

Hannah Arendt, Nidhi Eoseewong, and the Spectre of Totalitarianism in Thailand ハンナ・アーレントとニティ・イオシー ウォン タイ王国を彷徨う全体主義の幽霊

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Hannah Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, her expansive analysis of the development and spread of totalitarianism in Europe in 1951, in the aftermath of the rise of anti-Semitism and Nazism, the Holocaust, and the violent destruction of life, community, and nation left both in the wake of World War II and amidst Stalinism. Her analysis rooted firmly in Europe, she commented in the preface that, “Never has our future been more unpredictable, never have we depended so much on political forces that cannot be trusted to follow the rules of common sense and self-interest - forces that look like sheer insanity, if judged by the standards of other centuries.”¹ Over sixty years later, noted Thai historian Nidhi Eoseewong picked up Arendt’s work to write two articles about the forms of creeping totalitarianism emergent in Thailand in the long aftermath of the 19 September 2006 coup.² While the points of difference between interwar Europe and present-day Thailand are as multiple as the points of resonance, the shape of totalitarianism itself is very similar. By threading his analysis of changes in Thai society over the last ten years through a reading of the chapters on the mass and dictatorship in Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Nidhi provides a broad context and framework for understanding present-day developments in Thailand, which mitigate against the very isolation he and Arendt argue is a key feature of totalitarianism. In what

follows, I offer an account of the current crisis in Thai politics informed by Nidhi’s essays. The translation of the two short essays, “Totalitarian Dictatorship,” and “The Great Mass of the People,” originally published on *Prachatai*, an independent Thai news and commentary site, follow my account.

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A year and a half ago, Nidhi Eoseewong warned of growing atomization among the members of the Thai polity. In a column for *Matichon*, a leading Thai-language daily, Nidhi threaded his analysis of changes in Thai society over the last ten years through a reading of the chapters on the mass and dictatorship in Hannah Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. While Thais were well-acquainted with standard military dictatorship, a frequent occurrence since the end of the absolute monarchy in June 1932, they had been spared totalitarian dictatorship. In contrast to a dictatorship in which the people are dominated by the army, totalitarian dictatorship is by and for the mass, has a need for the mass, and “endeavors to control the daily life of the people, or, actually, to control the brain or the thinking of the mass as well.”



Nidhi Eosewong, Thai historian and social and political critic

Photo Credit: Siam Intelligence Unit

The immediate impetus for Nidhi's essay was a series of short-lived protests in November and December 2012 by a group that called itself Protect Siam (*Pitak Siam*). Led by retired General Boonlert Kaewprasit and physician-activist Dr. Tul Sittisomwong, their rallying cry was a vague criticism of the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and a call to protect the monarchy from its critics.

Nidhi argued that the socioeconomic changes in Thai society in the prior decade created the conditions for the emergence of the mob. The people felt abandoned by their leaders and families and yearned for belonging and community. The defining characteristic of these potential atoms was "their grave discomfort with the conditions of their being." But like Arendt's mass, the Protect Siam demonstrators were not political except in their disavowal of any claim to participation in governance. Nidhi commented, "They are bored with politics. They deem politics to simply be a series of arguments. Politics is a waste of time from their work earning a living, as well as something that destroys their livelihood. Therefore, if they were able to arrange the purge and elimination of the politicians, they would like to return home to earn a living. The totalitarian mob would permit the 'good people'

to administer the country, without being involved as well." This category of "good people" — *khon dee* in Thai — recurs across time as shorthand for compliant citizens who support the status quo and the institution of the monarchy.

Protect Siam disappeared from the streets nearly as quickly as it appeared, but the desire for totalitarianism identified by Nidhi remained latent. This desire combined with sharp polarization in a series of rapid-fire events beginning with the protests of the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) in November 2013, which, as the New York Times editorial board warned in early March, have brought Thailand to the brink of disintegration.³

This polarization, once cast in the bright colors of red and yellow, has become decidedly murky. The yellow shirt protestors are nationalist-royalists who emerged onto the streets in late 2005 and early 2006 and called for military intervention into politics in order to remove Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in the name of saving the monarchy. Thaksin's two governments (2001-2005, 2005-2006) were marked by a mixture of populist healthcare and loan programs that began to change the socioeconomic structures of Thai society, human rights abuses, and personal profit. The 19 September 2006 military coup was an answer to the demands of the yellow shirts. There was no evidence that Thaksin was a danger to the monarchy, but citing the urgency of protecting the monarchy offers a convenient blank check for many extralegal actions in Thailand. The red shirt protestors are heterogeneous, including populist fans of Thaksin and progressive, republican-leaning critics, but share a belief in the importance of maintaining democratic process and equal social and political participation. These color-coded descriptions of both groups belie both their heterogeneity and the profound tension at the heart of the conflict. What is at stake is the

very question of who should rule the country and who can participate in politics. It is no accident that the crisis in the streets is taking place as the current king is ageing and a path to succession, and an appropriate successor, remains surrounded by uncertainty. The draconian Article 112, the measure of the Thai Criminal Code which criminalizes all speech or action deemed to be critical of the king, queen, heir-apparent, or regent and prescribes a punishment of three-to-fifteen years per count, means that this uncertainty cannot be broached openly.



Suthep Thaugsuban, leader of the People's Democratic Reform Committee, addresses his mass following.

Photo Credit: Associated Press

The immediate impetus for the PDRC protests led by former deputy prime minister and member of parliament Suthep Thaugsuban was the October 2013 proposal of a blanket amnesty bill in Parliament by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, leader of the Pheu Thai Party. For Suthep and many other critics, although Thaksin has not returned to the country since the 19 September 2006 coup, Yingluck, and the party she leads, the Pheu Thai Party, which was reconstituted from the Thai Rak Thai party of Thaksin that was dissolved after the coup, can only be understood as puppets of Thaksin. The proposed amnesty bill reached back in time to

cover state crimes beginning in 2004, when Thaksin was still in power. If passed, it would have exonerated Thaksin and all in his government for the Tak Bai massacre, a series of assassinations and disappearances of activists and human rights defenders, and many financial crimes. The bill would also have covered Suthep himself, who was indicted in December 2013 along with former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva for premeditated murder for his role in the April-May 2010 military crackdown on red shirt protestors which left 99 dead and over 2000 injured.



Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand's caretaker prime minister, faces a possible judicial coup

Photo Credit: Wikipedia

Slightly over a year after his first essay on totalitarianism in Thailand, and a month into the PDRC protests, Nidhi Eoseewong again turned to Hannah Arendt and *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. In a December 2013 article, he began by commenting that he was not particularly clever, because he failed to predict the speed with which the signs of totalitarianism would blossom into unmistakable totalitarianism in the form of the PDRC. Suthep and other PDRC leaders refer to their followers as the “great mass of the people” (*muan maha prachachon*), without even a touch of irony. What Suthep and the PDRC

have demanded, from the beginning, is the full exit of Prime Minister Yingluck and her government from politics, the appointment of an interim prime minister, and vague, undefined political and social reform to be carried out by an unelected “People’s Council.” They have promised to shut down the city of Bangkok until their demands are met, and have followed through with shifting closures of roads and government buildings. No concession by the Yingluck government has been sufficient. She dissolved Parliament on 9 December 2013 and a Royal Decree was issued calling a general election was set for 2 February 2014. The PDRC prevented candidates from registering to vote in 28 districts, boycotted the elections, and in some instances, used violence to intimidate citizens who wished to vote. Offers of dialogue by the caretaker government were turned down and instead the protests quickly entrenched in various parts of the city. Civil servants in many government offices had to flee their offices upon arrival of protestors and have been unable to return for several months. While claiming to be devoted to the tactics of civil disobedience, some PDRC protestors are clearly armed and have fomented clashes with both police and their critics, with 23 dead and 768 injured to date. Guards at the PDRC protests routinely detain and sometimes torture red shirt and other critics who come into the protest areas.⁴ On 17 March 2013, the PDRC again rejected a request for dialogue by the caretaker Yingluck government.

Nidhi argues that the void felt by the atoms that comprise the PDRC is matched by the void they wish to install at the center of politics. The great mass of the people disavows the principle of the democratic majority and is focused inwards on their own lives and families. The direction of the protests are decided from day-to-day, to throw off the opponents of the protests but also the atoms themselves, as “Any given project or plan turns the atoms into individuals, because they have to have one or

another firm principle. If the atoms begin to hold principles, and have to think either to support or oppose [a given idea], they cease to be atoms. Then, the (great) mass (of the people) dissolves and simply becomes a mob in which each person has a different purposeThis is why the movement of the ‘great mass of the people’ is only planned from hour-to-hour and must slowly advance day-by-day. The goal or the plan is to destroy the ‘great mass of the people’ itself.”



One of the individuals tortured by PDRC guards. Source: Prachatai

One of the ways in which the mass is held together as it hurtles towards self-destruction and the entire society is through the violation of law.

For those who feel a void, Nidhi comments that the violation of law, “strengthens their belief that the movement will lead to something new and better than their old laws.” Some of the violations of law, such as graffiti and vandalism in front of the police headquarters and other government buildings are material. Yet the primary goal of the protests represents a much deeper violation of the law. They desire the extralegal removal of the elected government from power and a replacement of it with an appointed prime minister and an appointed council. Under the 2007 Constitution, this amounts to a coup d’etat. From very early in the PDRC protests, Suthep and other leaders

have called for a revolt (*kabot*) in order to overturn the Yingluck government and all it represents. Fomenting revolt is a grave crime in the Thai Criminal Code, and in late 2013, arrest warrants were issued for Suthep and other key PDRC leaders. However, to date the warrants await execution. Whether they have not been executed due to concern about a possibly violent reaction by the protestors, or because the PDRC is supported by figures powerful enough to ignore the law, is immaterial. The end result is that the law is being emptied of meaning and force. The destruction of the law, in turn, leaves all of those in the polity unprotected.

On 21 March 2014, the Constitutional Court, whose ostensible purpose is to protect the Constitution, and by extension, the citizens whose sovereignty is at its center, leaped into the fray to aid in the destruction of the law. In response to a request by the Ombudsman, they ruled that the 2 February elections were not constitutional because the Constitution mandates that elections must be held on the same day throughout the country. As elections were not held in 28 districts due to the PDRC's boycott and obstruction by the PDRC, the Constitutional Court argued that the elections were null and void. Two days after the Court's ruling, the Assembly for the Defense of Democracy (AFDD), a coalition of progressive intellectuals, released a statement condemning the ruling as legally incorrect and politically motivated.⁵ While the Constitution stipulates that the date for a general election must be set as the same date throughout the country, it does not mandate that the election must actually take place on exactly the same day throughout the country. Natural disasters, unrest, and other factors may ensue that causes the election to be postponed in some districts. This does not normally void the entire election. But in this case, it caused the Constitutional Court to rule that the Royal Decree which set the date of the election was unconstitutional, and so the election itself was

therefore void. The role of the Constitutional Court is only to examine laws and rulings with respect to constitutionality, not political events. In voiding the election, an additional series of problems emerged. As raised by the AFDD, what has happened to the ballots of the over 20 million people who did vote on 2 February? Are their ballots in storage in a warehouse somewhere? Have they been destroyed? And what of the voices those ballots represent? Have they been counted, or not, and on whose authority? There is no existing Thai law or constitutional provision which explains what happens to ballots, and voices, when an election is declared to be of no consequence.



A PDRC gunman hides an automatic weapon in a popcorn bag. He was subsequently arrested and claimed that he was paid 300 baht (approximately 10 USD) per day to work as a guard.

Source: Bangkok Post

The problem with this ruling, the AFDD noted, is that the very body that is meant to protect the people's right to participate in the democratic process both acted in excess of its mandate, and did so in order to foreclose the democratic process. The void at the center of Thai politics widens by the day, and this ruling helps to create the space for an unelected

prime minister to be appointed. Within this space, the possibility for unrest, and therefore violence, grows. David Streckfuss notes (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/401769/risky-road-ahead-in-avoiding-civil-war>) that this ruling by the Constitutional Court indicates that the space in Thai politics, always dubious, has fully ceased to exist.⁶ The failure to acknowledge this is at the heart of the problem. When the “great mass of the people” of the PDRC, which is an actual minority of the population, and others who wish to be saved by the “good people” claim that want an appointed prime minister, they do so under the sign of a desire for neutrality, the anti-democratic nature of their actions is both deepened and obscured.

Thailand’s future remains uncertain. Although a new date for a general election to select members of parliament has not been set, elections for the Senate, which is a body that is 50% elected and 50% appointed, went smoothly on 30 March 2014. At present, caretaker prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra faces potential challenges from both the National Anti-Corruption Commission and the Constitutional Court which could lead to her removal from office. One of the petitions currently being considered by the Constitutional Court involves both Yingluck’s removal and the appointment of an allegedly neutral prime minister, in line with the wishes of the PDRC. Were this to be carried out, this would amount to a judicial coup. While there is no Constitutional basis for the Constitutional Court to take this action, events of the past five months indicate that in this time of creeping totalitarianism, this may not be an obstacle.

What makes Hannah Arendt’s writing sharply resonant with Thailand in the present moment is her urgent call for the careful thinking in a time of crisis. In “Understanding the Politics (The Difficulties of Understanding),” an essay in *Essays in Understanding* (<http://www.randomhouse.com/book/4704/essa>

ys-in-understanding-1930-1954-by-hannah-arendt), Hannah Arendt writes, “Understanding, while it cannot be expected to provide results which are specifically helpful or inspiring in the fight against totalitarianism, must accompany this fight if it is to be more than a mere fight for survival.”⁷ In the long five months of the protests of Suthep Thaugsuban and the PDRC, anti-democratic vigilante violence has been fomented by self-proclaimed practitioners of civil disobedience, over seven years of careful rebuilding of democratic process destroyed by the 19 September 2006 coup have been dismantled, and civil war has become a distinct possibility. With each passing day that Suthep Thaugsuban and the PRDC attempt to ensure a coup, whether military or judicial, and the institutions, such as the Constitutional Court, meant to protect democratic principles fail to do so, the need for understanding and analysis of the elisions and reversals taking place becomes ever more urgent. What Hannah Arendt realized, and what Nidhi Eoseewong realizes, is that if the struggle for the future is divorced from a struggle for understanding within the polity, the resultant future will be shot through with an absence of either justice or peace.

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Totalitarian Dictatorship

Nidhi Eoseewong

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Regarding Pitak Siam, Khun Nattawut Saikua opined that there is no clear signal that anti-democratic movements can function in a coordinated fashion. Consequently, it is unlikely they will upend the political field. But they cannot be underestimated.

I agree with Khun Nattawut in every respect, particularly on this issue of not underestimating anti-democratic forces. But I

do not accord any significance to the movement of these clowns, at all. What should not be underestimated is bigger than Pitak Siam. It is the tenor in Thai society throughout the last decade, which may lead us into a new form of dictatorship which is nearly totalitarian.

Let me first explain that ordinary dictatorship, which Thai people have been familiar with for many centuries, and totalitarian dictatorship are different. In an ordinary dictatorship, an individual or a group of individuals seize state power and categorically close off all space to their political opponents. They conduct the country's dealings either for their own interest, the common interest, or a combination of the two. Ordinary dictatorships are backed by various power groups. As for totalitarian dictatorship, it has to be supported by the mass. Totalitarian dictatorship endeavors to control the daily life of the people, or, actually, to control the brain, or the thinking of the mass as well (it caused the German aristocratic generals to obsequiously listen to the orders of Sgt. Hitler).

There has not yet been a totalitarian dictatorship, and many conditions make it difficult for there to be one, in Thailand. To put it simply: it is that we are unable to "liquidate" a large number of people in the way that Hitler did with the Jewish people (and others). Or as Stalin did with millions of people in Siberia. This is for the simple reason that we are not populous enough to be depopulated, or for the population to be reduced by that degree. Even Hitler was only able to devastate the Jewish people after he expanded and extended the territory of the Reich.

Therefore, the chance of Thailand becoming a totalitarian dictatorship is slim (even more so than Thailand becoming a full-fledged democracy). But there are some notable characteristics of potential totalitarian dictatorship in Thailand.

I employ the work of Hannah Arendt, a political

thinker, in her book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (and my own personal experience, which has not aided in making me much shrewder) to explain the unsettling direction emergent in politics over the last decade in Thailand. The trend is not limited only to the movement of the yellow shirts, but also includes the red shirts, the multi-colored shirts, and the clowns of Pitak Siam as well. This, in fact, also includes Khun Thaksin Shinawatra, or even the political tenor preceding him as well.

Khun Arendt's theory of the origin of totalitarian dictatorship is very exciting to me. Totalitarian dictatorship begins from the loss of class as the basis of belonging in the nation-state. In Europe, World War I caused states built on class to wholly disintegrate. People who no longer felt class belonging became the "mass" or unattached individuals who were no longer connected to anything at all.

Socioeconomic changes over the past several decades have undermined traditional forms of belonging in Thailand. Families have changed from belonging within the broad kinship of the extended family to the limited belonging of the nuclear family. And even the relationships within a nuclear family are not very strong, as has always been mentioned by many about the weakness of the Thai family in various aspects. So, there is no need to speak of the belonging that Thai people used to have with the temple (preceptors), with their friends, (If we have to move to make a living, how can we maintain our belonging until death as we used to do before?), with their teachers, with their village, with their alma mater, etc.

If we are going to belong to anything at all, it seems as though it is to something as far from ourselves as possible. Such as nation, religion, king, or King Naresuan, Ya Mo, or Preah Vihear temple, etc.

The "mass" is being born or has already been born in Thailand.

Being an individual in the vast mass makes life bleak, desolate and meaningless. So individuals have to grasp those distant things to hold on to. More importantly, these desolate individuals long to be politically organized, because being politically organized provides them with a clear meaning for their life. For example, they must go join the protest. They must wear a color shirt and feel unified with people who wear the same color shirt. Life comes to be lived to struggle for things they hold to be of the highest worth, whether it is nation, religion, king, or justice and democracy, etc.

Many people have offered the observation that both yellow and red protestors yearn for community. I agree with this observation. But this is not community in its traditional meaning. This is a new kind of community that clings together via "ideology." This is not a community held together by kinship and the use of common resources as in the past.

When there is a mass starving for political organization, just like this, a movement in the style of a totalitarian dictatorship can emerge. This yearning does not emerge without cause. Khun Arendt explains that the mass that comes together as a "mob" (from Khun Arendt's perspective, this is a group of people who were agitated to become the leaders of the masses) or that actually, the majority of the mass have never been interested in politics beforehand. They are people who earn a living from day to day, and are surrounded by feelings of desolation, a lack of worth, and being abandoned.

They feel abandoned by politicians, by bureaucrats, by the media, by everything that comprises their existence. Khun Arendt states clearly that when the classes in Europe collapsed, political parties collapsed as well. This is because political parties could no longer be the representative of a given group. In Thailand, political parties have never been the representatives of any given group of people.

Bureaucrats have never recognized the mass. Both of these entities issue edicts which affect the mass, who have never had a negotiating voice.

The media are interested only in the politicians and the bureaucrats. Or individuals who do unusual things, such as rape and murder, or climb electrical poles.

It is always said that that people who come to join the red shirt protests are people who are politically naive. In one sense, this is true. These are people who have not been interested in politics enough to join demonstrations with others in the past. But think about it again -- the dames and ladies who join the yellow shirts are the same. Each is a demonstration of those who have been similarly abandoned. In contrast, the Assembly of the Poor, the anti-power plant group in Prachuab, the land reform groups, etc., were all uninterested. They did not join with any color at all. This is because these are people who were already interested in politics and already politically organized. They could not be agitated.

Think way back, those who tied cloths around the bellies of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, Khun Banharn Silpa-archa, Khun Chuan Leekpai, and Khun Thaksin Shinawatra were also abandoned. Except they did not join demonstrations to demonstrate against those who abandoned them then. However, what is notable about this group is that they surrender themselves to the "leaders." They did not politically organize themselves. They did not bring pressure to bear on political parties. They did not create media of their own to negotiate, etc. "Leaders" are their representatives. Khun Sonthi Limthongkul, Khun Chamlong Srimuang, Khun Jatuporn Prompan, and Khun Nattawut Saikua are representatives who can reach inside their desolate hearts.

If the only change in a society is from a society of groups or classes to one of individuals, it may not become totalitarian. Individuals in the

society must first go through the process of becoming atoms (atomization). That is, they become separate units lacking relationships to each other or anything else. They cannot decide on anything. They spin without any intention of their own. They depend on the “mob” and the mob leaders to push them to revolve.

The desolate individuals, who themselves feel that they have been abandoned, are uninterested in the collective (such as politics). What is important is their grave discomfort with the conditions of their being. This is a group ready to be transformed into atoms. During Stalinist times in the Soviet Union, relationships within the family or with friends could become dangerous. Those accused by the state of being a class enemy did not have any friends or family who came to their aid. They immediately leapt to deny having had any relationship (with the accused). In 1984, even love was dangerous to the state. This is because love created a bond between two atoms, unrelated to their bond with the state. Atoms began to become individuals.

I have heard of many instances of husbands and wives, fathers and children, mothers and children, brothers and sisters, etc., in severe spats because one side is red and one side is yellow. This has actually happened to many people in Thailand. Color is often pulled out to be the basis of the relationship among friends. This demonstrates the atomization of a not insignificant number of Thai people.

The purpose of “Freeze Thailand” was to cut and reduce the connections with anything that seemed to be universal and diverse.

We arrive at the ideological aspect of totalitarianism. There is none, or it lacks substance altogether, so to speak. This is because it is not the power of ideology that pulls the atoms into a “mob.” However, the majority of totalitarian ideology comes from ideas that thrive in such times. These are ideas

that can be simplified (and are simultaneously stupid), such as: anti-Semitism, the reduction of Marxist-Leninist theory to a theoretical remnant comprised only class struggle, nationalist sentiment for Preah Vihear temple, Thai politics cannot develop because politicians are bad, or “We Love the King,” which is not any kind of way out for the institution of the monarchy in the present-day world.

The totalitarian mob does not imagine that it will come to hold political power (like the mob leaders of every color proclaim directly -- whether it is true or not is unimportant because they are representatives of a mob that truly feels that way). They are the people who were never interested in politics before. A large number of them are middle-class, from lower-middle-class to upper-middle-class. The mob is bored with politics. They deem politics to simply be a series of arguments. Politics is a waste of time from their work earning a living, as well as something that destroys their livelihood. Therefore, if they were able to arrange the purge and elimination of the politicians, the mob would like to return home to earn a living. The totalitarian mob would permit the “good people” to administer the country, without being involved as well.

I think that all sorts of things in the past decade in Thailand could perhaps lead us into democracy, could perhaps lead us into totalitarian dictatorship. But there is no way that it could be full in either way. There are certainly many obstacles to both. But to keep going in this fashion? That is perhaps impossible.

This is why I think they cannot be underestimated.

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The Great Mass of the People

Nidhi Eoseewong

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Both in print and on television, I have warned that the (great) mass (of the people) has already been born in Thailand, and that the mass politics of the people could take two different paths. One path was the expansion of the democratic apparatus and political participation, if the apparatus and various institutions were prepared to adapt. Or the other possible path was the emergence of totalitarian politics. Without a (great) mass (of the people), totalitarian dictatorship cannot be born.

In saying this, I do not want to intimate that I am more brilliant or profound than other people. I also failed to foresee the swift appearance of totalitarian politics.

In the first article I wrote about totalitarianism, I drew on Hannah Arendt's ideas. The political chaos of the last two weeks, and doubt and bewilderment as the movement of "The Great Mass of the People" of Khun Suthep unfolded, caused me to return to read her work once again. The puzzle which I am compelled by is not who is behind Khun Suthep, but why a large number of people (even if one does not count those who were brought from the south, it remains a significant number) joined the demonstrations against the government.

A totalitarian dictatorship can be born out of a political movement or it can emerge from the state, a state which transforms into a totalitarian state. But in Arendt's view, a small state without a large population, such as Thailand, has no way of becoming a totalitarian state. However, this does not mean that a totalitarian-styled political movement cannot be born in a small state such as Thailand.

As I have already mentioned, the power base of a totalitarian dictatorship is the mass. This word does not refer to any given people, but to people who are free from all attachments that

they once had, such as family, community, locality, religion, political parties, and even class (even slum dwellers can admire the royals and men of the Chuthathep family) [the Chuthathep family is a fictional family of minor royals who appeared first in a series of novels and then in the last year in a popular television soap opera—trans.] and have become singular individuals. Ajarn Kasian Tejapira argued with me and said that individuals can still think for themselves, and that to be correct, I should say that they were individuals who split off into separate atoms. Yes, absolutely. They are atoms who are unable to think anything aside from competing in the market in order to preserve their lives. They are the center of the universe. For this reason, at heart, their lives are bleak and desolate. They search for the meaning of life and find nothing.

Thai society is undergoing a transformation into an atomised one. The only attachment that remains in the lives of the atoms who comprise Thai society is the institution of the monarchy, for which there is "excessive" loyalty, especially among the middle-class. That the middle-class have become atomised more than others [classes] is an often-found phenomenon.

This makes it possible to surmise that the center of the totalitarian-styled political movement of Khun Suthep is in Bangkok.

Khun Suthep's "Great Mass of the People" is comprised of atoms. If they were not atoms, they could not become the "human masses" (in Arendt's terms). As they are atoms, they have been able to fuse into the "Great Mass of the People." They were not fused together by Khun Suthep, no, they fused together on their own and included Khun Suthep as well. In this, they have found the purpose of their bleak and desolate lives: to be a part of the "Great Mass of the People." This mass has a life and mind of its own, channeled through Khun Suthep. And, the "Great Mass of the People" speaks for all of the people.

So it is irrelevant to ask how many are in Khun Suthep's "Great Mass of the People." Far from the number of 65 million, the population of Thailand. Totalitarian politics do not rely on numbers, but for whom one speaks. Where has there been a totalitarian regime that emerges from the voice of the majority? Even the Nazis, who obtained a majority in parliament, began as a gang of rogues in the streets and then included groups of people who failed in every aspect of life. Mussolini seized the state with a minority in parliament. The Bolsheviks were a minority, but were the representatives of the "Great Mass of the People." The claim that Khun Suthep's mob is a dictatorship of the minority is right on target and likely pleases the mob as well. The entire movement is because they want to be a dictatorship of the minority, the dictatorship of the "good people." This desire to be a dictatorship of the minority is similar to that of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Aryan dictatorship.

Totalitarian dictatorship, no matter where it arises, destroys the principle of the democratic majority entirely. A majority that holds that every person is politically equal is the very problem. Everyone should not be politically equal — not when they have different levels of education, hold different shares in the country, and view the collective differently. Those who have allowed themselves to be swallowed into the "Great Mass of the People" will be equal with others who are solely concerned with the interests of themselves, their spouses, and children.

This is why you should not ask about the number of people involved. The "Great Mass of the People" will not know what you are talking about.

When the principle of the majority is destroyed, it dissolves the legitimacy of the institutions of the majority as well. The government that came from the approval of the majority in parliament is null and void. Even the parliament or

assembly that gave the approval is null and void. The state offices that are under the direction of those who have become null and void inevitably are as well.

Everything is completely null and void. Or everything has been cleared out for the "Great Mass of the People" to create anew, or for a "good person" prime minister selected by the "good people" to be royally appointed.

The objection that all of this is unconstitutional is irrelevant because the "Great Mass of the People," which claims to be the voice of the entire mass of the people does not intend to give legitimacy to the constitution, which has provided an opportunity for scoundrels to hold power. This has not yet been explicitly announced because the time is not right to do so.

Why has the political plan of the "Great Mass of the People" not been announced clearly yet? Arendt's explanation is very penetrating. Any given project or plan turns the atoms into individuals, because they have to have one or another firm principle. If the atoms begin to hold principles, and have to think either to support or oppose [a given idea], they cease to be atoms. Then, the (great) mass (of the people) dissolves and simply becomes a mob in which each person has a different purpose. The fusing into the "Great Mass of the People" cannot occur.

This is why the movement of the "Great Mass of the People" is only planned from hour-to-hour and must slowly advance day-by-day. The goal or the plan is to destroy the "Great Mass of the People" itself. Do not forget that if there is a plan, when it succeeds or fails, then what next? The policies of the parties of Stalin and Mao changed every year, in order to make the "Great Mass of the People" always strong, alert, and engaged in battle.

Things must be found for the mob to do. Don't simply demonstrate. This is the explanation in

terms of tactics. But there is a deeper explanation at the level of strategy.

Khun Suthep's "Great Mass of the People" has been criticised for violating the law in staging an insurrection. Sometimes they may have also been criticised for violating morals in provoking violence. Some people have dug up and "revealed" Khun Suthep's past in order to lessen the legitimacy of the "Great Mass of the People."

Extraordinarily, Arendt points out that this violation of the law and morals is one charm that causes the (great) mass (of the people) to collide and fuse with the leaders. Many leaders of totalitarian movements talk about their violent pasts with pride. Khun Sonthi Limthongkul admitted on stage how he had been a "villain" (his word) and now he had turned to dharmic practice until he was one step away from Angulimala. My simple explanation for this phenomenon is that the (great) mass (of the people) actively abhor the society that does not bring them happiness. The laws and morals of this society should be violated. This causes them to rise up to join together as the (great) mass (of the people). The violation of laws and morals strengthens their belief that the movement will lead to something new and better than their old lives.

A large number of those who have joined in Khun Suthep's "Great Mass of the People" (discounting the mob that was hired and the people who were brought from his election district) did not join due to Khun Suthep's rhetoric. They did not join for personal benefit. But you cannot say that they share an ideology with Khun Suthep, because ideology comes from pondering ideas and from significant argument and contestation. If they participate out of conviction of emotion and feeling, that is a reaction to being dissatisfied with their experience living in a society lacking any belonging, and it is also a state in which they cannot see any other exit. Khun Yingluck, the

Pheu Thai Party, and Khun Thaksin are the concrete victims of this conviction of emotion and feeling. One day in the future, the concrete victims of this conviction will may change. I am confident that they will, and they may be the army or other institutions, such as the judiciary, or religion, or many other possible things.

This is because totalitarian mass politics inevitably and constantly needs to create enemies to function as the objects of hatred.

I may be able to refer to Arendt in order to understand Khun Suthep's (great) mass (of the people) far more extensively. But let me stop with simply this, in order to say with certainty that Khun Suthep is clearly leading the "Great Mass of the People" in the direction of totalitarian dictatorship. Khun Suthep is not the first person to do so. But it has never been as clear as it is this time.

How can we move away from mass politics that are proceeding towards dictatorship? I think that elucidating the illegitimacy and illegality of this movement is something that must be swiftly done. Not in order to accuse those who have joined the demonstrations, because the (great) mass (of the people) will not hear us. But we must create greater understanding for those outside the movement, a not insignificant number of whom also live in the atomised society, so that they will believe that there is still a democratic option, if we give it a chance.

There is a mob like the "Great Mass of the People" in every atomised society, but it does not invariably have to hold the power to overwhelm alternatives in society like the mobs of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin or Mao. It depends on whether or not the majority of people in the society possess enough sense, forbearance, and understanding to not allow the (great) mass (of the people) to blindly lead.

All of us, including Khun Yingluck Shinawatra, in Thai society have arrived at a life-or-death

critical juncture. If all of us help support Thai society to break loose from the option of totalitarian dictatorship this time, my grandchildren and Khun Yingluck's children will have lives in which they can say whatever they think. They will be able to oppose and counter the thinking of other people, without having to be afraid that the (great) mass (of the people) will punish them by blowing whistles, detaining, exiling, or executing them.

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Notes

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1951), vii. The book is available as a free PDF or RTF file sponsored at the Internet Archive of the California Digital Library (<https://archive.org/details/originsoftotalit00are> n).

² Nidhi Eoseewong taught in the Department of History at Chiang Mai University from the late 1960s until his retirement as a Professor in 2000, when he was also awarded the Fukuoka Prize. He is the author of over forty books and hundreds of newspaper articles. While most of his writing is only available in Thai, one of his most important books, *Pen and Sail: Literature*

and History in Early Bangkok (http://www.silkwormbooks.com/each_titles/e_t_hailand/pen_and_sail.htm), has been translated into English, as well as several articles in addition to the two reprinted her, including "The Thai Cultural Constitution," (http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue2/article_243.html) "Understanding the Situation in the South as a 'Millenarian Revolt,'" (http://kyotoreview.cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/issue/issue5/article_380_p.html) and "Mass Politics and Reconciliation." (<http://www.prachatai.info/english/node/3527>)

³ "Thailand at the Brink" (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/28/opinion/thailand-at-the-brink.html?_r=1)," *New York Times*, 27 February 2014. Accessed 1 April 2014.

⁴ See "PDRC guards torture after finding a UDD guard before they threw him in the Bang Pakong River" (<http://prachatai.com/journal/2014/03/52079>)," (in Thai), *Prachatai*, 4 March 2014. Accessed 1 April 2014.

⁵ The Assembly for the Defense of Democracy was founded on 10 December 2013, Constitution Day, and one day after Parliament was dissolved. Their first, founding public statement, issued on 10 December 2013, can be read [here](http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/3785) (<http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/3785>). Their second statement, issued on 23 March 2014 can be read [here](http://prachatai.com/english/node/3903) (<http://prachatai.com/english/node/3903>).

⁶ David Streckfuss, "Risky road ahead in avoiding civil war" (<http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/401769/risky-road-ahead-in-avoiding-civil-war>)," *Bangkok Post*, 26 March 2014. Accessed 1 April 2014.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 2005),

page 310.