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Explaining Thailand's Politicised COVID-19 Containment Strategies: Securitisation, Counter-Securitisation, and Re-Securitisation

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Abstract

We examine the Thai government's politicised COVID-19 containment strategies, which have been challenged by Thai protesters. Although we use securitisation theory as an explanatory framework, we argue that researchers using this theory can explain the issues only if they simultaneously use social-conflict theory to explain the interactions between securitising actors and their audiences. By supplementing securitisation theory with social-conflict theory, we have found that the roles of securitising actors and audiences are not fixed. In our case study of Thailand, the Thai government and protesters have played two roles simultaneously: the role of a securitising actor and the role of an audience. This finding suggests that successful securitisation is impermanent; that is, it is subject to change over time. Securitisation may be successful, but the success can only be temporary because as new actors or resources enter the picture, the previously successful securitisation will, at some point, diminish.

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Keywords
Securitisation, Thailand, COVID-19, Prayuth Chan-o-cha, protesters

Introduction

On 13 January 2020, Thailand became the first country outside of the People's Republic of China to publicly announce a positive COVID-19 case (Marome and Shaw, 2021: 1). As the virus spread and a global pandemic took shape, the Thai government adopted a series of measures. In April of that first year, the Thai government announced a nationwide curfew and instructed people to stay inside their home from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. (WHO Thailand, 2020), while banning almost all incoming flights and requiring 14 days of quarantine for all individuals arriving in Thailand (Ministry of Public Health, 2020). In addition, the government recommended, 'that everyone wear a cloth mask when outside their home' (WHO Thailand, 2020). In April 2021, 63 of Thailand's 77 provinces imposed fines of up to 20,000 baht for people who failed to wear masks in public places (Bangkok Post, 2021c).

The most controversial measure to contain the spread of the virus has been Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha's declaration in late March of 2020 that all of Thailand would be under a state of emergency. The legal justification for the declaration was the Emergency Decree on Public Administration in Emergency Situations, B.E. 2548 (2005) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020). This was not the first time that a state of emergency had been imposed on Thailand. In early 2005, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had declared a state of emergency in response to the crisis in the country's Malay Muslim-majority provinces. The most recent state of emergency, which went into effect on 26 March 2020, has been extended fifteen times and, at the time of this writing (early March 2022), has not been lifted. The state of emergency allowed Prime Minister Prayuth to place significant restrictions on people's movement and speech (Marome and Shaw, 2021: 5).

The announcement was met by nationwide protests against the government beginning in February 2020. The protesters' demands went further than calls for the repeal of the government's pandemic-containment measures, which were decried not only by protesters but also by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for infringing upon human rights (Human Rights Watch, 2020a; International Commission of Jurists, 2020). Protesters advocated for democracy, the reformation of the Thai monarchy, the abolition of money politics within government, and the safeguarding of basic human rights such as freedom of expression (Reuters, 2020b). One of the strongest demands was for Prime Minister Prayuth to resign (Reuters, 2020b). For a large segment of Thai society, the protest activities highlighted the widely held view that the lack of democracy in Thailand was a more serious issue than the containment of COVID-19 outbreaks. Official COVID-19 statistics for the nine consecutive months of regular protests beginning in February 2020 show that the highest cases were between 11 March and 11 April of 2020, when there were roughly 50+ daily cases.[1] Outside of that month, the

daily cases were roughly 10 per day.[2] However, Prime Minister Prayuth claimed that protesters had significantly jeopardised 'the livelihoods of tens of millions of fellow Thais' (Bangkok Post, 2020b). Not surprisingly, then, he never eased the State of Emergency Decree. On 1 February 2021, the military in Myanmar, which is Thailand's neighbour to the northwest, launched a military coup and detained the recently elected members of parliament before they could begin their new term (The Irrawaddy, 2021a). This coup fuelled Myanmar's largest nationwide protests in recent decades, but the military and its proxies violently shut them down, sometimes with calculated, widespread murders (The Irrawaddy, 2021b). Myanmar people residing in Thailand joined Thai protesters in a bid to integrate the two national pro-democratic movements and thus to expand their influence. In response, the Thai government strategically attempted to sever the two groups' connection (INN, 2021).

How do we make sense of Thailand's highly politicised COVID-19 containment strategies? Securitisation theory, originating from the Copenhagen School (CS), can be a potential explanatory framework. Securitisation refers to a process whereby a group of 'securitising actors' frame an issue as an existential threat and then attempt to convince an 'audience' that the issue must be resolved (Buzan et al., 1998). Securitising actors are diverse and can include political elites, the media, and members of civil society (Biba, 2016; Collins, 2005), with the political elites tending to exercise much more power than the other groups (Buzan et al., 1998: 32). Audiences are usually the general public (Arifianto, 2009; Collins, 2005; Stritzel and Chang, 2015) but, in some studies, can include government officials (Biba, 2016), local power elites (Curley and Herington, 2011), and humanitarian organisations (Vaughn, 2009). Securitising actors use speech to gain audience acceptance and to legitimise, in their eyes, extraordinary emergency measures designed to remove an existential threat (Buzan et al., 1998: 21). Such speech usually revolves around a general discourse: 'if we do not tackle this problem, everything else will be irrelevant, because we will not be here or will not be free to deal with it in our own way' (Buzan et al., 1998: 24). Conversely, de-securitisation involves the 'shifting of issues out of emergency mode and into the normal bargaining processes of the political sphere' (Wæver, 1995: 55). De-securitising actors are usually 'those who reconstitute an issue as no longer an existential threat' (Caballero-Anthony and Emmers, 2006: 6). Successful securitisation is 'intersubjective and socially constructed' (Buzan et al., 1998: 31) because it occurs only when targeted audiences accept it (Balzacq, 2005; Buzan et al., 1998: 25; Stritzel, 2007). If we use securitisation theory to analyse Thailand's highly politicised COVID-19 containment strategies, we find that the Thai government has acted as a securitising actor for COVID-19 and that protesters have comprised an audience staunchly opposed to the securitising move.

Scholars have readily adopted securitisation theory to explore non-traditional security (NTS) issues in the context of Southeast Asia. These studies focus mainly on securitising actors (Arifianto, 2009; Caballero-Anthony, 2008; Emmers, 2003). However, research that ignores audiences cannot satisfactorily establish the nature of the intersubjectivity characterising an instance of securitisation (Balzacq, 2005; Côté, 2016; Vuori, 2008). In some cases, audiences have contested the processes by which various actors –

usually governments – have securitised NTS issues in Southeast Asia (Collins, 2005; Hameiri, 2014; Hameiri and Jones, 2013; Jones, 2011). If researchers neglect to consider the roles of audiences, we may oversimplify securitisation processes, such as in the case of Thailand's strategic approach to COVID-19 containment. Some scholars have tried to foreground the role of the audience, but their arguments in this regard tend not to correspond to securitisation's intersubjective nature (Balzacq, 2005; Bourbeau, 2011; Stritzel, 2014; see Côté 2016: 549–550). Côté (2016) further theorised the role of the audience by portraying audience members as active and independent actors. This portrayal accurately reflects the current status of the protesters in Thailand. However, Côté's theorised framework is insufficient for understanding the specific forms that securitisation has taken in Southeast Asia.

How should we improve securitisation's explanatory capacity in the context of Southeast Asia? In the current paper, we argue that social-conflict theory can be a useful supplementary analytical framework for securitisation theory. This view has already been partially developed by a group of scholars who, hailing from the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University (Hameiri and Jones, 2014), have made an effort to account for Southeast Asia's unique sociopolitical structures. In short, social-conflict theory argues that a state consists of various societal groups (Jones, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013), each of which evaluates security issues according to the group's interests, ideology, and power (Jones, 2011: 406). A state's security governance *must* benefit some societal groups while simultaneously marginalising others (Hameiri and Jones 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Thus, to enhance or maintain their power, societal groups struggle over security governance. If we supplement securitisation theory with social-conflict theory, we can quite clearly see that an audience's reaction to a securitising move can be much more than simple acceptance or rejection. Researchers have identified this complexity in several Southeast Asian cases in which audiences were challenging the securitising moves of securitising actors (Collins, 2005; Hameiri, 2014; Hameiri and Jones, 2013). In the case of Thailand, protesters have engaged in securitisation, too: specifically, they have counter-securitised COVID-19 as an existential threat by securitising a new existential threat of their own, that is, the lack of democracy and the threats to human rights in Thailand. Hence, securitisation can take shape in an interactively contested process between societal groups that do not neatly fall into only one of two categories: securitising actors and audiences. One of our own central research findings, as we will demonstrate below, is that the roles of securitising actors and audiences are indeed not fixed; a societal group can be both a securitising actor and an audience simultaneously. Our research findings in this regard point to a profound conception of successful securitisation: it is impermanent (i.e. is subject to change over time), which is to say that the success of an instance of securitisation will likely diminish as new actors and resources enter the context.

This central finding is supported by primary data that we collected on the basis of two qualitative methods: online interviews and in-person interviews. We used a semi-standardised interviewing method to interview five student protesters, each of whom had joined at least one protest activity. One protester had joined protest activities both

in Bangkok and in Chiang Mai and had done so while playing an organising role in protests. Additionally, we interviewed one World Health Organization (WHO) representative of Thailand and a provincial middle-ranking police officer who had done his part to maintain order during many protests. These two sets of interviews have elucidated the Thai government's positions on the protests and its strategies for dealing with COVID-19. We conducted all online interviews between 18 June and 4 July 2021, after providing online interviewees with consent forms guaranteeing their anonymity, their right to withdraw at any time, and their right to review our paper before publication. After gathering consent from all online interviewees, we video-recorded all the interviews, and shortly after transcribing each interview recording, we promptly deleted it. For interviewees who preferred English, we conducted interviews in English; for interviewees who preferred Thai, we hired an interpreter to assist us with the interviews.

As mentioned above, in addition to online interviews, we relied on in-person interviews, which constituted the second source of primary data. This paper's second author conducted the in-person interviews after having observed a protest in Chiang Mai on 24 June 2021. The second author used a non-standardised interview method to engage in conversation with three protest organisers: a 13-year-old high school student, a monk, and a democracy activist. We use pseudonyms for all interviewees in this paper.

We divided this paper into three sections outside the introduction and conclusion. In the first section, we identify the gap in the research on securitisation in the context of Southeast Asia and explain why researchers' efforts to theorise the roles of audiences have failed to fill the gap. In the second section, we explain social-conflict theory and explore how it can supplement securitisation theory to explain contested securitisations in Southeast Asia. Last, we carefully explore, in the context of Thailand's COVID-19 crisis, (1) how protesters counter-securitised COVID-19 and securitised a series of new issues and (2) how the Thai government re-securitised COVID-19.

Literature Review

Many scholars have adopted securitisation theory to examine NTS issues in Southeast Asia. Focusing on transnational crimes, Ralf Emmers analyses why the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with its 'declaratory anti-crime position, has failed to produce an effective policy outcome' (2003: 419). Emmers argues that the factors affecting policy outcomes are corruption, vested interests, ASEAN members' lack of resources, and ASEAN's 'consensus model and in-built resistance to institutional reforms' (2003: 420). Like Emmers, Caballero-Anthony mentions similar factors hindering ASEAN's ability to address infectious diseases (2008). However, Caballero-Anthony argues that 'NTS issues like pandemics could be pivotal in pushing ASEAN to recalibrate its existing institutional arrangements to move beyond rhetorical agreements toward deeper institutional commitments' (Caballero-Anthony, 2008: 508). Regarding ASEAN, Caballero-Anthony suggests that the organisation implements health-monitoring systems, the fair distribution of vaccines, and major improvements in

healthcare infrastructure (2008: 521–522). Arifianto (2009) focuses on how the Malaysian government, harnessing both speech and law, securitised Indonesian migrant workers as a threat to Malaysia's national sovereignty and social identity. These actions triggered protests from Indonesia's labour unions and NGOs (Arifianto, 2009: 619–625).

This impressive array of scholarship deals with securitising actors. Indeed, Rita Floyd has questioned whether securitisation theory even needs audiences (Floyd, 2010, 2011). If we place this argument in the context of Southeast Asia, audiences may appear to be secondary in importance to securitising actors because Southeast Asian democracies, where they exist, are regressive or unstable (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2020a, 2020b; Fukuoka, 2013; Huang, 2017; Jones, 2014; Peou, 2019). Thus, one may argue that powerful political elites can securitise any issue without an audience's permission (Vuori, 2008: 68), as exemplified by the Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia (Arifianto, 2009). However, Vuori argues that even a totalitarian regime needs to persuade its people that its adoption of an extraordinary measure is acceptable – without the persuasion, the regime's ideological and material legitimacy becomes just that much more vulnerable to instability (2008: 68–71). In addition, without a strong awareness of the roles played by audiences, securitisation theory loses its intersubjective distinctive nature (Balzacq, 2005; Côté, 2016). If we, in explicating Thailand's politicised strategies for mitigating COVID-19, had excluded audiences from the underlying securitisation process, our analysis would have woefully oversimplified the process.

Agreeing with the premise that audiences are crucial, Côté finds that there is a gap between empirical articles and theoretical articles regarding the roles of audiences in securitisation theory. Empirical articles show that 'audiences have, at a minimum, the potential to exert influence over securitization processes and the policies selected to address perceived threats' (Côté, 2016: 547), whereas many theoretical articles either insufficiently develop or unjustifiably marginalise the roles of audiences, instead of labelling each audience a 'passive receiver' (Côté, 2016: 551). Côté terms these audiences 'agents without agency' because many theoretical works regarding securitisation treat audiences as agents only to the point where audiences have the power to reject or accept securitisation; in these works, audiences lack agency to affect securitisation beyond this simple binary (2016: 551). For example, Côté notes that although Balzacq (2005), Bourbeau (2011), and Stritzel (2014) bring the audience to the foreground, their excellent studies portray audiences as 'the entity that simply accepts or rejects the interpretation of security put forward by the securitizing actor but cannot actively contribute to the creation of security meanings' (Côté, 2016: 550). Thus, the only function of audiences is for them to fulfil the completion of a securitisation process.

Côté attempts to shift researchers' perception of the audience as passive to a perception of the audience as active. The purpose of this shift is to maintain the nature of intersubjectivity in securitisation theory. Côté defines 'audience' as people or groups that have the authority and agency to accept or reject a securitising actor's approach to a security issue (2016: 548). Côté identifies two principles underpinning this definition. First, 'audiences are active participants' in a given securitising process (Côté, 2016: 551) because

they can influence what it is, what it will be, how it is discussed and conceptualised, and how it is perceived (Côté, 2016: 552). Against this backdrop, an actor that attempts to securitise an issue is unlikely to encounter an audience that simply accepts or rejects the securitisation. The first principle attributes considerable dynamism to audiences and, in so doing, addresses the previously mentioned oversight in the literature. Thus, we are led to the second principle: because audiences are active participants in securitisation, it must almost always result from interactions between securitising actors and audiences; that is, securitisation is not a one-sided process dominated exclusively by a securitising actor, but a back-and-forth mutual engagement that is most obvious when audiences engage directly and deliberatively with securitising actors (Côté, 2016: 552). These two principles acknowledge the intersubjectivity at the heart of the relationship between securitising actors and audiences (Côté, 2016). Côté's theorised attribution of nuanced, dynamic roles to audiences objectively reflects the nature of the protesters in Thailand: they have been active and independent in their formulating of responses to the Thai government's securitisation moves.

However, Côté's theorised framework is insufficient for understanding securitisation occurring in Southeast Asia. The processes by which NTS issues are securitised in Southeast Asia have been sites of heated contestation. The governance of NTS issues in Southeast Asia involves a slew of wide-ranging actors, from powerful political elites and financial conglomerates to liberal activists, everyday members of civil society, and regional and international organisations (Hameiri and Jones, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). In other words, the central government is not the sole possessor of hegemonic power. Examples of this principle are not uncommon in Southeast Asia: in Malaysia, ethnic-Chinese educators challenged the government's Malay-only language policy (Collins, 2005); in Indonesia, *bupatis* (district regents) resisted securitisation imposed by the Ministry of Health in response to H5N1 (Curley and Herington, 2011; Hameiri and Jones, 2015a) and by international organisations and ASEAN in response to air pollution (Hameiri and Jones, 2013); and in Thailand, protesters resisted the Thai government's pandemic-related securitising moves – the topic of this article. The absence of a supremely hegemonic actor leaves the security governance not anarchistic but certainly far more complex than is usually assumed: diverse actors engage each other to achieve their interests, making power struggles over security governance inevitable (Collins, 2005; Curley and Herington, 2011; Hameiri, 2014; Hameiri and Jones 2013, 2015a). Thus, securitisation is a contested process and is, in Southeast Asia, likely to be fragmented among these competing actors and interests. To understand a contested securitisation process, we must unpack why audiences might reject a securitising move and why a securitising actor might want to re-securitise an issue. Côté's theorised framework, as useful as it is, does not touch upon these two matters.

Social-Conflict Theory

To explore the two matters of rejected securitisation and re-securitisation, we harness social-conflict theory. The general view underlying social-conflict theory is that a state

is not a united entity, but consists of diverse societal groups (Jones, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013). These groups can take many forms, ranging from classes, ethnic groups, and religious sects (Jones, 2010) to 'bureaucratic and military apparatuses' (Jones, 2016: 651). Each group assesses security issues in relation to its own interests. Thus, while some groups may view an issue as a threat, other groups may view it as an advantage (Jones, 2011: 406). A group that dominates state apparatuses can use them not only to enhance its power and interests but to marginalise other groups, as well (Jones, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016). Not surprisingly, then, marginalised groups find ways to resist the adversarial dominant groups, triggering a power struggle between the groups (Hameiri and Jones, 2013, 2015a, 2017; Jones, 2011).

Scholars in the Murdoch School (MS) adopt the 'politics of scale', which is a theory in political geography (Brenner, 2001; Swyngedouw, 1997), to understand the power struggles that simmer and erupt between social groups (Hameiri and Jayasuriya, 2011; Hameiri and Jones, 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). According to the theory, the scale of a response to an issue is a crucial factor in determining the outcome of the related conflict. An issue prompting an act of securitisation can appear on any scale (local, national, regional, or global), and the scale, in turn, can reflect the severity of the issue. During a power struggle, opposing sides may differ from each other regarding the 'ideal' scale on which the issue ought to be addressed. One side may want to scale jump, or shift to another scale, which can empower new 'actors, resources, and political opportunities' that cater to the interests of the scale-jumping side (Hameiri and Jones, 2013: 465).

Social-conflict theory can shed light on contested securitisations. As we know, an act of securitisation can negatively impact some actors, who thus have reason to resist the securitisation, sometimes through a series of counter-securitisation measures. This pattern of back-and-forth contestation surfaced in Thailand during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic: the Thai government attempted to securitise the health crisis, triggering protests whose organisers securitised a series of entirely different existential threats. This 'counter-securitisation'[3] served to resist the government's initial securitisation and to transform an 'audience' into a 'securitising actor'. When a new securitising actor's counter-securitisation threatens an established securitising actor's interests, the latter actor may re-securitise the issue that had been de-securitised by the new actor. Thus, re-securitisation becomes a tool by which established – yet threatened – securitising actors try to marginalise an instance of counter-securitisation.

The power struggle between two groups can be understood through the politics-of-scale lens. As we will show in this article, the Thai government and the protesters clashed over a securitised issue in a way that manifested the actors' contestation over the scale on which securitisation would proceed. All acts of securitisation, counter-securitisation, and re-securitisation reflect the securitising actors' effort to further their own interests, perhaps invariably at the expense of other actors' interests. The zero-sum nature of so much securitisation – one actor's gains are another actor's losses – explains why the process is so frequently contested. By exploring the Thai government's politicised COVID-19 containment strategies in the context of the

securitisation concept and social-conflict theory, we have found that both the Thai government and the protesters had been performing the roles of both securitising actors and audiences simultaneously. This finding suggests that successful securitisation is impermanent and subject to change over time. Why? Because the introduction of new actors or resources can diminish or even undo the success of an existing act of securitisation.

Contested COVID-19 Securitisation in Thailand

Before discussing Thailand's contested COVID-19 securitisation, it is necessary to understand how the current Prime Minister of Thailand, Prayuth Chan-o-cha rose to power. In September 2006, the Royal Thai Army Commander General Sonthi Boonyaratglin led a coup against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who had risen to prominence as a telecommunications tycoon (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2016: 432) and whose Thai Rak Thai (TRK) Party had soundly defeated the ruling Democrat Party in the 2001 legislative elections. Sonthi's supporters included several high-ranking members of the Thai military and political establishments (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2016: 432). Among these supporters was General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, who was serving as a deputy to the head of the First Army and who helped plan the coup that overthrew the democratically elected government (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2016: 432). After the coup, Thaksin fled into exile, but the successor to his TRK Party – the People's Power Party (PPP) – won legislative elections in 2007 thanks to support from rural areas, where Thaksin was liked for his populist policies, which had prioritised healthcare subsidies and relief for farmers (Phongpaichit and Baker, 2008). These same policies, however, had led to considerable displeasure in upper-class, military, and elite bureaucratic circles (Jones, 2011: 423). Following the 2006 coup, the Thai armed forces 'helped to cobble together an anti-Thaksin government' and in December of 2008, the Constitutional Court ordered the dissolution of the PPP. In the 2011 elections, the Pheu Thai Party (PTP), led by Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra, captured 53% of the votes (Dalpino, 2012: 197). During this time, Prayuth served as Army Chief. The PTP tried to enact an amnesty bill that, though intended to lead to the return of Thaksin, instead triggered anti-Thaksin demonstrations. Despite Prayuth's announcement that the military was 'neutral' in the conflict, by the end of May 2014, he had conspired with Prawit Wongsuwon to bring down the government (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2016: 436). After the successful coup in 2014 led by Prayuth as Army Chief, Prayuth took the seat of Prime Minister of Thailand and has maintained it since then. However, in the 2019 elections, the Future Forward Party (FFP) – led by the young industrialist Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit – won 80 seats in Parliament with support mainly from young students (Ockey, 2020: 119). The FFP was now a potential political challenger to Prayuth. In June of 2019, King Rama X Bhumibol Vajiralongkorn's endorsement of Prime Minister Prayuth provoked an outcry from Thai citizens (Reuters, 2020a).

Thai democratic protests focusing on political reforms first surfaced in late 2019. Protests intensified when the Constitutional Court of Thailand disqualified Thanathorn

as a member of parliament (Bangkok Post, 2019). In February 2020, when COVID-19 positive cases had been confirmed in Thailand, the Constitutional Court of Thailand voted to ban the FFP completely, provoking even more protests (Ockey, 2021: 116–117). A month later, the government securitised COVID-19 by implementing health emergencies with a controversial State of Emergency Decree, which prohibited large gatherings, travel, and the sharing of false information online and which was not limited to COVID-19 (Marome and Shaw, 2021: 5). The decree remains in place as of this writing (early March 2022). From 19 March to 8 April 2020, the average number of daily new COVID-19 cases was 102,[4] which in fact was a peak number until December 2020, when a new wave hit the country. Evidently, the Thai government had successfully securitised the spread of COVID-19. On 18 July, the Free Youth Group held a protest at the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, where they issued four demands: the dissolution of Parliament, a rewritten constitution, safety for critics of government,[5] and a reformation of the monarchy (Prachatai, 2020a). The demands of the group marked the beginning of the protesters' counter-securitisation efforts. We can see that, from this point on, the Thai government and protesters were in a full-fledged struggle over the power to shape securitisation. Within this struggle, each of the two opposing forces acted simultaneously as securitising actors and as audiences: in the case of the protesters, they were obviously an audience to the Thai government's securitisation of the pandemic but were not so obviously a securitising actor in their effort to dramatically shift the securitisation agenda; likewise, regarding the Thai government, it was obviously a securitising actor in its effort to enact the sweeping Emergency Decree during the pandemic but was not so obviously an audience to the protesters' reformist counter-securitisation agenda.

The protesters' counter-securitisation has challenged the Thai government's power and interests. Since Prem Tinsulanonda[6] served as Prime Minister beginning in 1980, the military and the monarchy have developed a symbiotic relationship in which the military ensures the existence – and the privileges – of the monarchy in exchange for the ruling monarch's bestowal of political legitimacy on the military (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2016: 428). Bolstered by this political legitimacy, the military has repeatedly had its say in political and economic issues from which the military might enhance its interests and power. Chambers and Waitoolkiat (2016) coined the term 'monarchised military' in reference to the privileged status of the country's armed services. In addition, military protection has kept the monarchy at the centre of Thailand's political and economic order. For example, the monarchy has a controlling stake in some firms, which go on to enjoy 'hierarchical advantages over non-royal ones' (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2020a: 154). As mentioned earlier, Thaksin challenged the symbiotic relationship between the military and the monarchy, and the military promptly ousted Thaksin from elected office. Since becoming Prime Minister, Prayuth has reinforced the military's loyalty to the monarchy (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2016: 437). The military–monarchy relationship has interrupted democratisation in Thailand (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2020a) because 'non-elected elites hold veto power over the effective power of popularly elected representatives' (Chambers and Waitoolkiat, 2016: 430).

The protesters' demands, particularly regarding reformation about the monarchy and Prayuth's resignation, are clearly intended to sever this symbiotic relationship.

As for the protesters, our interviews and the second author's observations at a protest event confirm the widespread view that many of Thailand's recent pro-democracy protesters have been students from high schools and universities.[7] According to the interviews and observations, protesters strongly believe that the monarchy–military symbiotic relationship has ruined their future. One university student, Anna, said,

> I think we clearly see what's wrong and right. We can visibly see what's wrong in our country. The obvious problems include the run-down state of our public buses and, in general, how the city looks and works. We can clearly see the problems. And we were frustrated about our future: how can we grow up and be decent citizens in this country and have decent futures? But in this country, no one supports us. We're tired of the older generations telling us we have to stay quiet. If it's not changing, we have to do something about it.[8]

Anna's concerns seem to have arisen from the Thai government's constant push-back against democracy through a string of coups and disqualified pro-democracy parties. This heritage of corruption and injustice created a powder keg, the fuse of which was lit when the Thai government implemented sweeping COVID-19 securitisation policies.

The protests intensified between August and September of 2020, and on 10 August, students at Thammasat University listed ten demands (Ockey, 2021: 119). The most sensitive of these demands called for the revocation of Article 112 of the Criminal Code, 'to allow the people to exercise freedom of expression about the monarchy and amnesty for all those prosecuted for criticizing the monarchy' (Prachatai, 2020b) and to 'abrogate the law making the Crown Property Bureau the personal property of the King, separate it from his personal assets, and give control to the Ministry of Finance' (Ockey, 2021: 119). Again, protesters were setting their sights on a formal severing of corrupt ties between the monarchy and the military.

Two protests occurred, one on 16 August and the other on 19 September, involving more than 10,000 participants on each occasion (BBC, 2020a; 2020b). Throughout this period, although some protesters raised new issues such as the country's abortion legislation,[9] protesters' demands regarding democracy and human rights remained front and centre. Facing this pressure, which took the form of counter-securitisation, Prayuth himself re-securitised COVID-19 in a bid to undermine the protesters. In a speech, he called them out for creating 'great risk to the livelihoods of tens of millions of fellow Thais' (Bangkok Post, 2020b). In this same speech, he warned that 'mass gatherings come at a very heavy price for everyone: the risk of new infections, the risk of mass outbreaks, and the risk of a return to lockdowns', thus implicitly blaming Thai protesters for outbreaks and causing infections (Bangkok Post, 2020b). Another of Prayuth's assertions was that COVID-19's securitisation was more important than electoral politics and censorship: 'let's try and get through this global crisis and defeat COVID together first Then we can come back to politics' (Bangkok Post, 2020b). However, at the time of his speech, Thailand had not had an identified local COVID-19 transmission for two

weeks, and the previous positive test had been a prison inmate, prior to which there had been 'over 100 days of no new local cases' (Bangkok Post, 2020b).[10] According to Prayuth's logic, gatherings of people created chances for the virus to spread. Interestingly, the Thai government issued extra holidays for 4 and 7 September, a step that would also seem to promote gatherings of people and thus the spread of the virus.

Conflicts between government forces and protesters re-emerged in October. Beginning on the 15th of that month, the government's 'Severe State of Emergency' declaration banned gatherings of more than five people (Reuters, 2020b). The ban took effect even though, from 1 to 17 October 2020, the average number of new daily COVID-19 cases had been only 6.76 per day.[11]

However, in the days preceding the ban, tens of thousands of protesters had camped outside of the Prime Minister's office and temporarily blocked Queen Suthida's convoy (Bangkok Post, 2020d). Police officers arrested at least 22 protesters (Human Rights Watch, 2020b), and on 16 October, the day after the 'Severe State of Emergency' declaration, riot police used water cannons, tear gas, and blue dye to disperse protesters (Bangkok Post, 2020e); however, at this point, the protests had spread nationwide. Anna described them:

> I was one of the ones on the frontline who got targeted with the pressurised water. If they were gonna do something like this, there's no way I'd stay silent anymore. I remember there were small teenagers wearing masks, being so scared like, Am I gonna die? Am I gonna be arrested? I was having a panic attack. The schoolgirls behind me were so scared, they were nearly crying.[12]

Another university student, Jenny, said,

> I joined two protests…the second one was at Siam [the MRT station]. There, I experienced the first water cannon…. It was very frustrating and chaotic…they [the Thai government] closed down the entire MRT, including the Siam station and other stations in that vicinity…. When I got home and opened my Twitter account…I saw Thai students with only an umbrella to protect themselves. They were unarmed. The police had weapons and poisons [probably blue dye], but we had nothing. We came in peace, and we just wanted to tell them to listen to us, but they didn't listen at all.[13]

Most interviewees stated that, at the time, they felt little or no threat from COVID-19 but a considerable threat from police officers.[14] In addition, they asserted that the government's adoption of the Severe State of Emergency Decree served the purpose of not protecting the population from a pandemic but weakening and discouraging protesters.[15] This interpretation of the decree reflects the protesters' rhetorical de-securitisation of the Thai government's response to COVID-19. Evidence that the Severe State of Emergency Decree was politically, not scientifically, motivated came to light when the government had four news outlets – the Reporters, Prachatai, the Standard, and Voice TV – and the most popular student-activist page – Free Youth – shut down on the

dubious premise that they had been disseminating 'misleading information' (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020). According to Tom, a university protester, police were targeting student leaders:

> The police tracked down groups of protesters mainly by going to their homes and intimidating their parents. Sometimes, the [plain-clothes] police don't show their police identification card when intimidating or mingling with the protesters…. The police came to my house as well, but I'm barely ever at home…. I don't remember the date, but I remember that there were two times when the police came to my house to talk to my parents. I have no idea what they talked about, but my parents came to talk to me and warned me not to participate in the protests that much.[16]

In our fieldwork, we interviewed a provincial mid-ranking police officer, whose comments were in line with the central government's actions. Specifically, he said,

> They [student protesters] need to be socially responsible…. They can do something like this [protest]…. They can gather in public areas, but the disease is out there…. If demonstrators violate or impinge on the laws or the emergency decree, police officers will first approach the protesters and discuss the matter with them. At that point, if they continue to disobey the law and fail to heed the warnings of the police officers, the officers themselves will enforce the law.[17]

The WHO representative we interviewed praised Thailand for its swift action: 'for almost a year, Thailand did not have basically local or community-based transmissions while other countries were experiencing massive catastrophic outbreaks'.[18] Additionally, the Thai government again announced extra holidays for 19 and 20 November (Bangkok Post, 2020c). The official justification for this move was that the days off would stimulate the stagnant, domestic economy. Evidence suggests that the way in which the Thai government dealt with the protests was simultaneously a rational response to the pandemic and a politicised effort to quash anti-government speech.

Some of our interviewees reported that, by aligning themselves with the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar, they had tried to attract international attention to the Thai government's hardline actions, and thus had tried to improve the likelihood that the pro-democracy movement in Thailand could pursue successful counter-securitisation. As part of a coup, Myanmar's military detained State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other elected members of Parliament on 1 February 2021. The high-profile detentions prompted many people in Myanmar to protest the anti-democratic actions of the military. The Milk Tea Alliance, an online solidarity group, was a key non-violent, pro-democratic platform that aided the activists in Myanmar, as well as those in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Thailand (Bangkok Post, 2020a).[19] When Myanmar protesters joined forces with Thai protesters in the Milk Tea Alliance, the conflict in Myanmar became relevant to the Thai protesters' counter-securitisation efforts targeting the anti-democratic institutions in Thailand. One

interviewee confirmed that he had been attending weekly online meetings with other Milk Tea Alliance members.[20] In addition, Thai protesters provided their counterparts in Myanmar with such material support as mobile-phone SIM cards.[21] Sometimes, the Milk Tea Alliance members have supported each other in person, as was the case on 28 February 2021, when Myanmar citizens living in Thailand joined Thai protesters in Bangkok to demonstrate for democracy regionwide (ABC, 2021). These instances of support demonstrate that Myanmar protesters became pro-democracy partners with Thai protesters, and in so doing, became a key actor in the Thai protesters' counter-securitisation. These links that have bound the democratic movements in Myanmar and Thailand to each other reflect the protesters' attempt to 'scale jump' from a national scale to an international scale, and it is reasonable to assume that a central motivation behind this collaborative effort has been to garner international attention to the undemocratic activities of regional governments. When sociopolitical actors successfully 'scale jump' an issue to a higher scale, they can turn the tide of securitisation contestation thanks to the involvement of powerful, well-resourced foreign actors. Thus, the support of influential actors can embolden weaker actors and can alter the course of a sociopolitical conflict. If the Thai protesters, buoyed by their Myanmar supporters, had been successful in their attempts to re-scale and gain power over the Thai government by using international recognition as a tool, securitisation would have turned in favour of the protesters.

The Thai government successfully scaled Myanmar's difficulties to a national level in order to protect the symbiotic relationship between the monarchy and the military; that is, the Thai government protected their interests by characterising Myanmar's conflicts as internal disputes. After the coup in Myanmar, Army Chief General Narongphan Jitkaewtae in Thailand 'insisted on maintaining ASEAN's principle of non-interference in Myanmar's military coup' (Bangkok Post, 2021b). Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon referred to Myanmar's coup as an 'internal affair' in a bid to dissuade Thai citizens from participating in or supporting Myanmar's pro-democracy movement (Bangkok Post, 2021a). In September 2021, Major General Piya Tawichai, who was serving as Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Bureau in Thailand, warned that 'foreigners who join the [Thai] protests will be prosecuted and face deportation and would also be blacklisted from Thailand' and that 'those arrested will be charged with violating the Emergency Decree and Communicable Disease Control Act' (INN, 2021). This declaration constituted an attempt to prevent foreigners, including those from Myanmar, from participating in protests. Additionally, the Thai government expressed its interest in increasing prison space to deal with the growing number of arrests for defamation of the monarchy (The Diplomat, 2021). The Thai government followed the principle of non-interference, considered an expansion of the prison system, and re-emphasised the Emergency Decree in order to de-internationalise the protests and discourage foreign residents of Thailand, as well as Thai citizens, from participating in protests targeting the Myanmar coup. However, the Thai government's politics-of-scale strategy has not eased the protests. Pro-democracy protests in Thailand have continued into late 2021, in a clear effort to bring in new actors, reject

the COVID-19 securitisation as the COVID-19 pandemic eases, and ultimately securitise democracy. The government's re-securitisation was less than completely successful.

Conclusion

The Thai government's controversial COVID-19 containment strategies seem to have been highly politicised. Through the prism of the securitisation concept, we can better understand the interactions that, since 2019, have taken place between the Thai government and protesters, but the concept cannot satisfactorily elucidate the securitisation occurring in Southeast Asia. Therefore, we have chosen to use social-conflict theory to fill the gap of securitisation in Southeast Asia. Thailand's COVID-19 containment strategies and the power struggle between the Thai government and protesters demonstrate that a securitising actor can simultaneously be an audience to another act of securitisation: Thai protesters were simultaneously a securitising actor for democracy and an audience for the Thai government's securitisation of COVID-19; likewise, the Thai government was a securitising actor for COVID-19 and an audience for protesters' pro-democracy act of securitisation. A very notable point is that successful securitisation is impermanent and subject to change over time. Thus, securitisation may be successful for a temporary period, but if new actors or resources are introduced, the previously successful securitisation may diminish in its potency. At the time of this writing (March 2022), the Thai government has, with varying degrees of success, suppressed protests by using the Emergency Decree, despite international criticism (Human Rights Watch, 2020a). However, we must note that if the power struggle were to shift in favour of the protesters in the coming months or years, the protesters would temporarily assume the mantle of successful securitising actor.

Our analysis of securitisation relative to recent events in Thailand has faced certain research limitations. First, we conducted a small number of interviews: only ten. Second, we conducted interviews with a very narrow range of participants: of the ten participants, eight were protestors; only 2 (a WHO official and a police officer) represented other perspectives. In fact, with the exception of the police officer, all our requests for interviews with government representatives were declined. Third, the limited scope of our paper prevented us from exploring the internal frictions among the heterogenous protesters. These three limitations point to some fascinating themes that we were unable to explore with satisfactory rigour. Future securitisation studies would do well to address these and other themes by, for example, broadening the number and the range of participants who agree to sit for interviews and surveys.

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Notes

1. See WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/coronavirus-covid-19-cases-and-deaths?fbclid=IwAR2l_7D5ofnfkAxI5XJcJMc_wePb3Tau2bXQgZM61AobmqwS7VpfBPGy2GY
2. See WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/coronavirus-covid-19-cases-and-deaths?fbclid=IwAR2l_7D5ofnfkAxI5XJcJMc_wePb3Tau2bXQgZM61AobmqwS7VpfBPGy2GY
3. The term ‘counter-securitisation’ is not new, as many scholars have mentioned it in their works (Buzan et al., 1998: 206; Vuori, 2008: 93; Hasen, 2011a: 61; 2011b: 364). However, this term was not theorised until Stritzel and Chang (2015) defined it as an action taken by securitised subjects who are seeking to protect their own interests against perceived threats from acts of securitisation initiated by securitising actors.
4. See WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/coronavirus-covid-19-cases-and-deaths?fbclid=IwAR2l_7D5ofnfkAxI5XJcJMc_wePb3Tau2bXQgZM61AobmqwS7VpfBPGy2GY
5. The protesters’ insistence on ‘safety for critics of government’ was partly in reference to the prominent Thai human-rights activist Wanchalearm Satsaksit, who went missing in 2020 in Cambodia, where he had been exiled. The Thai government has denied any involvement in his disappearance.
6. Prem also served as Chair of the Privy Council from 1998 to 2019.
7. Online interview, conducted on 20 June 2021; observation, conducted on 24 June 2021.
8. Online interview, conducted on 18 June 2021.
9. Online interview, conducted on 20 June 2021.
10. See WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/coronavirus-covid-19-cases-and-deaths?fbclid=IwAR2l_7D5ofnfkAxI5XJcJMc_wePb3Tau2bXQgZM61AobmqwS7VpfBPGy2GY

11. See WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard: https://data.humdata.org/dataset/coronavirus-covid-19-cases-and-deaths?fbclid=IwAR2l_7D5ofnfkAxI5XJcJMc_wePb3Tau2bXQgZM61AobmqwS7VpfBPGy2GY. In the same period, Thailand only had two local transmission cases. See the website of Thailand's Department of Disease Control: https://ddc.moph.go.th/viralpneumonia/eng/situation_more.php
12. Online interview, conducted on 18 June 2021.
13. Online interview, conducted on 20 June 2021.
14. Online interview, conducted on 18, 20, and 21 June and 4 July 2021.
15. Online interview, conducted on 18, 20, and 21 June and 4 July 2021.
16. Online interview, conducted on 21 June 2021.
17. Online interview, conducted on 24 June 2021.
18. Online interview, conducted on 30 June 2021.
19. Interview, conducted on 24 June 2021.
20. Interview, conducted on 24 June 2021.
21. Interview, conducted on 24 June 2021.

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