency
9. Metropolitan Waterworks Authority, Klong Toei branch	State agency
10. Stock Exchange of Thailand	Other
11. Sogo Department Store in Ratchaprasong area	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – high-end shopping complex
12. Siam and Scala Theaters	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – located in Siam Square, a high-end shopping complex
13. Post Publishing Public Company Limited	Other – owner of Bangkok Post, an English language daily newspaper.
14. Bangkok Bank, Asok branch	Private bank
15. Bangkok Bank, Victory Monument branch	Private bank
16. Bangkok Bank, Chan Road branch	Private bank
17. Center One Shopping Mall	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – high-end shopping complex
18. Siam Square	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – high-end shopping complex
19. Siam City Bank, Siam Square branch	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – located in Siam Square
20. Bangkok Bank, Siam Square branch	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – located in Siam Square
21. Retails shops in Siam Square soi 5 and 6	High-end conspicuous consumption establishment – located in Siam Square
22. Mahatun Plaza Building on Ploen Chit Road	Commercial/corporate high-rise, 18 floors
23. Bangkok Bank, Rama IV branch	Private bank
24. 7-Eleven store, Sam Liam Din Daeng branch	Other
25. Krungthai Bank next to Mater Dei School	State-owned bank
26. Krungthai Bank, Asok branch	State-owned bank
27. Bangkok Bank, Bangjak branch	Private bank
28. Tesco Lotus Express convenient store, Rama IV branch	Other
29. Bangkok Bank, Sathupradit branch	Private bank
30. Bangkok Bank, Saphanluang branch	Private bank
31. Siam City Bank, Sam Liam Din Daeng branch	Private bank

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Structure	Classification
32. Siam City Bank, Sunthornkosa branch	Private bank
33. 7-Eleven store near Victory Monument	Other
34. Bangkok Bank, Hua Lam Phong branch	Private bank
35. Siam Commercial Bank, Prachachuen branch	Private bank
36. Big C Superstore, Rajdamri branch	Other
Type of structure attacked in Bangkok:	Notes:
Private banks: 12	Classification, types of structure attacked, and notes
State-owned agencies/banks: 6	by author.
High-end conspicuous consumption establishments: 9	
Commercial/corporate high rises: 3	
Other: 6	
Total structures: 36	

Many of the banking infrastructures were symbolically linked to the surfeit of wealth had by Thai elites as well as the institutions that protected their status. Government structures were attacked as well since they are often viewed by many Red Shirts as instrumental in supporting Thailand's upper classes, the nobility and the royal family, institutions that indirectly or directly reproduced notions of *amathayathipathai*.

In the aftermath of the May 2010 protest, *Bangkok Pundit*, a highly respected blog on Thai political issues, reported that Thailand's state planning agency, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), estimated that damages from the conflagration would exceed 100 billion baht, or 1% of gross domestic product. The NESDB also noted how avoidance by tourists and investors to the globalization-friendly city would be sources of future economic loss. However, *Bangkok Pundit* itself estimated a figure of over 290 billion baht, or close to USD$9 billion. Revenues from tourism for the 2010 year was precariously low, according to Tohru Nishihama, an economist at Dai-ichi Life Research Institute Inc. in Tokyo, even though during the previous quarter Thailand's growth from output, exports and consumption was at its highest in 14 years (*Bangkok Pundit*, 2010). Bangkok's collateral damage spanned an area of approximately 36 square miles (57 square kilometers).

Globalization and the Primate City

An important extrapolation about the political vulnerabilities of a primate city like Bangkok is how globalization has altered people's ties to their respective countries. Although globalization has certainly ushered in impressive dynamics that (1) quickly spread information, (2) promote free trade, (3) contribute to the free movement of financial resources, (4) enhance technological innovation, and (5) unfetter movement of labor across national boundaries, it has simultaneously 'eroded primordial loyalty and identification with family, clan, tribe, linguistic group, or religion' (Laquian, 2005: 140). Sassen noted the same tendency, which she described as a 'denationalizing of national territory,' one that 'contributed to a sense of powerlessness among local actors' (1998: xxvii).

Citing Bangkok as one of the world's more important global cities along side New York, London and Tokyo, Sassen notes how it also exhibits major issues of global cities, such as a 'sharpening

inequality in the concentration of strategic resources and activities between . . . others in the same country' (2001: 125). When local citizens are unable to penetrate mainstream society through their only significantly major urban center, globalization and its discontents may continue to have class-based dynamics which characterize its political terrain. With the denationalizing of nation already set in place by globalization, Bangkok may no longer be able to wholeheartedly express the 'nation's mind and soul,' as noted by Jefferson (1939: 229). Exacerbating this dynamic may be how the rupturing of a unanimous rendering of the Thai nation was also influenced by the migration patterns of citizens from the rural hinterland.

Although Bangkok is the country's exponentially largest city, this does not mean that the city can permanently collect every migrant coming to the city. If the city cannot take in migrants beyond a certain parameter, the only option for migrants is to have but a temporary stay in the city if they desire to have some modicum of a quality of life. Fuller, Kamnuansilpa, and Lightfoot (1990: 535–536) identify a back and forth 'circular mobility' migration taking place between rural areas and Bangkok, an important economic strategy for rural households. This phenomenon exhibits patterns where migrants temporarily stay in the city insofar as the can harness urban networks for whatever labor opportunities are available, only to later return to their rural provinces with their earnings. Studies by Goldstein et al., (1977) and Papanek (1975) demonstrate similar patterns of the semi-permanent stays of migrants to Bangkok. Sternstein noted this same pattern for the younger demographic as driven by 'seasonality tied to the school calendar' (1974: 138). For Fuller and colleagues, 'circular mobility is quantitatively far more significant than the types of permanent migration recorded by national censuses . . . and is . . . consequential for the social and economic development of both urban and rural areas' (Fuller et al., 1990: 536).

Yet circular mobility is not a simplistic phenomenon. The process actually includes a variety of nuanced strategies that include 'return migration . . . wage labor migration, seasonal mobility,' and 'sojourner movements' (Chapman, 1982: 1–2). The strength of the link between: (1) the primate city of Bangkok and its embodiment of the elitism and conspicuous consumption that denies the disadvantaged opportunities for full participation and inclusion into Thai society; and (2) the migrants' temporary links to Bangkok in ways that minimize their emotional investment and loyalty to it urgently requires more precise elaboration and investigation. Such is the misplaced ambitions of Bangkok as a primate city: expectations that the super-city can perennially bridge cultural, political, and economic distances of the entire nation.

What remains to be seen are pivotal historical episodes that are on the horizon for Bangkok: the period after King Bhumibol and his almost seven decades of paternalistic rule and the real likelihood of Thaksin's return, a pathway already being paved by his sister's election victory, a victory which will be seen as a mandate for supporters of Thaksin's politics. On 24 March 2012 the *Bangkok Post* reported that Thaksin told his supporters that he would soon make an 'elegant' return to the country, one that will see him 'come back with style.' In the meantime, Thaksin cheered his supporters on, noting how the *Pheu Thai* government was 'doing its very best' to help detained Red Shirts complicit in the uprising to be freed. Thaksin noted: 'I would like Red Shirt detainees to be patient. I am talking with judges and everything should be settled. If the government has no money to bail out the Red Shirts, I will use my own money to bail out everyone. I keep in close contact with red shirt leaders' (Kingkaeo, 2012: para. 3). Thaksin further insisted that his return was 'imminent.'

Cautiously extrapolating from Bangkok given the listing of arson sites and the types of structures attacked, the data suggest that primate cities serving as national capitals in countries with glaring inequalities – if they continue to be exacerbated by globalization – will be highly vulnerable to class-based political upheavals in the future. This is due to the sheer density in how state and

conspicuous consumption institutions are configured proximately to one another. Such density allows for reactive political entrepreneurs to see explicit antipodes of inequality. That is, ensconced within the shadows of the opulent skyscrapers are the unresolved tropes of Krongkaew's ultra poor (2002): the impoverished selling lottery tickets, children selling garlands and cleaning automobile windows during red lights, or most poignantly, physically disfigured citizens with missing limbs begging for money, while others ably sing *lookthung* songs and classic Thai ballads outside impressive office high rises.

No matter where one enters the chronology of 18th-, 19th-, or 20th-century Bangkok, the city functions not only as the country's front office but as its tangible political frontline as well. In Bangkok, different nationalisms and great class divisions and interests compel political entrepreneurs to mobilize their constituencies to forge a nation. Now in the age of globalization, the city's status as a conspicuous consumption capital – amplified by banking and shopping 'monuments' – is also contested by aristocratic old world views of hierarchy that attempt to supplant globalization's inequalities *with their own*, contributing to the city's volatile interaction between development and tradition in highly complex ways. In Thailand's super-city where privy council members uphold royalty while republicans and many economistic Thais would rather see otherwise, dramatic chapters for the primate city of Bangkok and its 244-year history are still being written.

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