

## Thai Civilized: what a minor party tells us about authoritarianism in Thailand



[????????????????????](#)

Over the last week, several online writers have written articles comparing Mongkolkeha Suksintharanon, aged 37 and the head of the Thai Civilized Party, with Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, aged 40 and the chairman of Future Forward Party.

The basis of the comparison lies in Future Forward having received 6.3 million votes (out of 35 million eligible voters) in the recent election, with much of the support coming from younger generations and first-time voters. Yet merely a day before Thailand's newly-elected legislative assembly was scheduled to open, the Constitutional Court ordered Thanathorn to temporarily cease performing his duties as a member of parliament while judges consider allegations from the Election Commission that he illegally owned shares in media companies while participating in the election. Moreover, the Constitutional Court has expedited the trial process. For example, the Court summoned Thanathorn's mother to give testimony in the morning, while the summons letter only

reached his mother's house in the afternoon—that is, after she had already given testimony. Netizens, including Thanathorn himself, have interrogated the injustice the Future Forward Party leader is currently facing, in the form of both the rushing of the trial and the Court's acceptance in the first place of a case that is almost entirely without basis. Subsequently, we have not been able to see Thanathorn perform his duties as a member of parliament from the very first day that the lower house convened.

In contrast, we have been able to watch Mongkolkit's unsettling role since parliament convened, even though the Thai Civilized Party received only some 60,000 votes. The Thai Civilized Party was able to receive a seat in the legislature even though the organic law on the election of members of parliament outlines a method for the calculation of party-list seats whereby one party-list seat requires a minimum of 71,000 votes. The Election Commission chose to interpret the calculation method in another way, while the Constitutional Court declined to rule on the final party-list calculation formula used and deferred the power to interpret to the Election Commission. As a consequence, representatives from 11 political parties who received as little as 30,000–70,000 votes were allocated party-list seats in the new legislative assembly, including the Thai Civilized Party.

After the Election Commission released the official election results, spaces both online and offline were flooded with a continual stream of news about Mongkolkit—beginning with the news that Thai Civilized and the other 10 small parties which benefitted from the Election Commission's interpretation of the party-list seat calculation formula had all announced their support for junta leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha's bid to continue on as the country's prime minister. The parties justified their stance by appealing to the need to overcome “the political crisis”, even though Mongkolkit and Thai Civilized had previously campaigned on a contradictory platform.

Netizens subsequently uncovered records of Mongkolkit campaigning on a stance of opposing dictatorial rule and rejecting the maintenance of the existing regime in any form. As the clips made their way around the internet, a journalist questioned Mongkolkit on the hypocrisy. His answer—“I was just talking, saying anything to get into parliament first”—elicited anger from a large number of Thais and sparked further excavations of prior public statements.

Many people have already written pieces analysing Mongkolkit's character, so I will not attempt to do so here. I would like us to consider inquiries that perhaps we have overlooked. Are we looking at anything more than Mongkolkit's lies? Thai Civilized Party received 60,354 votes, which means that some 60,000 Thais elected Mongkolkit as a representative in parliament. Tens of thousands of votes is no meagre amount. With just a few more votes, he would have been entitled to a party-list seat even under the original organic law.

Without a doubt, one factor to consider in explaining the votes received by Thai Civilized Party is its status as a small party, and the resource constraints such parties tend to face. Small parties are unable to compete financially with large parties, particularly on a national level where sharply

drawn political divisions compel most Thais to choose a major party. Under these political conditions, a small political party such as Thai Civilized must pull votes by competing for media coverage in order to maximize exposure.

To unveil his political party prior to the election, the very first thing that Mongkolkit did was organise a press conference to release the party's policies, where he called on Prayuth to increase the punishment for corrupt politicians, business people and civil servants from imprisonment to include additionally caning and flogging. Through a public demonstration of the caning and flogging he was proposing, Mongkolkit succeeded in drawing the attention of the media and a large number of Thais. As his news releases gained increasing momentum, Mongkolkit proceeded to present more absolutist and violent party policies: live broadcasting of executions, a dramatic reduction in the prime minister's salary, and a policy of stringently and violent pursuing cases and suppressing people who think differently—whether they reside in or outside of the country—particularly cases related to the institution of the monarchy.

It is worth noting that that part of Thai Civilized's platform was opposing the continuation of Prayuth's rule, rejecting dictatorship in all forms and undoing the junta's orders. But anyone who admired these policies would have probably elected to vote for a major party with a clear anti-Prayuth standpoint over Thai Civilized. As such, the 60,000 people who voted for Thai Civilized, if there were not the friends and families of candidates, most likely believed in the policies and selling points of the party. Though its policies collectively had the form of a fishnet—scattered, jumbled and covering a large number of issues—they were united by their extremism, violence and absolutism.

Mongkolkit's decision to support the continuation of Prayuth's rule, and his confession that his opposition to the junta leader was only opportunistic rhetoric aimed at getting into parliament, has disillusioned many Thais who are no longer confident he will fulfil his campaign promises. Those wavering extend even to within his own party, with some members enthusiastically joining in public criticisms of the Thai Civilized leader.

All the same, the extent of support for Mongkolkit is an indication of that dictatorial power and the use of violence to punish those who violate the law is popular among no small number of Thais. Though the voters who supported him may now be disappointed in Mongkolkit, that does not mean that will cease to hope for the emergence of another political champion. And though some may not like the current junta, that does not mean they do not want dictatorial leaders at all. The political rise of Mongkolkit has pushed me to wonder: who are these people and where are they found in our society? Has the visibility of groups in Thai society who support dictatorial rule awakened younger generations and other demographics to the dangers contained in the ongoing emergence of highly authoritarian policies?

The campaign platforms of Thai political parties tend to be constituted by policies that assist, help, promote, or inject various goods into society at large—they are policies that promote the freedom of the people. But such policies promote only “positive liberties”, whereby people have the freedom

to be or do those things that fulfil their individual potential. But the policies of Thai political parties almost never speak of “negative liberties”, whereby people have the freedom to act without other powers interfering or obstructing—especially the reigning in of the state from infringing on spaces where individual freewill should reign.

I do not raise these issues to suggest that positive liberties are not meaningful, but only to suggest that Thai society should show interest in developing and improving the quality of negative liberties. As the English philosopher Isaiah Berlin cautioned, "The notion of positive freedom has led, historically, to even more frightful perversions ... This goes back to the naive notion that there is only one true answer to every question: if I know the true answer and you do not, and you disagree with me, it is because you are ignorant; if you knew the truth, you would necessarily believe what I believe; if you seek to disobey me, this can be so only because you are wrong, because the truth has not been revealed to you as it has been to me. This justifies some of the most frightful forms of oppression and enslavement in human history, and it is truly the most dangerous, and, in our century in particular, the most violent, interpretation of the notion of positive liberty".

When society is concerned with only objectives, methods cease to be of concern to those who wield the power to turn those objectives into reality. It is under such conditions that the seeds of dictatorial power blossom. Once we take up the lens of negative liberties to consider Mongkolkit's popularity among a certain section of Thai society, we can begin to see how the appeal of dictatorial forms of power may be rooted in the experiences of the Thai people in being continuously exposed to seizures of power in the form of coups.

If there exist groups in Thai society who support or even simply accept policies that violate human rights, we should be concerned and demand advancements in our negative liberties. If today a person such as Mongkolkit is elected into the legislature, in the future there may be yet others who take up his policies as the basis of draft laws that infringe the rights of the people, arguing that these policies have been approved by popular demand and have been accepted by society at large. And if such laws are enforced against the Thai people, in the end it may be you and I whose rights are violated by the conferring of governing power to individuals who have goals and political beliefs akin to Mongkolkit. In the end we might be caned, whipped or be executed in a live broadcast, simply for engaging in actions that others see as getting in the way of national development as they define it.

Developing policies concerned with negative liberties is of utmost importance. These include guarantees to the privacy of personal information, preventions against the abuse of state power in internet surveillance, and guarantees to fundamental human rights for all people in our society.

The case of Mongkolkit reflects a wider problem of a deeply rooted yearning in Thai society for authoritarian rule. We must not through inattention allow state power to extend further than is necessary; we must be wary of and reject figures and policies which seek to place limitations on individual liberties. And as Timothy Snyder has said of tyranny, we must “make eye contact and

small talk” to bring down dictatorial power and build democracy. We may not be able to achieve such things through communication alone, but we who co-exist in the same society must still strive to learn, patiently listen and understand those who think differently to us.

???????????????????? ???  
???????????????????? ????????????????????? ??? 37 ??  
???????????????????? ??? 40 ??  
?? 6.3  
???????? (?? 35 ??????) ???  
??  
???????????????????? ??? 1 ??  
??  
??  
??  
??  
??  
??  
??  
?

??  
???????? ??? 6  
??  
?? 1  
?? 7.1  
?? (???.)  
??  
??  
??  
?? 3  
?? 7  
?? 11  
??  
??

???????? ??. ???  
??  
?? 10  
??  
??  
(??  
??  
??  
??  
??





