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New Social Media and Politics in Thailand: The Emergence of Fascist Vigilante Groups on Facebook

Wolfram Schaffar

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Since 2010, Facebook has become a battleground between competing political camps in Thailand. Facebook groups like the Social Sanction group, tellingly abbreviated as SS, and the Rubbish Collector Organization, which was founded in 2014 and has attracted more than 200,000 members, have played a crucial role in the process of political radicalization. The aim of these groups is to expose political opponents by accusing them of *lèse-majesté*, which can result in a prison sentence of 15 years or more. The groups also serve as fora for hate speech and are increasingly used as a tool of mobilization for state-sponsored mass events by the authoritarian regime that came to power with the coup d'état of May 2014. Contrary to its popular perception as a tool for democratization, Facebook has been successfully used by political groups reminiscent of fascist vigilante groups. This paper analyses the genesis of these groups and discusses the phenomenon in a broader political and historical context.

Keywords: Facebook; Fascism; Rubbish Collector Organization; Thailand; Vigilante Groups

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INTRODUCTION

In May 2015, a Red Shirt activist who identifies herself on Facebook as Tananun Buranasiri was targeted by a Facebook mob. During the campaign against her she was accused of having posted comments that were disrespectful of the monarchy and was threatened with accusations of *lèse-majesté* under Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code – a charge that can result in a prison sentence of 15 years. The Facebook mob even disclosed personal information about Tananun and her family, including the name of the shopping mall where she worked. When people started appearing in front of the particular shop, she was fired by her employer (“Red Shirt Sacked”, 2015).

The campaign against Tananun Buranasiri was organized by a Facebook group called the Rubbish Collector Organization (RCO), which had more than 200,000 members in summer 2015. Judging by the daily number of likes and comments, the group was highly active between April 2014, when it was launched, and late 2015, when its founder, Rienthong Nanna, officially withdrew from it. The stated aim of the RCO was to “clean” Thailand of “social rubbish” – people, according to their definition, who were not loyal to the monarchy or who opposed the military coup d'état of May 2014 (“Doctor Sick of All”, 2014).

The RCO has published lists of people who were subsequently targeted by both online as well as offline mob campaigns, such as the one against Tananun Buranasiri. The post about Buranasiri's dismissal alone drew more than 4,480 likes by August 2015, and followers of the group posted numerous comments insulting her and exchanging fantasies about how to “get rid” of her.



Figure 1. Screenshot, taken from the timeline of RCO Facebook group, May 2015, showing the campaign against Tananun Buranasiri. *In English: If no complaint has yet been filed against Tananun Buransiri, I and my team will do so beginning of next week. I beg you to be patient. Be sensible. General Rienthong Nanna, 10 May 2015.* (figure by the author).

The most serious incident that has been connected with such a campaign is the shooting of Kamol Duangphasuk, a well known writer and poet who took the side of the Red Shirts in his work. Although it has never been solved, Kamol's assassination coincided suspiciously with the founding of the RCO, which had launched one of its first campaigns against him and whose members applauded his assassination (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Apart from bullying individuals, RCO's Facebook group also served as a forum in which members publicly displayed their loyalty to the monarchy by means of, for example, photos of public performances of the royal anthem or joining public events in honor of the King or Queen. Iconic examples include the campaigns “Bike for Mom” and “Bike for Dad”, through which the heir to the throne, who meanwhile has become King himself, called on Thai citizens to join a biking tour around the city to express their loyalty and gratitude on the occasions of the Queen's and the King's birthdays. Mobilizing for and documenting mass events like this was the second major function of the RCO Facebook group. The peculiar mixture of violence against political opponents and mass mobilization is reminiscent of political processes and strategies typical of the ascent of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe. In those times, ultra-nationalist vigilante groups mobilized to intimidate left-wing political opponents and create political chaos, with the ultimate aim of abolishing parliamentary regimes. Mass events then mobilized popular support for authoritarian regimes to be set up. It was hardly by accident that the predecessor of the RCO on Facebook was a group called Social Sanction, abbreviated as SS.

The establishment and success of the RCO is a disturbing example of how social media is being used in contemporary Thailand in times of deepening political conflict. Contrary to its popular perception as a tool for democratization, Facebook has been successfully used by political groups in a way reminiscent of fascist vigilante groups. The aim of this paper is to present an analysis of the genesis of social-media based vigilante groups as a first case study. The problem, however, seems to have a wider significance which goes beyond the scope of this paper, but will be touched upon in the final remarks.

FACEBOOK

Facebook was founded in 2004 as a social networking platform at Harvard University, based on the university's printed yearbooks or "facebook" (Marichal, 2012, p. 3). After expanding to other US universities and colleges in 2005, it was opened to the broader public in 2006 and experienced explosive growth in the following years. By July 2010, Facebook had amassed 500 million users (Marichal, 2012, p. 4) and surpassed one billion in the third quarter of 2012. Facebook has kept growing, due especially to its expansion into new geographic areas and sectors of society. Between 2013 and 2016, the biggest growth rates in terms of Monthly Active Users (MAUs) was achieved not in the US and Canada or Europe, but in the Asia-Pacific region and in what Facebook statistics refer to as the "Rest of the World" (Constine, 2016). By April 2016, Facebook counted over 1.65 billion MAUs, which means that the network enjoyed a steady growth rate of 15% per year (Zephoris, 2016). In 2015, social media had become the most important driver of all website referral traffic (DeMers, 2015), accounting for more than 31%. Facebook had a share of 25% and has left behind all major competitors (DeMers, 2015), including blogs, Google+, and also networks relying on mobile Internet, such as WhatsApp or Instagram.

Facebook, as the biggest social network site, has at the time of writing, effectively become a synonym for the Internet as such. The enormous growth of Facebook has attracted many researchers and there has been steep growth in social science research into the phenomenon (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Despite the high output of scientific papers, however, it is safe to say that Facebook is still an under-researched phenomenon. This is due to the fact that the company does not disclose its data, unlike Twitter, for example, that gives all tweets to the Library of Congress and has thus attracted a huge number of researchers. Due to its personal character as well as the company's business interests, Facebook data are not public and are difficult to extract. Other factors complicate empirical research further. Facebook is continuously developing its technical applications, which often leads to fundamental changes. The site also keeps changing its privacy policy, which makes it difficult even for the user to keep track of which content is visible to whom. Hence why empirical social science research has to rely on conventional methods of data collection. The study presented here relies on an analysis of screenshots of postings found in the RCO Facebook group in summer 2015. In order to access the postings, the author and a research assistant registered as members of the group. In addition to this, single informal interviews were conducted via the chat application of Facebook with selected group members. However, the motivation for and an important background to this

study are interviews and informal talks with Thai friends and colleagues who were threatened or targeted by violent attacks connected with Facebook.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPACT OF FACEBOOK

That the Internet has triggered tremendous changes in social interaction worldwide is a commonplace observation. When the uprising in the Arab world in 2011 was dubbed a 'Facebook Revolution', the moniker expressed that even pivotal political developments may be traced back to the impact of specific communication technologies.

This utopist-decisionist view of the Internet can most adequately be described as a technical modernization theory: Due to a technical innovation, entire societies undergo fundamental change in spheres including social relations, forms of production, and political regimes. The expectation is that the Internet creates a new public sphere (Castells, 2008) where, due to the technical specification of the new communication channels, citizens can meet on more equal terms, civil society can organize better, and deliberation can be more inclusive and more effective.

Many expectations regarding the spread of the Internet have not come to pass. Singapore is an example where the government has supported 100% broadband Internet access in the city but has at the same time kept the authoritarian regime in power. George (2007) and Lee (2010), drawing on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, have analyzed how the government of Singapore used the technical specifications of blogs, tailored legislation, and calibrated coercion to trigger self-censorship and even broaden the surveillance of their population. With its successful policy of containment, Singapore has served as a laboratory for the design of authoritarian governance techniques that have subsequently been adopted and adapted by other governments, most prominently in China and Thailand. Moreover, it has been shown that existing inequalities concerning gender, race, and class are often reproduced and even enhanced on the Internet. The same holds true for global inequalities (Chang, Himelboim, & Dong, 2009; Graham, De Sabbata, & Zook, 2015).

Some scholars hoped that the spread of social media and social networking services would finally fulfill the promise of the Internet, which had not been realized by classic Internet applications. In contrast to the old model of setting-up and maintaining static homepages, Facebook allows for a truly reciprocal exchange of data and opinions. The classic gap between sender and receiver is absent, and sharing has become the keyword for data exchange and Facebook (Van Dijk, 2013). Moreover, early versions of Facebook which allowed users to change names and maintain several profiles made it possible to practice anonymity and fluid identities. On this basis, scholars saw in it the advent of a true network society (Castells, 2008; Shirky, 2009).

Many analyses of Facebook have, however, pointed in another direction. In contrast to the utopist-decisionist view, and as a reaction to the disillusionment with empirical evidence, some analyses have posed their focus less on technical solutions and more on the 'technology in use'. These constructivist approaches stress that technical applications are embedded in and shaped by social and political processes. The amount of information available on the Internet, for example, seems to exceed the capacity of Internet users to process it – to discern its quality, reflect on it, or use it for

meaningful deliberation (Marichal, 2012, p. 19). Rather than using the abundance of shared high-quality information, users are distracted by Twitter posts and Facebook status updates. As early as 2010, a Pew report found that young people's use of the Internet showed a tendency to move away from content-sharing sites like YouTube and blogs and toward sites focused on social networking (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010).

In addition to this cloud of banality, the Internet and social media in general display a tendency toward fragmentation. Instead of making use of the possibility of exchanging views with people from all strands of life, users are linking up with those they already know or with whom they agree politically. Quantitative research into political blogs has shown that the exchange of opinions among bloggers largely remains within homogeneous groups. References to blogs expressing rival opinions are far less common than references to blogs that express the same opinion. The blogosphere thus mirrors the political divides within society. Moreover, in referring to pieces that express the same opinions, these groupings function as echo chambers, radicalizing the positions and arguably exacerbating political polarization (Adamic & Glance, 2005; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010; Sunstein, 2004, 2009). This tendency, also known as *selectivity bias*, is also evident in Facebook networks (boyd, 2010). As for the situation in Thailand, the tendency of Facebook groups to act as echo chambers, whereby people exchange and discuss their views with those of a similar opinion, is clearly borne out (Grömping, 2014).

Another critical question is how far Facebook supports or furthers political engagement. Indeed, analyses have shown that Facebook users are more politically active than average (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2010; Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2014). A closer look into what kind of political activity is supported by Facebook reveals that, like other Internet-based platforms, it leads not to engagement in the sense of a physical presence, but to what Morozov (2011) and Gladwell (2010) respectively termed *slacktivism*. Online activism – so it seems – substitutes low-cost, low-benefit political behavior for meaningful political engagement (Gladwell, 2010; Marichal, 2012; Morozov, 2011).

Another dilemma facing social science research into the political effects of Facebook appears with respect to right-wing or fascist groups. With the rise of right-wing and fascist groups in many different countries, research has been conducted into how these groups use the Internet (Caiani & Kröll, 2015; Caiani & Parenti, 2013; Froio & Gattinara, 2015; Tateo, 2005). It has been shown that right-wing groups are making good use of the opportunities offered by Internet-based communication – circumventing national legislation banning fascist activities and using the Internet for in-group organization as well as outreach. Whereas the possibilities of the Internet are perceived as positive opportunities when used by democratic social movements in authoritarian contexts (Etling, Faris, & Palfrey, 2010; Laer & Aelst, 2010), the same features appear dangerous when it comes to fascist mobilization.

POLITICAL CONFRONTATION IN THAILAND

The current political divide between the Red and Yellow camps in Thailand started as an intra-elite conflict when Thaksin Shinawatra became prime minister in 2001

(Kasian, 2016; Montesano, Pavin, & Aekapol, 2012; Pasuk & Baker, 2008, 2009; Pavin, 2014). The two factions that confront each other can be characterized as follows: On the one side are the Red Shirts – a coalition of party followers and business partners of Thaksin. The grassroots followers are mainly lower middle-class people and politicized farmers from the North and Northeast who have profited from Thaksin's infrastructure and social security programs (Walker, 2012). A growing group of supporters are also drawn from social movements for democracy, consisting of newly politicized citizens opposed to the involvement of the military in politics and the unconstitutional maneuvers through which the Yellow Shirts and their parliamentary arm, the Democrat Party, monopolize power (McCargo & Naruemon, 2011; Montesano et al., 2012). On the other side are the old Bangkok elites – also a broad coalition of social forces that have been dubbed Yellow Shirts: royalist conservative circles and business people connected to the Crown Property Bureau, with exclusive access to the judiciary and military and supported by Bangkok's upper middle class (Pye & Schaffar, 2008). The most important ideological focus for this group is a growing nationalism that puts the nation, the monarchy, and religion at its center and demands unwavering loyalty. The appeal to these principles, moreover, to a higher morality based on these principles, legitimizes their claim to political leadership. The numeric majority of the Red Shirts, however, is explained by populism, vote-buying, and corruption (Kasian, 2016; Thongchai, 2008, 2016).

The general trend, which has become more pronounced over the course of the years, was that the Red Shirts managed to win a vast majority in every free election with great ease. The Yellow Shirts, claiming that the electoral majority had been won through vote-buying or populism, challenged the government and managed to oust it by means of their privileged access to the judiciary and military (Pavin, 2014). This led to a stalemate between the two antagonistic camps – a constellation of power which was also typical of the situation in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, at the advent of fascist regimes.

FASCISM IN THAILAND

It is difficult to use the term *fascism* as an analytic concept. The notion is strongly associated with a specific period in European history between the 1920s and 1940s, when ultra-nationalistic parties in Italy took over the government and transformed the entire society (Bosworth, 2009).

The term fascism is derived from a term for Italian vigilante groups – *Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* (FIC) – that were supported by capitalists in northern Italy, with the aim of fighting the increasing influence of organized labor and communist groups in factories and among rural laborers. Under Mussolini's leadership, these vigilante groups grew strong enough to abolish the parliamentary system and establish an authoritarian regime based on violence. Whether there is any central ideology behind fascism that can be defined like other political ideologies such as liberalism or socialism is contested. Roger Griffin (2003) argues that “generic fascism” can be pinned down by a single formula: Fascism is a “political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism”¹. Among

1 Palingenetic means the idea of ‘national rebirth’.

historians, however, this definition is met with considerable skepticism. Regimes in the Europe of the 1920s and 1930s varied considerably in their ideological orientations and, furthermore, many historians reject the idea of abstracting from historical cases to create an analytically meaningful concept of fascism. It is doubtful that such a concept can be translated to cases outside Europe and to different historical periods.

For Thailand, however, Griffin's concept seems to fit strikingly. During the course of the increasing antagonism between the Red and Yellow Shirts, the latter have focused their ideology increasingly on nationalistic concepts. In the present context, their morally charged appeal regarding nation, monarchy, and religion plays an increasingly central role. A fuzzy, morally charged code of 'Thai-ness' is posited as an antidote to the perceived decline of society. This Thai-ness serves as point of reference for the rebirth of the Thai nation, which is pressed on all sides by globalization, capitalism, and modernization (Thongchai, 2016).

Even more illuminating for an analysis of the current political situation in Thailand is the strand of research on fascism that focuses on the role of vigilante groups. Not only in Italy but in most other European countries vigilante groups were instrumental to the rise of fascism. In Austria, for example, there was the *Heimwehr* – diverse groups and remnants of the imperial army in rural areas, supported by clerical-conservative elites and acting to counter the successful organization of the social democrats, communists, and organized labor (Tálos, 2013). Instead of focusing on ideology, Bonapartist theories of fascism put class constellations and the role of vigilante groups at the center of analysis (Saage, 2007). At the time of the rise of fascism, various European countries' political landscapes were characterized by a stalemate between two antagonistic blocks. On one side were socialist parties and organized workers who successfully used the young parliamentary system to gain influence, but were unable to take political power completely. On the other side, conservative capitalist elites were entrenched in political institutions and held on to power. In this stalemate, and under the specter of a world economic crisis, the middle classes/bourgeoisie sided with monarchic-conservative elites (Borworth, 2009; Tálos, 2013). Vigilante groups were employed to intimidate organized labor and create chaos, thereby legitimizing the dissolution of the parliamentary system and the establishment of an authoritarian regime. The bourgeois sectors of society thus opted to give up their political and democratic rights in order to keep their socially and economically privileged position.

Vigilante groups in Thailand working in the above-mentioned ways are not a new phenomenon. Paramilitary groups founded and supported by conservative and right-wing forces in Thailand have a long history going back to the times of when Thailand played a crucial role in the geopolitical strategy of the USA to contain communism in Southeast Asia. As a bulwark against a spill-over of communist movements in Indochina, Thai authorities spread a strictly anti-communist propaganda and fought the Thai Communist Party, which retreated to waging a guerrilla war in the Northeast. Accompanying the Four Cuts anti-insurgency policy, the *Royal Thai Army's Internal Security Operations Command* (ISOC) founded scouting and paramilitary groups as a rural defense against communism and all kinds of opposition forces. *Village Scouts* and *Red Gaur*s played an infamous role in a 1976 massacre when the military staged a

coup d'état closing the brief window of democracy which opened in 1973. The groups were brought to the capital and were instrumental to the atrocities carried out in downtown Bangkok, eradicating all resistance and intimidating any opposition ("Steady Rise of Fascism", 2014; Zimmerman, 1978).

FASCIST GROUPS IN THAILAND ON FACEBOOK

The emergence of vigilante groups on the Internet has grown out of specific historic circumstances: political developments and a deepening political divide; legal provisions in Thailand; and the rise of Facebook as the dominant social network.

Following the coup d'état of 2006, the military government began to introduce new mechanisms of Internet censorship. The military junta proclaimed a state of emergency and the institution of martial law, with the stated aim of uprooting 'political undercurrents' – a euphemism for the strong support for Thaksin in many parts of the country. Because of the self-censorship of the traditional media, anti-coup groups had to resort to Internet-based channels to organize. The censorship that was put in place to fight these new forms of organization was modeled after Singaporean laws and comprises tightened criminal provisions regarding lèse-majesté and new Internet-specific laws.

The tightening of Article 112, which punishes lèse-majesté with up to 15 years in prison, has made it into a catch-all to intimidate whomever is deemed a political enemy. A steep increase in cases shows that this section has been used almost arbitrarily to fight political opponents. Until 2005, there were about five cases of lèse-majesté per year. In 2007, however, military and royal conservatives started using the law systematically to silence political opponents. The number of cases exploded, with 478 in the year 2010 alone. The law was also considerably broadened in the course of political struggle. Originally, it was interpreted as covering the reigning King, but in 2013 a court ruling found a person guilty of defaming past kings, even those from distant history, as well as the pet dog of the King ("Thai Man Faces Jail", 2015). Sentences have also been continuously increased. In August 2015, Pongsak Sriboonpeng was sentenced by the Bangkok Military Court to 60 years – later reduced to 30 years – in jail for six alleged lèse-majesté Facebook postings ("Man Jailed for 30 Years", 2015).

In 2007, the Computer Crime Act was enacted by the military government. A censorship authority was created within the Ministry of the Interior which issues frequent bans against single websites. During the government of Prime Minister Abhisit, no less than 45,357 sites were blocked, 39,115 of which on the grounds of lèse-majesté (Saksith, 2014). After continuous criticism from various human rights and other political organizations, the number of lèse-majesté cases, as well as the circumstances of the accusations, alerted even the United Nations Security Council and led to criticism in the Universal Periodic Review process (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

In addition to criminalizing a number of computer-specific acts, the law introduced the stipulation that the Internet provider or owner of a website is liable for any content, including hyperlinks, comments, blogs, etc. With these provisions, and by means of applying the tightened Article 112 to Internet fora, the military government managed to close down or impose tight controls over most websites where political discussions were organized. Popular pages like Midnight University or *Prachatai* were

either shut down or, following the Singaporean model, targeted by spectacular court cases in which the providers or editors were held responsible for content allegedly insulting the monarchy. This functions as a means of creating insecurity or a ‘chilling effect’, triggering far-reaching self-censorship by the common user.

However, the Computer Crime Act only served this political purpose in the short term. Its limitations became clear when more and more videos and clips insulting the King appeared on YouTube as a means of protest. The government tried to hold YouTube responsible yet, after banning the site for some months, it reached an agreement with Google (the owner of YouTube) and the filter was lifted. Today, YouTube is flooded with dissident material about the monarchy. Facebook too has become an arena where individuals have been able to found groups and create fora that are out of the reach of authorities. Recently, the military government has intensified its efforts to trace and prosecute Facebook users (“Facebook 8’ Case Shows”, 2016). However, from 2010 on, social media like Facebook have become the main battlefield of political struggle. It was here that the first group showing fascist vigilante features appeared: Social Sanction, tellingly abbreviated as SS.

EARLY VIGILANTE GROUPS: SOCIAL SANCTION OR SS

This group was established against the background of the 2010 demonstrations of the Red Shirts, who showed a strong and impressive capacity to mobilize. Not only their numbers, but also the strength and persistence with which they struggled for their demand to hold snap elections, surprised the royalist-conservative government of Prime Minister Abhisit and political analysts alike. Using class terminology from feudal times to frame their battle as *Phrai* (commoners/slaves) against *Amat* (feudal lords) drew the question of the monarchy more into focus than at any other previous demonstrations (Montesano et al., 2012; Schaffar, 2010).

Already in 2009, there were single incidents of “cyber witch hunts” (Thai Netizen Network, 2012, p. 59). The first Internet forum where people were publically accused of *lèse-majesté* was a Facebook group with the title Rally Bangkokians to Oppose Evil Red Shirts (Thai Netizen Network, 2012, pp. 63, 77). However, the first group to operate systematically and with a broader impact was the Facebook group called Social Sanction (SS), founded in March 2010 (Thai Netizen Network, 2012, p. 63). The organizers of the group remained anonymous but declared in their Facebook description that their aim was to “unite Thais to expose crooks and defend the monarch by social sanction” (Thai Netizen Network, 2012, p. 66). The group operated for three years until it finally disappeared in July 2013 (Thai Netizen Network, 2014, p. 136). In the course of this time, about 40 people were publicly “exposed” (Thai Netizen Network, 2014, p. 135). The main activity through which people were targeted were postings, in which they were portrayed as disloyal to the monarchy and accused of *lèse-majesté*. If the accused answered to such postings, the campaign went into the next round – re-posting screenshots of such reactions with more defamatory comments. The main issue was not so much to present legally sound evidence of *lèse-majesté*, but to attack individuals with the more general accusation of being ‘un-Thai’. “Thai-ness under absolute monarchy” was the main ideological point of reference, as illustrated by postings like: “[W]hoever questions, criticizes or does not express love toward the monarch is considered alien, ungrateful, and evil” (Thai Netizens Network, 2014, p.

67). Supporters of the exiled Prime Minister Thaksin were insulted with terms common among Yellow Shirts, like ‘red buffalo’. They were also called ungrateful, ‘traitor’, or ‘dead wood’. Comments publicly suggested that they should be lynched.

In addition to this core activity, the page also served as a forum for exchanging political opinions by posting and commenting on news. The exchanges, however, followed the same logic as the defamations of individuals and reproduced the discourse of “Thai-ness under absolute monarchy” (Thai Netizen Network, 2014, pp. 67-68). Thus, the SS group can be characterized as a mixture of echo chamber and slacktivism. Defaming comments reproduced and amplified a nationalist-royalist discourse about Thai-ness. Attacking individuals through Facebook posts and calling, or supporting a call, for action against them was framed as political activism or a social sanction. The difference in the forms of slacktivism was, however, that the accusation of *lèse-majesté*, launched by a simple click on the Internet, was and is a dangerous weapon and can have serious consequences under Thai legislation. The cyber-mobbing led by groups like SS, which used the draconian Article 112 as a threat against political opponents, and various counter-campaigns using fake online profiles to equally expose opponents to Article 112 prosecution, led to a veritable cyber guerilla war which only eased up with the election of Yingluck Shinawatra and the stabilization of politics (Thai Netizens Network, 2014, p. 135). SS was dissolved, however, as a consequence of a flawed campaign and public outcry against it: In July 2012, it launched a campaign against a Lt. Col. Sopa but, lacking a photo, used a picture found on the Internet. When it became clear that the image was of the wrong person, it led to an outrage in the Internet community and SS was closed down (Thai Netizens Network, 2014, p. 138).

PROFESSIONALIZATION AND STATE-SUPPORTED VIGILANTE GROUPS: CYBER SCOUTS

The process through which a new generation of Facebook-based vigilante groups emerged in 2014 cannot be understood without the government’s *Cyber Scouts* program, which was launched in December 2010 by the royalist-conservative government of Abhisit Vajjajiva and under the leadership of the *Ministry for Information and Communication Technology* (MICT). In seminars at universities and schools, pupils and students were recruited to join a now state-organized group to search the Internet for cases of *lèse-majesté* and other offences (Farelli, 2010; Rook, 2011). Volunteers could register on a website and, as part of their one-day training, received ideological instructions on the history and importance of the monarchy as well as on Facebook’s technical specifications. The Scouts’ work included incognito methods such as befriending suspects on Facebook and starting conversations about sensitive issues. In the case of a breach of *lèse-majesté* laws, the Scout would then warn the person or hand over the case to the authorities. The name *Cyber Scouts* clearly alludes to the vigilante groups of the 1970s when Village Scouts and Red Gaurs were mobilized against the student movement (Farelli, 2010; Saksith, 2010; “Steady Rise of Fascism”, 2014). These early programs of state-supported Internet-based spying groups were phased out when the government of Yingluck Shinawatra took office in 2011 but were relaunched after the coup d’état of summer 2014 – this time in an even

more comprehensive way and with more financial support from the MICT (Saksith, 2014). We have not been able to pin down whether people taking part in the Cyber Scout programs have later taken an active role in the Facebook-based vigilante groups. Arguably, the program in 2010, however, had a more general effect beyond the immediate results of the Cyber Scouts scanning activities. The very existence of such a program and the fact that it was initiated by the state administration put activities like the ones performed by SS in a different light. Instead of political guerilla campaigns, launched by a sectarian group of radical Yellow Shirts, it now appeared as state-sponsored, morally valuable political activity serving the nation.

THE RUBBISH COLLECTOR ORGANIZATION

A new round of mobilization of vigilante groups was launched in late 2013 when Yingluck Shinawatra was prime minister (2011-2014). Despite the fact that Yingluck had won the 2011 elections with the support of the Red Shirts, her administration was characterized as low profile and reluctant as far as pressing political issues for the Red Shirts were concerned. This was often interpreted as a strategy not to create any pretext for the Yellow Shirt camp to mobilize against her. Especially with regard to the tightened *lèse-majesté* laws and the legal investigation into the violent crackdown against the Red Shirts in 2010, Yingluck remained largely silent. Despite this, the Yellow camp started mobilizing for demonstrations in Bangkok to oust the government in late 2013. In January 2014, Yellow Shirt demonstrators pushed a campaign with the slogan “Shut Down Bangkok – Restart Thailand” and blocked the central traffic hubs of downtown Bangkok. Giant screens at the central protest stages and nationwide broadcasting via television channels and printed media, which are close to the royal conservative camp, were a clear sign of the financial and logistical support of influential elite circles. On stage, the speakers demanded that elections be abolished and the parliament be replaced by an appointed reform committee. This situation – the middle-class plus elite mobilization against a popularly supported government, the demand for the abolition of the parliamentary system in favor of a corporate system of representation, and the legitimization in the name of ultra-nationalist salvation of the country – comes very close to the situation in several countries of Europe at the advent of fascism, especially Austria in the 1930s and Portugal in the late 1920s (Tálos, 2013). In this constellation of power, vigilante groups re-emerged and played a crucial role in the political struggle of the Yellow Shirts against the government and its supporters, the Red Shirts. They were instrumental in paving the way to the coup d'état in May 2014 and the establishment of the authoritarian regime under Prayuth Chan-o-cha.

During the demonstrations, armed security groups who started using violence against political opponents were formed around the stages. For example, groups of security guards formed motorcycle convoys and started ‘visiting’ government politicians at their houses amid a climate of rising violence. When Yingluck Shinawatra called for snap elections, these guards attacked citizens who wanted to register for voting. On Facebook too, a new vigilante group was established which appeared more professional and with a tighter organizational backbone: the Rubbish Collector Organization (RCO).

From the very beginning, the RCO used a strategy that was considerably different from that of the SS. The RCO combined the established forms of guerilla/mobbing activism with a professional military organization structure, which was made public by a well-designed offline narrative. Moreover, in contrast to SS, which operated as a small and anonymous group of radical Yellow activists, the RCO styled itself as comprising common people from the streets who had come together due to the spur of indignation – a movement rather than a small, radical group. Instrumental to this new narrative was the public figure of the group’s founder, Rienthong Nanna, who became the face of the group and embodied its specific features.

Rienthong Nanna is 55 years old and runs the family-owned Mongkhut Wattana General Hospital in central Bangkok. Before he took over the hospital in 2007, he worked in the Army Medical Department and held the rank of a major general. The establishment of the RCO was portrayed as Rienthong’s personal initiative. When the RCO was launched on Facebook, Rienthong held a meeting in his hospital. The meeting, covered by the mainstream media, showcased him and his motivation. A central part of the narrative was that Rienthong is non-political, with no connection to any parties or political networks (“Call the Stop”, 2014). Despite his lack of interest in politics, he had been drawn into that sphere by his indignation over the violence he presumed had been committed against Yellow Shirt members. Out of a deeply felt sense of injustice, he started joining the Yellow Shirt demonstrations more regularly in 2008 and eventually became an ardent supporter who also appeared at the protest staged during the 2013/2014 campaign (“Army’s Job to Defend”, 2014).

Rienthong combines the features of a *Wutbürger* (enraged citizen) with the determination and ruthlessness of a soldier. At the founding meeting of the group at his hospital, 30 former high-ranking army leaders were present (“Monarchists Vote to”, 2014). Rienthong claimed that he was working on the establishment of a “people’s army to protect the monarchy” (“Monarchists Vote to”, 2014), and that the RCO was under the special protection of the army, which was promptly denied by army leaders (“Army’s Job to Defend”, 2014). The military structure behind the organization is, however, obvious. The group is organized in different units, among which is a “top secret surveillance command center” (“Doctor Sick of All”, 2014). The exact structure of the group, which served the administrative requirements of its 200,000 members and steered online activities, was kept secret (“Doctor Sick of All”, 2014). However, our analysis of online communications in July 2015 shows that, despite the large number of several hundred comments connected to one post, each comment was answered from Rienthong’s personal account – a clear sign that there is a professional staff behind this account.

Also in stark contrast to the image of the ‘common man of the streets’ is the militancy and violence that was apparent in the language of the RCO’s official proclamations and Facebook posts. Rienthong defined the aim of the group as to clean up Thailand’s “social rubbish” and to “eradicate lèse-majesté offenders completely” within two years, where the word eradicate is the same Thai word previously used in slogans about “eradicating communism” (“Steady Rise of Fascism”, 2014). Metaphors like: “When you first sweep the floor, the dust will be blown all over the place – but later the floor will look cleaner” (Rienthong in an interview with the Bangkok Post, “Doctor Sick of All”, 2014) resemble a German proverb that was popular in the fascist



Figure 2. Screenshot, taken from the timeline of RCO Facebook group, May 2016, illustrating the campaign against Rose. (figure by the author).

period and was used to excuse the killing of people as ‘collateral damage’ for the sake of reaching a higher end.² Rienthong also compared himself with Van Helsing (“Doctor Sick of All”, 2014) – the character fighting Dracula in fantasy films.

Like the SS, as its core activity, the RCO pursued campaigns to expose breaches of *lèse-majesté*, which were then notified to the police. However, the RCO went beyond this and systematically combined online and offline activism. As mentioned in the introduction to this article, Tananun Buranasiri lost her job when a mob started appearing in front of the shop where she worked. Another spectacular case is the systematic mobbing of Chatwadee Amorpat, also known as Rose, who works as a hair stylist in London and has become known as a Red Shirt activist and critic of the monarchy. Rose was named on RCO’s ‘most wanted’ list along with several other prominent dissidents, many of whom are now living in exile. After her private address was revealed by the RCO, she was targeted by mobbing attacks in London. Incited by the RCO campaigns, Thai tourists as well as Thais living in Europe uploaded video clips showing how they had gone to Rose’s house and sprayed slogans on her door or left

2 “*Wo gehobelt wird, fallen Späne*”, in English “where there is planing, shavings will fall”, is said to have been the favored proverb of Hermann Göring. This only roughly corresponds to the English “You can’t make an omelet without breaking eggs”.

bags of excrement in her mailbox. The mobbing against her went so far that her parents felt pressured to file a case of *lèse-majesté* against their own daughter (Gazeau, 2014).

Another example of offline action is the boycott against the Thai UNHCR. The impetus for this campaign was the case of Tang Achiwa, also known as Ekapop – a Red Shirt activist who was accused of *lèse-majesté*, managed to flee to Cambodia and, with the help of the UNHCR, was granted asylum in New Zealand. The RCO published, as a fake cover of a UNHCR report, a selfie showing Tang Achiwa and his partner holding new travel documents from New Zealand. Apart from the usual hate comments against Tang Achiwa, RCO members boasted of having canceled their donations to the UNHCR and openly threatened the institution: “I’ll go and destroy the [UNHCR] donation booths and slap the staff. F*** UNHCR Thailand”. After numerous Internet attacks, the Thai UNHCR branch had to shut down its Facebook page (“Thai Royalists Condemn”, 2015; “Thai Royalists Threaten”, 2015).



Figure 3. Screenshot, taken from the timeline of RCO Facebook group, May 2016, illustrating the campaign against the Thai UNHCR. (figure by the author).

The logic of these campaigns is similar to that of campaigns on the SS page. Cases were set upon the basis of pictures and reports added to the group’s Facebook Timeline. This served as a crystallization point for the ordinary group members’

comments, which triggered an echo chamber effect that eventually swelled into hate speech. Within this cycle, Rienthong would take the role of a fatherly leader who calls for moderation among his followers, albeit without preventing the posting of calls for or documentation of violence.

The ritual performance of indignation, followed by hate speech and the documentation of actions, under the guidance of a fatherly but uncompromising and rigorous leader, was increasingly combined with calls for and documentation of mass mobilization of members 'performing' their loyalty to the monarchy. In this respect too, the RCO page constitutes a new development compared to the SS page. Whereas older Facebook pages served as fora for the documentation of private initiatives, the RCO's, with its prominent individual members and its mass membership, triggered a new effect. State-organized mass events were advertised on RCO, with an almost coercive effect on members to, at the very least, click the like button or post greetings like the ritual "Long live the King". One example is the campaigns "Bike for Mom" and "Bike for Dad", which aimed to promote the heir to the throne, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, as dutiful son and legitimate successor. For this reason, Vajiralongkorn invited Thai citizens to join a public cycling event in Bangkok and other provincial capitals on the occasion of his mother, the Queen's, 83rd birthday.

Uniformed in merchandise such as light blue t-shirts and flags, the cyclists were formed into three groups according to their social and political status and cycled along a course. Vajiralongkorn led Block A with the highest representatives of the state, including the supreme commander of the Royal Thai Army, the prime minister, and the president of the Supreme Court. Block B, with representatives of the private sector, NGOs, and high representatives of the bureaucracy, was headed by the Princess Bajrakitiyabha, daughter of the Crown Prince. Commoners cycled in Block C. This mobilization, organized along feudal lines representing the corporatist order of society favored by the royalist-conservative elites, was covered live on public TV channels and on the websites of the mainstream media ("Crown Prince Leads", 2015). Apart from various offline channels, participants were also mobilized through Facebook groups such as the RCO, where both events constitute the main activity since mid-2015.

This event (as well as its subsequent "Bike for Dad" counterpart, which followed the same choreography) performed a mass mobilization in corporatist formations that strikingly resembled fascist mobilizations in Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Back then, coerced mobilization served to organize support for authoritarian regimes. In Germany, this process slipped into the totalitarian system of National Socialism where the distinction between private and public was dissolved in order to exert total control over the individual.

CONCLUSION

In Thailand, we can observe how vigilante groups emerged on Facebook. Ideologically, these groups come close to Griffin's (2003) definition of palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism, and thus qualify as fascist groups. Their role in a specific constellation of power, as it is analyzed in Bonapartist theories of fascism, is even more striking. Vigilante groups such as the SS or the RCO perform public witch hunts against

people whom they accuse of being disrespectful of the monarchy. The intimidation of political opponents and the creation of a climate of fear was instrumental in bringing about a perceived state of emergency, which helped to discredit and abolish the parliamentary system in favor of the current corporatist, authoritarian regime. Later, after the takeover of the military, groups like the RCO shifted their focus and helped to organize mass events where loyalty to the monarchy and the corporatist order of society is performed.

The vigilante groups have grown out of specific historic circumstances: the deepening political divide, specific legal provisions in Thailand, and the rise of Facebook as the dominant social network site. It has been shown that all these circumstances were equally important and equally constitutive for the groups. In this respect, the present approach differs from studies cited above where Fascist groups in Italy, Spain, or other countries are seen as a phenomenon of offline politics, as groups who – in addition to their offline activities – use the communication, organization, and mobilization opportunities of social media. Further studies on similar groups will be needed to get a more complete picture of the recent rise of vigilante groups on the Internet. A crucial question to ask will be in how far the specific features of Facebook, the general trend toward political polarization, and more or less dormant legacies of Fascist vigilantism are interlinked.



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