

## A Rational Actor Analysis of Authoritarian Consolidation: The Case of Thailand

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In Feb 2020, the Thai pro-reform and anti-military Future Forward Party (FFP) was dissolved in a constitutional court ruling. Widely criticised as a move by the military junta to stymie potential opposition, the interference was predictable given Thailand's historical alternation between military juntas and civilian governments since the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932.

Such military interference reflects the classification of Thailand as a closed anocracy (Polity IV, 2018) and a flawed democracy (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). The lack of democratic freedoms does not augur well for political stability in Thailand, as governments since 1957 had an average regime length of 2 years, compared to 4–5 years in other semi-democracies (Knutsen & Nygård, 2015). Yet, with exception of the Thaksin regime, military juntas tend to last far longer than 2 years—crucially having in common a system of patronage with the Thai monarchy. Our project begins from this notion of describing authoritarian consolidation not in terms of long-lived military regimes, but in terms of their common feature: political backing from the Thai monarchy. We seek to address two questions: (i) how had the Thai monarchy under King Bhumibol consolidated power from 1957–2006? and (ii) why had military regimes consistently outlived democratic regimes?

We propose a rational actor model in response to (i), which we use to isolate three aims of the monarchy: maintaining *public religious loyalty*, *economic stability* and the *monarchical nexus*. In response to (ii), the monarchy had preferred military regimes as they had better fulfilled these aims.

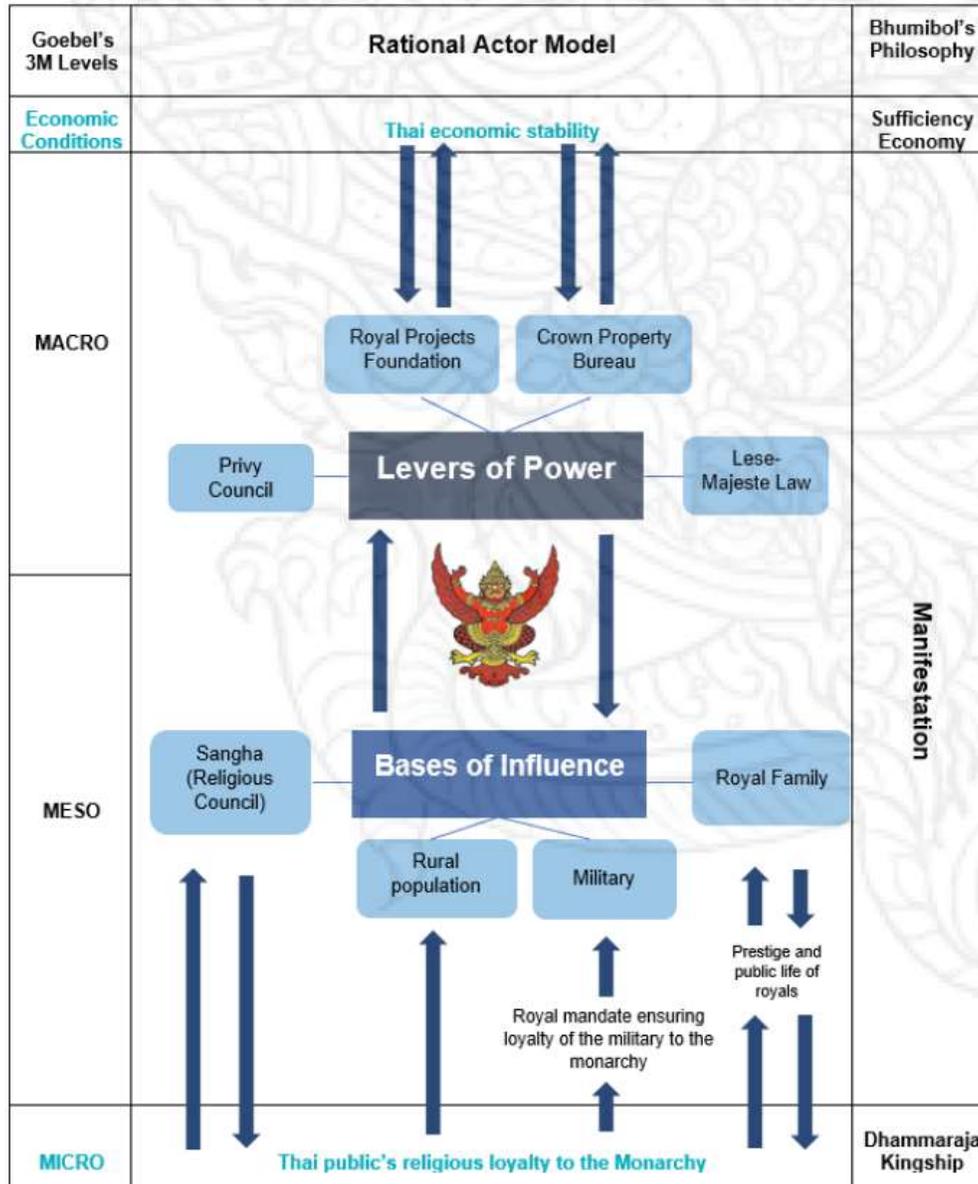
## Constructing the Model

First, we introduce Christian Göbel’s model of authoritarian consolidation (Göbel, 2011), as summarised below:

	Authoritarian Consolidation	Power dimension
<b>Macro</b>	Communication; bureaucracy; legal system	Infrastructural power: density and reach of state organisations
<b>Meso</b>	Meritocratic networks; semi-competitive elections; mass organisations; complaint mechanisms	Infrastructural power: embeddedness
<b>Micro</b>	Attitudes and behaviour (elites, population)	Discursive power

Göbel’s model is consistent with the major findings in the literature on Bhumibol’s reign and power consolidation. For instance, the concept of Bhumibol’s “network monarchy” of royalists who interfered in Thai politics at royal behest (McCargo, 2006) outlines *macro*- and *meso*- tiers of consolidation, while the literature concerning Bhumibol’s charismatic leadership centred on Theravada Buddhism (Ünaldi, 2016) outlines a *micro*-tier.

Second, we match theory to evidence by specifying Bhumibol’s power consolidation in each tier, referencing historical evidence from 1957–2006. Starting with Bhumibol’s *dhammaraja* philosophy, we posit that the monarchy seeks to preserve loyalty amongst stakeholders in Thai society—*bases of influence* consolidated along the *meso*-tier. To legitimise his influence, Bhumibol relies on the Thai public’s religious loyalty, thus consolidating power along the *micro*-tier. To maintain his influence, Bhumibol relies on political, economic and legal institutions—*levers of power* consolidated along the *macro*-tier. Finally, we note how economic stability is needed to maintain the operability of such institutions. We proceed to show how the tiers are dynamically related to each other, such that strengthening (or losing) influence in one will likely induce similar effects on the other. This allows us to construct the following model of Thai monarchical consolidation:



### Next steps

From our model, we isolate three monarchical aims: to maintain *public religious loyalty*, *economic stability* and the *monarchical nexus* (defined as the *meso-* and *macro-* tiers). Then, we address (ii) by showing how military governments, such as the Sarit, Prem and Thanom regimes, had better fulfilled these aims than non-military governments, such as the Kriangsak, Chatichai and Thaksin regimes. By operationalising the motives and methods of Thai monarchical consolidation, our research looks to the past to inform a systemic understanding of the present-day military-monarchy nexus.

## References

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