

Reconciliation as Free-Floating *Signification*: Reconciliation after 2014 Coup in Thailand

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The word *reconciliation* has become common throughout Thai society since the aftermath of the massacres of Red Shirt protesters in the heart of Bangkok in the months April and May 2010, which killed around a hundred people and injured 2,000 more. The word came into use by the government since the massacres, and has become an even more regular part of government discourse since the military's successful May 22, 2014 coup d'état against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The need for reconciliation stems from the incidents of national unrest created by protesters demanding Shinawatra's resignation and the dissolution of her government between October 2013 and May 2014. In part, the military used the need for reconciliation and unity as justification for launching the coup d'état. Ever since, the military government has stated that it is creating genuine and sustainable reconciliation as well as encouraging harmony. However, the so-called reconciliation process carried out by the military government is riddled with problems. Many of the military government's actions instead took the country back to a state in which true reconciliation in Thai society is impossible. Reconciliation as defined and deployed by the military government is inconsistent with academic definitions of reconciliation derived in the field of peace studies, due to the free-floating signification of the term. In the hands of the military government, the term reconciliation is self-paradoxical, and takes on any meaning politically beneficial to the military government. When examined more closely, it is clear that reconciliation as implemented by the military government consists of 1) creating a surveillance kingdom, 2) obliterating political opposition and threatening and hunting of people with opposing views, 3) dismantling the history of the Red Shirt movement, and 4) organizing entertainment to "return happiness" to the Thai people as a form of distraction. These so-called reconciliation activities are incompatible with the established principles of reconciliation. Above all, these forms of so-called reconciliation actually lead to the suffering of Thai advocates of democracy, and to an even more uncomfortable cultural state in Thailand, where true reconciliation is rendered even more difficult due to the suppression of honest political discourse.

Keywords: reconciliation, free-floating signification, human rights violation, military government, Thailand

The word reconciliation is fairly new in Thai society. While in the past the government has suppressed political protesters, it was not until the aftermath of the deadliest political violence in modern Thai history that reconciliation entered the political parlance and attempts at post-conflict management. The deadly violence that precipitated the discussions of reconciliation occurred during protests by the Red Shirts, the largest pro-democracy group in Thailand, against the government of PM Abhisit Vejjajiva (2008–2011) in April and May of 2010. The suppression and subsequent crackdown against the protesters resulted in the deaths of 94 people and caused numerous injuries which later brought the death toll to 99 (Khaosod Editors, 2010). In the aftermath of the violent suppression, the Vejjajiva government established the Truth for Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to find ways to bring about reconciliation in Thai society. The succeeding government, that of Yingluck Shinawatra (2011–2014), made reconciliation an “urgent policy” by drafting additional legislation (Sripokangkul, 2012). Even the military government led by self-appointed PM Prayuth Chan-ocha, the general who launched the successful May 2014 coup against Shinawatra, continues to stress that Thailand is in a period of reconstruction and reconciliation (“Prayuth Chan-ocha asks all Thais to reconcile and not resist the government,” 2014).

The Chan-ocha military government has claimed since the beginning that its aim is to create reconciliation in the nation. For three months after the military takeover, General Chan-ocha said, “I will focus on reconciliation with a new cabinet and constitution drafting committee put in place,” and he justified his intention to keep the military government in place for over a year by saying “enough time has been wasted on conflict” (“Thailand Elections not for a Year,” 2014, par. 6). Beginning in June 2014, the military government established Reconciliation Centers for Reform in all 77 provinces to carry

out the military’s reconciliation agenda at provincial, district, and sub-district levels. After more than a year of military rule, PM Chan-ocha has continued to emphasize his government’s role in reconciliation, saying in mid-June 2015, “I have already said that in my current role is bringing about reconciliation” (“Transcript: Prayuth Chan-ocha,” 2015, par. 54). In August 2015, he said again that Thailand is in a period of reconciliation (Gray, 2015).

Despite the newness of the term, the concept of reconciliation in Thailand is incredibly complex, stemming from political machinations beginning in 2010 which are beyond the scope of this paper. This article considers reconciliation as conceived and implemented by the contemporary government of PM Chan-ocha in the context of important academic fundamentals and accepted concepts of true reconciliation. This article discusses the immediate chain of events that led to the May 22, 2014 coup d’état, and dissects the practices and activities established by the Chan-ocha government under the banner of reconciliation.

THE 2014 COUP D’ÉTAT IN THAILAND

The May 22 coup d’état was a political continuation of many incidents that preceded it, which have shown that the Yellow Shirts—a political faction made up mostly of conservative elites—and the middle classes in Bangkok and southern Thailand refuse to recognize democratically elected governments that arise by majority vote. The Yellow Shirts and the Democrat Party with which they traditionally align do not respect rural voters who make up most of the voting population. The Yellow Shirts and Democrat Party have both accused rural voters of being irrational in their voting behavior and of selling their votes. In addition, the Yellow Shirts regard the majority of rural voters as lackeys or unquestioning supporters of the

former populist PM Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006), the older brother of Yingluck Shinawatra who was himself deposed in a military coup. Thaksin Shinawatra has been accused of playing “money politics” and was unpopular among the elites who saw his populist appeals as threats to their traditional political power, secured by bonds with the military, courts, and independent judicial entities.

The coup against Thaksin is instructive in revealing these alliances. Following the coup that deposed him, the military government that had installed itself redesigned the rules of politics through the 2007 constitution, putting more power into the hands of the judiciary and other independent political organizations, rather than with the elected parliament (Marshall & Gurr, 2014). When the military transferred power back to a civilian democracy by holding elections in 2007, results showed that the majority of Thai people still supported the pro-Thaksin party, People Power Party. The Yellow Shirts were incensed that the deposed PM still apparently wielded so much power, and consequently, Yellow Shirt protesters seized the Government House and both Don Muang and Suvarnabhumi International Airports to demand the resignation of the elected government. Further, General Anupong Paochinda, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, used state television channels to broadcast messages demanding the resignation of the pro-Thaksin government, illustrating the alignment of the military and the party of the elites. The military also acted as security guards for the Yellow Shirt protesters during their demonstrations. The newly empowered Constitutional Court then ruled that the People Power Party had to be dissolved; the army then asserted its support for Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Democrat Party leader, as the next PM, despite the fact that he had not received a majority of votes. The military coerced a faction of the now-defunct People’s Power Party to assist Abhisit

in forming a coalition government (“Thailand’s New Prime Minister Faces,” 2008).

After Vejjajiva became PM, many citizens felt betrayed because the government they had elected was destroyed. Therefore, they took to the streets under the banner of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, colloquially known as the Red Shirts. Unlike the outcome of the Yellow Shirt protests that had overturned a democratically elected government, the Red Shirt demonstrations were violently suppressed by the military in 2009 and 2010. The suppression of protesters was especially harsh during the crackdowns in April and May 2010 when 99 Red Shirts were killed: 82 were killed by bullets, 32 of whom were shot in the head. The violence left thousands more injured and many permanently disabled. The government spent more than three billion baht (\$100 million US) to control and disperse the Red Shirts by mobilizing 67,000 soldiers. More than 700 million baht (\$23.3 million US) was spent on 25,000 police officers. The total number of bullets used by officials was 117,932 (People’s Information Center, 2012).

Within one year after these incidents, the Vejjajiva government dissolved the parliament and called for new elections. Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin’s younger sister, became PM in the 2011 general elections. The *Pheu Thai* Party (“For Thai People,” a pro-Thaksin party organized from the remnants of the People Power Party that had been dissolved) won the election by a landslide.

For nearly two years, the Yingluck Shinawatra government weathered minor storms and criticisms, but the relative stability did not last. In the political posturing between the Red Shirt and Yellow Shirt leaders and their national representatives from 2006 through 2010, a number of criminal and civil charges had been leveled, both against Thaksin Shinawatra and against many thought to have played a role in the violence under the Vejjajiva administration. None of the charges had ever been resolved, and thus were still a shadow over politics in the

years after the coup that deposed Thaksin. After that coup, the government had defamed him for fraudulent business dealings and confiscated \$1.3 billion US in assets, as well as leveling corruption charges. In 2013, the *Pheu Thai* Party proposed a reconciliation bill which would have ended all related legal cases since the 2006 coup d'état, including both the corruption charges against Thaksin and all political prosecutions relating to the 2010 massacre.

Reactions from both sides were swift. Suthep Thaugsuban, a leading member of the Democrat Party, formed a group called the People's Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State (PCAD), in order to agitate against the democratically elected Shinawatra. Thaugsuban was no newcomer to politics or to the animus against the Shinawatras. Between 2008 and 2011, Thaugsuban had been the head of security affairs and the deputy prime minister under the Vejjajiva government. During the 2009-2010 unrest, Thaugsuban played a key role in the violence, ordering the suppression of the Red Shirts in Bangkok. Although they would also have been granted amnesty, Vejjajiva and Thaugsuban saw the proposed amnesty bill as merely a vehicle for allowing Thaksin back into Thailand from his self-imposed exile. They thus refused the protection the bill would have granted for their own actions in the 2010 massacres. Conversely, the *Pheu Thai* members felt that Thaksin had been a victim of the 2006 coup and wanted to see him redeemed, and those responsible for the 2010 deadly suppression of the protesters brought to justice. Nevertheless, they believed that neither the courts of justice nor the independent judicial entities, which have alliances with the Democrat Party, would ever prosecute Suthep, Abhisit and the military—even if they were not given formal amnesty. Accordingly, the *Pheu Thai* Party fully supported the reconciliation bill to allow Thaksin to return to Thailand and clear his name, while Vejjajiva and Thaugsuban opposed

it, knowing they would never face prosecution anyway.

Thaugsuban rallied the PCAD to the streets in Bangkok to demonstrate against the amnesty bill. The protesters rallied under the slogan “Shutdown Bangkok,” blocking Bangkok traffic, surrounding government buildings and behaving violently towards police. PM Yingluck Shinawatra decided to dissolve the parliament on December 9, 2013 in order to hold an election on February 2, 2014. Yingluck and the *Pheu Thai* Party calculated that with an election, their party was likely to win and regain political legitimacy. Knowing this, the Democrat Party boycotted the election and the PCAD did not stop protests after Yingluck had dissolved the parliament. They demanded additional reforms to Thailand's political process before the election was held. In addition, protesters blocked candidates from submitting their applications at provincial offices all over the country, especially in Bangkok and the South, which are areas dominated by Democrat voters. Many polling stations were completely shut down on election day. At some polling stations, PCAD protesters stole ballot boxes containing votes that had already been cast. In addition, many newspapers printed stories about Yellow Shirt protesters using force to prevent people from exercising their right to vote. In other words, they hindered the election without regard for the rule of law or for the majority of Thais who wanted to overcome conflicts through democratic means.

Even though there were countless obstructions, 20,530,359 electors voted. This represents a turnout of about 47% of the electorate (“The number of voters in Thailand,” 2014). Nevertheless, the constitutional court ruled that the election was invalid, because the caretaker government did not administer the election simultaneously all over the country. The court's ruling mentioned nothing about the obstructions by protesters which made voting difficult or impossible in cases where the voting precincts

were completely closed. After the failed election, the protesters continued to shut down portions of Bangkok, in some cases protected by the military, which had set up temporary bunkers throughout Bangkok, staffed by soldiers watching over and supporting protesters. The traditional ties between the military and the elites who made up the Yellow Shirts were on full display. Some high-level military officers were counselors and close friends of protest leaders, including Suthep Thaugsuban, and some military officers acted as armed guards for them. During these protests, the police became effectively the only state apparatus to keep peace and order because the military protected the PCAD instead of carrying out orders from the elected government.

Meanwhile, the caretaker government attempted to maintain peace and order, and intended to organize another election. However, Yingluck Shinawatra faced other problems stemming from the transfer of Tawin Pliensri from his position of Secretary General of National Security into a position unrelated to security matters in 2011. Pliensri was a key figure in the 2009-2010 Red Shirt suppression and was the creator of a false chart, called the “Chart of the Network to Overthrow the Monarchy,” which aimed to defame Red Shirt supporters by claiming they had a plan to bring down the monarchy—the ultimate offense in Thailand. This is the reason the Yingluck Shinawatra government did not trust Pliensri in an important position. On May 7, 2014 the constitutional court ordered the removal of the Yingluck government from office and the termination of the authority of her cabinet, ruling that the transfer was improper.

Before the military launched the coup d'état, the PCAD protests were losing momentum, with fewer and fewer people participating. Daily, the media reported that protesters violently abused people in the streets. Suthep threatened to kidnap the prime minister, her son, and the cabinet. Protesters called more urgently for the military to launch a coup to break the political

impasse. On May 20, 2014, General Prayuth, commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Army, declared martial law and carried out the coup d'état two days later. Not long after the coup, Thaugsuban gave an interview to the *Bangkok Post* which quoted him saying, “Before martial law was declared (on May 20), General Prayuth told me that I and my masses of PCAD supporters are too exhausted. It's now the duty of the army to take over the task” (Campbell, 2014, par. 3). While General Prayuth claimed that the coup was launched as a last minute decision, it was clear that the operation was well-planned and executed, and Thaugsuban's words underscore the close connections between the leaders of the military and the leaders of the anti-Shinawatra PCAD protests.

The 2014 coup d'état was, in some ways, made possible by the fact that the army has been able to expand both its budget and its political influence in outsize ways since 2006. Following the 2006 coup, the military government had placed greater importance on the military's role in keeping internal security, rather than its traditional role in ensuring external security. This emphasis enables the military to generate large amounts of funding and to expand. From 2006 to 2009, the armed forces budget was raised from \$2.8 billion US to \$5.6 billion US, an unprecedented increase. In 2013 the budget rose further to \$6.0 billion US (Thaipublica, 2013). The military government has only continued this trend, raising the military budget again in 2015 to \$6.2 billion US (“Financial Stability in 2015,” 2014), and planning in 2016 to raise the budget to \$6.9 billion US (“The 2015 Defense Ministry Budget,” 2015). In 2014, the Global Firepower Index reported that Thailand was the 24th most powerful military in the world; in 2015, it had climbed to 20th (Global Firepower, 2015).

The military gained increasing political influence beginning in 2006. Since the 2006 coup, Thailand has been a “weak state” which,

as Joel Migdal (1988) explained, “is one in which unelected power brokers (especially the army as well as elite bureaucrats, the business class, owners of large real estate) manipulate, subvert or utilize state power structures to enhance their power base” (p. 4). Essentially, this means that politicians who were elected have very little relevance and power compared with those, such as military leaders, who were not elected. It is not surprising that numerous Thai academics say that Thai society has been set back by half a century, and resembles an era when Fred Riggs (1966) studied Thai politics. Then, Riggs observed that Thailand was a “bureaucratic polity” because the military and bureaucracy were supreme, whereas citizen participation in government and politics was not given any importance. Professor Surachart Bamrungsook (2015), a political scientist at Chulalongkorn University, drew a similar conclusion after the 2014 military coup—that Thai society has fallen under the full control of the military. He argued that the military has successfully created a “military bureaucratic authoritarianism” in Thai politics (p. 167). On one hand, this system relies on a mechanism in which the army controls and rules the country and, on the other hand, it finds support from the elites and middle class by holding out the promise to “sustain stability” in different aspects of Thai society.

While after the 2014 military coup, General Prayuth Chan-ocha continually claimed that the coup was needed to create reconciliation in the nation, his administration has continued an alarming trend of increasing the military’s budget and its influence over both politics and Thai society. Nevertheless, now PM Chan-Ocha still claims that his administration has taken Thailand into a period of reconciliation, and uses this claim to prop up his agenda and to decry any criticism of his administration. Before examining the kind of reconciliation that the Chan-ocha administration has put in place, it is important to review the fundamentals of true

societal reconciliation, as identified by scholars in the field.

THE MEANING AND COMPONENTS OF RECONCILIATION

In ancient Greece, reconciliation was a term used in daily life to place importance on “changing enmity into friendship” in personal relations, but from the Roman period onward, reconciliation has been coupled with legal matters. For example, questions of whether an offender should receive amnesty or a reduced sentence, or whether laws should be enacted to compensate the victims of atrocities (Doxtader, 2007, p. 123). The generally accepted meaning of reconciliation in academic communities is to overcome enmity and mutual hatred while working towards peaceful coexistence without detestation or vengefulness. In addition, reconciliation refers to the creation of social processes to help previously opposed parties recognize and empathize with the suffering of the other party, and the support of new, friendly relations in an atmosphere of mutual trust (Parent, 2010). Often, it is difficult to explain when two parties have been in conflict and used violence against each other, why each party should reconcile, when there are many ways to meet the felt needs of the disputants in negative ways. When parties are not committed to reconciliation, they continue to engage in negative attempts to compete. Examples of this are halting negotiations, retaliating, and using violence to cripple or permanently destroy the enemy. These methods lead to happiness with retribution on the part of the victor, but almost always result in continued conflict and enmity.

This is why reconciliation is extremely important. Reconciliation is the process of finding “post-conflict” ways to deal with the “scars” of society and to resolve divisions between opposing parties that are the result of

oppression and violence. Violence involves a lasting social cost. Many countries that have a history of violence still struggle to create domestic reconciliation even after decades have passed since the end of overt hostilities or confrontations.

Alex Boraine, the founder of the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) said of the reconciliation process, “I think it will take generations, not years” (Mengel, 2010, p. 139). Although Boraine was talking about reconciliation in the context of South Africa, which endured hundreds of years of colonization with widespread and enduring racism, what he said is applicable to the process of reconciliation in other countries too.

Reconciliation is important for societal healing after conflict, despite its complexity and difficulty. The following seven principles are recognized prerequisites for achieving sustainable reconciliation. Without effective implementation of these social reforms, lasting reconciliation generally cannot be achieved.

Firstly, regime change must occur. It is difficult to imagine a government that has used violence against its people subsequently setting up investigation committees to investigate its injustices with the duty of punishing the perpetrators, who remain in power under the same regime. A new regime must be in place to carry out reconciliation. Therefore, to achieve justice and to discover the truth, transition is needed. There are three forms of transition: 1) transition from an authoritarian regime to democracy, 2) transition from a democracy of military supremacy to one of civilian supremacy, and 3) a paradigm shift within a democratic government, in which the ruling regime changes its official attitude toward victims that have been suppressed for a long time. This third case applies to situations in both Canada and Australia, wherein during the past century both countries tried to reach reconciliation with the indigenous communities who have been victims

of colonization, through an official apology and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate the legacy of violence from the colonial era (Smits, 2008).

Changing the government without a corresponding transition as described above cannot lead to reconciliation. For example, a coup d'état gives an illegitimate appearance to the victor's justice—that of the military. In addition, regime transition is important for the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission, which is tasked with discovering the truth about the abuse of power under the old regime and demanding that the perpetrators be held responsible. This type of committee also studies how to help victims and determines the structural causes of past violence in order to prevent recurrences (Hayner, 2002).

Secondly, during reconciliation, attention must be paid to human rights in the prosecution of perpetrators, particularly those who were considered most responsible for abuses or crimes during conflict (International Center for Transitional Justice, 2014), or else revenge may be carried out with impunity, instead of justice. The commitment to using words like reconciliation and amnesty indicates the capability of the country to move on (Doxtader, 2007). Giving amnesty to perpetrators of violence may be part of a productive strategy for creating reconciliation, but countries must also acknowledge and deal with the past in order to achieve rule of law and recognize the trauma experienced by victims of violence under the old regime (Du Toit, 1994). If amnesty is given without regard for the trauma of victims, this can create a culture of impunity in which justice for the victims is overlooked and perpetrators go unpunished. As Colleen Murphy (2010) said, “Denial of past injustice seems incompatible with reconciliation” (p. 59). The most-cited attempts to deal with perpetrators are efforts by countries in South America. The legal processes of these countries interpreted and applied

international law to prosecute the perpetrators. Also, the international court has adjudicated those perpetrators.

Thirdly, the truth must be revealed (Hayner, 2002). The truth about what happened in the period of violence and informing the victims of the truth is also very important. The truth can be classified into several categories. Firstly, reliable truth is factual with available evidence. Reliable truth can offer detailed explanation of who, what, where, why, when, and with whom. For instance, many cases show that for their own healing, victims and survivors benefit from knowing the truth regarding where the bodies of the dead have been buried, the names of the people who have been killed or tortured, and when and where this occurred (Gready, 2009). The second category of truth is verbal truth, which is anecdotal and needs to be proven. For example, in South Africa perpetrators revealed their stories to the Amnesty Committee, which was composed of judges and lawyers; when their stories were verified, the perpetrators received amnesty. The third category of truth, memory truth, or narrative and personal truth does not require evidence because it is the subjective experience of violently abused victims who expect society to conceive of and understand their past experiences. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa defines this category of truth as “the individual subjective experiences of people who had previously been silenced or voiceless” (Alidu, Webb, & Fairbairn, 2009).

Fourthly, victims have to be placed at the center of the reconciliation process. It is important to recognize the victims’ humanity and their inherent value in order to encourage them to resolve feelings of inferiority and transgress enmity, to rebuild friendships and social bonds (Doxtader, 2007). As Charles Taylor (1994) argued, if there is no recognition of the value of the victim, “misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound,

saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need” (p. 26).

Furthermore, adopting a victim-centered approach to the reconciliation process requires learning about the victims’ fates. Simon Robins (2012), who studied the needs of families whose members disappeared in Nepal and East Timor, says, “the term ‘victim-centered’ is used to define a transitional justice process or mechanism that arises as a response to the explicit needs of victims, as defined by victims themselves” (p. 86). Robins (2011) also emphasized, “the victim-centered approach represents an attempt to counter the elite-led nature of much transitional justice process by challenging it with views from below” (p. 77). For example, Roman David and Susanne Choi (2005) studied the reconciliation process in the Czech Republic during that country’s transition to democracy. They stated, “based on our findings, we propose a victim-oriented model of social reconstruction for transitional countries” (p. 393). Similarly, Claire Hackett and Bill Rolston (2009), who studied victims in Northern Ireland, argued that the act of telling their story to a dedicated listener makes the victim feel valuable and re-humanized: “Telling the story is establishing and preserving a historical record, providing society with the chance to learn lessons from the past, preventing the emergence of a single narrative of the past wherein some groups would inevitably be marginalized, providing healing for the individual storyteller” (p. 358). In addition, Ernesto Kiza, Corene Rathgeber, and Holger Rohne (2006) stressed that societal awareness of the fates of the victims is very important. They studied victims of violence in 11 countries—among which are Afghanistan, Cambodia, Kosovo, and Sudan—and concluded that telling of stories is like a medicine to cure and repair the state. Furthermore, Martha Minow (1998) convincingly expanded the essentials of a victim-centered approach by connecting it

with forgiveness: “Forgiveness is a power held by the victimized, not a right to be claimed, and it is the very act of forgiveness that is most closely tied with the difficult notion of reconciliation” (p. 17). The lesson learned from the academic examples given is that the narratives and traumatic experiences of victims should be placed at the center of the reconciliation process to restore ties in society which were destroyed.

Fifthly, compensation and restitution are required to reinstate victims to their status before victimization. Compensation cannot just be limited to reimbursement for loss and damage; compensation must extend to other dimensions of victims’ lives—for example, providing education and health care in the long term (De Greiff, 2009). Compensation of victims is beneficial in principle to help victims live their daily lives and it is an expression of sincerity, which shows the victims that the government and society are aware of the importance of the pain of the victims. Furthermore, it is a lesson that teaches the government to avoid using violence because the next new government also has the duty to compensate the victims. Care should be taken that restitution is not made as a replacement for truth and justice; if so, instead of showing care and understanding toward the victims, it might be a mechanism of the rulers to silence the victims and undermine the justice of the society (Borzutzky, 2007).

Sixthly, institutions which bore responsibility for violence or oppression must be reformed. These institutions often include the military and defense institutions, intelligence agencies, the national security council, police, courts of law, and educational institutions. The reforms will weaken these institutions’ powers and prevent these institutions from perpetrating both direct and indirect violence. Reforms to responsible institutions also prevent impunity. Institutional reform also builds trust between all citizens and their public institutions (International Center for

Transitional Justice, 2014). Manuela Nilsson (2010) stressed that the most important component of peace is reform of the security sector to prevent these organizations from forming barriers to the democratization process, and to make these institutions deal with future problems in more creative ways. The country most cited for its success in creating reconciliation through military reform is Argentina, which enacted reforms both during the democratic period of Raúl Alfonsín (1983 to 1989) and Néstor Kirchner (2003 to 2007). Chile has also been held up as a model for its success in reforming the judicial institutions since the end of the 1990s after the regime of Augusto Pinochet. The result of reform in both countries is the strong ability to deal with the past and consolidate a democratic system. Therefore, both countries are recognized among numerous academics in the field of reconciliation.

Seventhly, a place of remembrance needs to be created and maintained for society. With such a memorial, the open wounds of past suffering can heal. Mutual recognition can be achieved, and the memorial can serve as an illustration of how future violence can be prevented. The memorial can be in the form of museum, memorial site, film, song, poem, an annual commemoration ceremony, the traumatic exhibition, forgiveness day, national peace day, and so on.

These seven components of reconciliation are very important for sustainable reconciliation. The components, however, have no significance if both sides of the conflict still regard their former enemies as an evil or even inhuman. If these views are still pervasive in society, the conflict will remain, and victims and perpetrators of past violence will be unable to live together peacefully. Successful reconciliation relies on the human empathy (Halpern & Weinstein, 2004). Below, I consider the reconciliation implemented by the post-coup military government of Thailand in 2014 and 2015 in the context of these seven tenets of successful reconciliation.

RECONCILIATION AFTER 2014 COUP D'ÉTAT

The National Peace and Order Maintaining Council (later changed to the National Council for Peace and Order, NCPO) led by General Chan-ocha launched the coup against PM Yingluck Shinawatra's government on May 22, 2014, two days after having declared martial law and promising not to launch a coup. In the immediate aftermath of the coup the military government continued to enforce martial law and announced a nationwide curfew from 22:00 until 05:00. General Chan-ocha immediately announced his policy to create reconciliation in the country after the coup, and continued to use the stated need for reconciliation to justify the overthrow of the previous government. General Chan-ocha also claimed that the government was building real and genuine democracy for Thailand (Fuller, 2014a). He stressed in the beginning of 2015: "In Thailand we are now 99.99 percent democratic" (Sifton, 2015).

While the general spoke of reconciliation and democracy, martial law remained in place for nearly a year. In April 2015, the military government cancelled the martial law, and instead implemented the 2014 Interim Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, Section 44 gives the PM unhindered power over all branches of government. Under Section 44, the PM has total power "for the sake of the reforms in any field, the promotion of reconciliation and harmony amongst the people in the nation, or the prevention, abatement or suppression of any act detrimental to national order or security, royal throne, national economy, or public administration, whether the act occurs inside or outside the kingdom."

In light of PM Chan-ocha's claiming more power through Section 44 while still insisting that he is putting Thailand on a path to true democracy, the military government's attempts to create reconciliation should be scrutinized.

In particular, four practices that are at work simultaneously should be considered in greater depth. These are 1) creating a surveillance Kingdom, 2) obliterating political opposition and threatening and hunting of people with opposing views, 3) dismantling the history of the Red Shirt movement, and 4) organizing entertainment to "return happiness" to the Thai people as a form of distraction.

The Surveillance Kingdom

Based on the tenets of reconciliation outlined above, reconciliation cannot occur in a climate of fear and surveillance. Fear and surveillance are hallmarks of an authoritarian regime. In an authoritarian state, the political powers create a de facto police society to ensure that people do not resist the power or even think about resisting. The success of a totalitarian ideology lies in its ability to destroy human nature itself, because it potentially has the power to end human action, freedom, and the inherent human capacity to think (Arendt, 1958). The success of an authoritarian regime is also achieved through spreading fear and causing dissenters to engage in self-censorship.

Since the 2014 coup, surveillance has been used by the military government to exercise power through networks that include the state apparatus and private citizens who support the military takeover. These factions mutually keep an eye on and investigate the behaviors of those who are out of order or who question the coup and the continued military rule. In addition, if these power networks discover information, they will report to the NCPO directly. These methods cause the opponents of the military to feel constantly fearful and to self-censor in order to ensure their own safety. Those who express their disagreement in public or who are reported to have done so in private, including on social media, have been imprisoned and subjected to "attitude adjustment" for seven days as allowed

under martial law. Those who have undergone such attitude adjustment report that security officers follow up and inspect their behavior, especially online, long after the encounter. Those who are held and subjected to attitude adjustment are required to sign statements that they will refrain from political activity, and they must receive permission before travelling, both domestically and internationally.

The military government has been very clear about its intentions to surveil citizens and to encourage supporters of the government to report on those in their social circles. Somyot Pumpanmuang, a deputy commissioner general, announced to the public that if citizens find symbolic actions or expressions in any circumstances, including on Facebook or elsewhere on the Internet, they should take photos and send them to the Royal Thai Police. If those photos lead to arrests and prosecution, the informants will be rewarded 500 baht (\$18 US) for each photo. Similarly, a high ranking police officer announced that if any person “likes” any expression opposing the military coup on Facebook, even this can be regarded as an illegal act (“Rewards of 500 Baht,” 2014). The military government even made claims well beyond their capabilities in order to create fear by warning that citizens who protested against General Prayuth on the *Line* instant messaging application could be arrested. They claimed that though there are over 40 million people texting every day, the government can monitor all of them; eventually, the official office of *Line* in Japan refuted the Thai government’s claims.

Because overt political statements were expressly forbidden under martial law after the 2014 coup, many citizens who opposed the seizure of power expressed themselves through symbolic actions. Many of these actions caught on and were repeated, but once these behaviors were surveilled, they all were outlawed. The military was quick to ban all gestures that could be interpreted as being anti-coup. For example,

in June 2014, the military outlawed the act of showing the three-finger salute popularized as a protest gesture in the *The Hunger Games* movies, which were playing in theaters in Thailand at the time. Many Thais had adopted the gesture to opaquely indicate their opposition to the coup. Similarly, some students gathered to read George Orwell’s *1984*, clearly referencing the “Big Brother” surveillance state to register their distaste for the military tactics. They were arrested and dragged off their feet (Thai E-News, 2004; MatichonTV, 2014), prompting some foreign governments to warn their citizens not to bring this book into Thailand (iLaw, 2014a). An online game that mocked the dictatorship, *Tropical 5*, was banned by the military government. Even the gesture of covering the mouth has become politically offensive; in June 2014, a high-level police officer in charge of security affairs said that covering the mouth is regarded as a political crime. In addition, the government has stressed that village heads, in their capacity as civil servants, should keep an eye on citizens within their jurisdictions at sub-district and village levels.

Attempts to surveil the people who use social media as a space for opposing the authoritarian regime has taken interesting forms. For example, currently, the Royal Thai Army has cyber soldiers that investigate people who have different views from the government or criticize the military online. These cyber soldiers use aliases and different accounts and their daily work involves tracking the movement of people all over the online world. They track what people post, share, and “like.” The Royal Thai Army has also announced job vacancies for those with expertise in hacking (people who have the capacity to break into servers). There are many of these positions in the military, and they are paid \$2,000 to \$2,500 US per month, a hefty salary in a country where the minimum wage is approximately \$10 US per day (\$300 per month). Currently, the army is creating a Cyber Center to

carry out surveillance of the people who oppose the military government (“Army cyber contest,” 2015). In addition, Suwaphan Tanyuwardhana, Minister Attached to the Prime Minister’s Office, said, “the punishment will be increased for those who use the internet to damage security or disturb the peace and for people who access sensitive information on national security” (“Interview with Suwaphan Tanyuwardhana,” 2015, p. 8). Tanyuwardhana claimed that the security office is following people who express their opinions on websites and other media and warned that all parties should remain silent because the government is trying to move forward along the roadmap laid out by PM General Chan-ocha. This just continues with Chan-ocha’s own comments. Most recently, the general said, “If anyone is a loudmouth, we will put a bandage on it” (“General Prayuth threatens people”, 2015). These claims, moreover, have more substance than the junta’s claims to be able to monitor the *Line* messaging application. Importantly, the cabinet in August 2015 gave the green light to the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology (MICT) and other relevant agencies to push ahead with a process to implement a “single gateway” internet system and to speed up the process of reducing the multiple gateways that access the worldwide Internet to a single one. The goal is to increase the efficiency of the state’s surveillance system before the end of the 2015 fiscal budget. Assistant Professor Jittat Fakcharoenphol, a lecturer of Computer Engineering at Kasetsart University said, “What is frightening about the single gateway is giving absolute power in surveillance, filtering and restriction of access to information to the government” (“Thai Authorities to Step Up Surveillance,” 2015, par. 3).

Certainly, surveillance is not the only advantage the military sees in the single-gateway solution. The military government has consistently attempted to increase its control of the information flowing into the country by

blocking access to many websites such as Human Rights Watch, many domestic websites, and the Facebook pages of many who have expressed opposing political views. The military banned the book *A Kingdom in Crisis: Thailand’s Struggle for Democracy in the Twenty-First Century* by Andrew MacGregor Marshall (iLaw, 2014a) which was released in 2014.

In addition to state surveillance, supporters of the military regime have been encouraged to surveil and report on anyone expressing opposing views against the military government and the monarchy, and many have done so with great zeal. Although these witch-hunt movements are limited to a few groups, they have impacted Thai society. For example, a group called “Garbage Collection Organization of the Land” which has adopted the slogan “We are watching you,” insinuates that people with different views are garbage. PCAD mobs and ordinary right wing people who support the continued rule of General Chan-ocha prime minister also watch citizens who do not agree and believe it their duty to inform the government. These groups are stark reminders of previous eras of surveillance in Thai history, such as the Village Scout Movement, which was a right wing movement that was complicit with the government in killing students during the 1976 Student Massacres in Thailand (Bowie, 1997). These groups are also comparable to *Securitate*, the largest secret unit in the history of Romania, which during Romania’s authoritarian communist regime spied on citizens and surveilled those opposed to the government ideology (Matei, 2008).

Additionally, when citizens organize community activities, even those which are unrelated to views of the government, unrelated to former PMs Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra, and unrelated to the Red Shirts, the army insists on being informed beforehand so that nothing happens without the watchful eye of the military (McCargo, 2015). The military must approve these activities before they go

forward, and the majority of activities are not approved. For instance, in Krabi, a province in southern Thailand, the locals protested against the construction of a coal-burning power plant. The military invaded the homes of the protest leaders. In Kalasin, province in the northeast, citizens protested against drilling to survey for natural resources. The military suppressed the protest and restricted the participants' movements. In Nong Khai, a province along the Mekong River, people initiated a forum for exchange about threats in the Mekong region, such as hydroelectric dams, potash mines, the special economic zone project between Thailand and Laos, and the Waste Electric Power Plant. More than 10 soldiers, dressed both in uniform and in civilian clothing, came to surveil the forum. They took pictures with their telephones of all participants. In Loei, a province in the northeast, soldiers actually harmed participants in a protest against a mineral mine. Later, students attempted to make a news report on the mine protests, but the military insisted that an authorization letter had to be obtained from the army before the news could be released, so that the military stays informed about everything ("Military Tightly Monitors," 2015). In addition to suppressing political speech, the army has also suspended all elections for village councils and village leaders, with the stated intention "to keep from having conflict in the village while the country is creating reconciliation" (par. 3).

Surveillance is not limited to political activities, however. Currently, soldiers have open access to universities, and can enter undercover, dressed in civilian clothes, to conduct surveillance if they choose. Soldiers largely patrol at faculties related to politics, especially faculties of Political Science and Law. There have been reports of soldiers sneaking in to listen to seminars and take pictures of people who express liberal views. In addition, the military requires that universities inform the military of academic activities, so that they can be

monitored by the military (Tuansiri, 2015). The Office of the Higher Education Commission, the organization overseeing universities all over the country, formally informed all universities that lecturers must oversee the activities of students and keep them from opposing the government. If a university allows students to protest against the government, the rector and lecturers will be held responsible. As Col. Wintai Suwaree, Deputy Army Spokesman said, "In society, lecturers have the important role to surveil their students; if you are students, you have your lecturers as your commander; if you are the soldier, you also have your commanders. If you are wrong, your commander must be warned and punished, no exception for lecturers" (Srikhao, 2015, par. 8). The military consistently attempts to enforce militaristic obedience in other aspects of Thai society and regards the PM General Chan-ocha as society's ultimate commander.

Surveillance and intimidation are not only carried out physically, but also it attempts to penetrate the minds to control the thoughts of the people. People have to adhere to the military ideology. Throughout 2015, the Internal Security Operations Command has observed villages around the country, especially in the north and northeast which are the areas where many Red Shirt members and supporters live. In north and northeastern provinces, the military carried out the "One Thai Heart" project, and forced villagers to join in the events. At the gatherings for the One Thai Heart project, people must watch patriotic videos that celebrate the nation and the king, and the military reiterates messages to the people to stop political activity. Videos present a glorified history of how Thailand lost some of its territory to neighboring states, and attempts to fortify people's love for and loyalty to their country ("Internal Security Operations Command," 2014). This project attempts to survey the ideas of the people who support the Shinawatras and it tries to distance the local people from them.

Additionally, the Internal Security Operations Command has continued to surveil in local communities and to forbid the media from doing its work. A Mass Media Relations project was organized to keep local, provincial, and national mass media from broadcasting, printing, or promoting views critical of the government. The government has continuously surveilled members of the media who criticize the government, and PM Chan-ocha once said, half joking, that those who reported stories critical of the military government might be killed. Pravit Rojanaphruk, a journalist from The Nation Media, was detained incommunicado by the military twice; once in 2014 and once in 2015. He said that the army came to his house when he was not at home, and that his movements were tracked through Twitter, Facebook, and by his phone signal. When he used his phone or the Internet, the army knew where he was. He said, “I know after I was detained twice that the army knew where I used my phone or the Internet in Bangkok. This made me feel unsafe” (Srikhao, 2015, par. 6). It is clear that many media are followed and surveilled like Rojanaphruk was. In addition, the government announced that if any media wants to conduct polls, it is free to do so, “but if the polls oppose the government, that is not allowed” (Haworth, 2015, par. 16). Consequently, the polls carried out by organizations which support the authoritarian regime resulted in more than 80% support for the government in all polls (Haworth, 2015).

Surveillance and coercion were expanded into schools and other institutions which are susceptible for the reproduction of ideologies. These arenas look like pure, naïve and neutral places (Althusser, 1971), and can thus be manipulated. Shortly after the coup, the military government announced “12 core values of Thais” and ruled that these values must be recited daily by students at schools. These 12 values must also be incorporated into existing curricula at all levels, including in higher education. The content of these values focuses on conservatism and the

maintenance of “Thainess.” Everyday soldiers visit some schools to teach discipline and instill values of nationalism, religion, the monarchy, and the “12 core values” to students. Furthermore, the government has required that the already existing subject called “Civic Duty” must now focus on teaching students that movements against the government do not constitute “Thainess” because “whoever causes chaos in Thailand or disrupts peace and order should not be recognized as Thai, because Thais do not destroy each other” (Ashayagachat, 2015, p. 2). Not everyone accepts the military’s attempts to infiltrate schools with such ideology. Nattanan Warintarawet, a student activist and proponent of democracy, handed in a blank test paper with the reason: “I do not accept a tyrannical dictator of morality” (Ashayagachat, 2015, p. 2).

The military government wants all Thais to strictly abide by its rules of conduct and speech, and furthermore not to ask any questions about the military government’s legitimacy and/or the widespread violations of human rights. Although the government refers to reconciliation continually, its behavior—causing fear and uncertainty, especially among the prior victims of violence, supporters of the Red Shirts and the Shinawatras—contradicts the basic tenets of reconciliation.

Obliteration of the Political Opposition, Threatening, and Hunting

In addition to surveillance and enforcing the promotion of pro-military ideology, the government has engaged in attempts to further obliterate the political opposition by threatening and hunting political opponents and leaders of the former opposition, the Red Shirts. The military’s tactics include widespread violations of human rights.

After the coup, the military government immediately began to summon politicians and political activists. The first summoned were 23

Pheu Thai Party members, Yingluck Shinawatra, and her cabinet. On the day the coup was carried out, they were summoned to appear before the military the following day. This was the beginning of the “attitude adjustments.” All those summoned were made to sign agreements promising that they would not engage in any political activities, including, but not limited to, protesting or opposing the coup. For those that did not answer the summons, arrest warrants were issued and they were arraigned in the Military Court (a single court in which the judges are military officers). Those who were abroad and refused the military’s order, requesting instead to stay abroad, had their Thai passports cancelled. Pavin Chachavalpongpun and Somsak Jeamteerasakul who are the esteemed academics were among those whose passports were cancelled. Next, the government revoked the passports of former *Pheu Thai* members who were critical of the government, like Jaturong Chaisang. Seven *Pheu Thai* members were detained for seven days for criticizing the government. For example, former Minister of Energy Pichai Nariphaphan, Watana Muangsook, and Karun Hosakul were forbidden to participate in any political movement. They were threatened with the revocation of their passports and the prohibition of all financial transactions.

Additionally, requiring that Yingluck Shinawatra refrain from political activity as a private citizen was not enough. The military-stacked National Legislative Assembly (NLA), most of whom have expressed themselves as the Shinawatras’ enemies and had joined the PCAD, voted to impeach Yingluck, and also accused her of corruption. They ruled that she must stay out of politics entirely for five years. The impeachment and the public accusation of corruption stem from her rice-pledging scheme, which had paid farmers above-market prices for their rice crop with the intent to then sell the rice on the world market when prices rose. The scheme was riddled with problems, including the government’s inability

to pay the farmers and the fact that much of the rice went missing before it could be sold by the government. The NLA charged that Yingluck was responsible. In addition, Thailand’s Office of the National-Anti Corruption Commission has charged Yingluck with criminal corruption for the scheme. While those charges have not been resolved in court, the NLA has wasted no time in branding her administration as corrupt. It is a part of the military plan to exclude her not only from politics but also from many rural people’s hearts. Within a week of her impeachment, a former foreign minister, Surapong Tovichakchaikul, and Singhtong Buachum, her lawyer and former *Pheu Thai* MP, were summoned for attitude adjustment by the military after they criticized the NLA’s decision. General Prayuth said threateningly, “if someone criticizes the government, they are acting illegally. We will call them to talk and if they continue criticizing, I will use my authority to cancel their travels and prohibit them from going abroad, and I will audit their accounts and expenditures. For this, we have a range of punishments to fit their offences” (“Prayuth Chan-ocha asks all Thais to reconcile and not resist the government,” 2014).

A week after the impeachment, a Thai court sentenced the leader of the Red Shirt movement, Jatuporn Prompan, to two years in prison for defaming former PM Vejjajiva. Less than one week passed before the junta summoned Nattawut Saikua, another core Red Shirt leader in Bangkok, along with Cherdchai Tontisiri, a Red Shirt leader in Khon Kaen, for attitude adjustment. Thailand analyst David Streckfuss said of these attempts to quash any opposition to the military regime, “it seems to be part of a larger plan by the Bangkok establishment to silence and force aside their vocal critics [...]. They are attempting to weaken the infrastructure of pro-democracy forces ahead of when an election is eventually held” (Associated Press, 2015, par. 7).

In just the first three months after the coup, the military had summoned 570 people, arrested

235 people who protested against the coup, and prosecuted 77 people, 17 in Criminal Court and 60 in Military Court. Six months after the coup, the numbers had risen to 626 people summoned and 340 people arrested. It is difficult to ascertain the number of people jailed because the information is not made public; however, the Military Court gave seven people from Chiang Rai three-month jail sentences for protesting against the coup. In addition, 19 people have been prosecuted for *lèse-majesté*, with at least 15 people jailed so far. This does not include more than a thousand people who were arrested and yet not mentioned in the news. Most of these are in alliance with the last government and/or are democratic and human rights activists (iLaw, 2014b). Amnesty International's (2014a) report, "Attitude Adjustment—100 Days Under Martial Law," called the widely and arbitrarily issued summonses of citizens a clear violation of human rights and an obvious tool of political intimidation. The report quoted victims who claimed that while they were held by the military after responding to a summons, the military had violated their human rights through beatings, death threats, mock executions, and attempted asphyxiation. Similarly, Kritsuda Khunasen, a Red Shirt activist, said she had been tortured during military detention and soldiers suffocated her with a plastic bag and a piece of fabric, covering her head until she lost consciousness, after which time she was placed in a zipped body bag. A female officer bathed her and took off her trousers so she could use the bathroom. On one occasion she heard a man's voice in the room while she was naked and blindfolded in the bath. Her words were "I consider this sexual harassment" (Srikhao, 2015, par. 5). When journalist Rojanaphruk was arrested, he said, "I was treated as if I were a prisoner. For example, I was blindfolded to be taken to a location I don't know where and I was locked in a room with the windows covered without ventilation. There were TVs and CCTV cameras all the time and

in the bathrooms all ventilation openings were blocked" (par. 9).

One year after the military seized power, there have been a total of 779 people summoned and at least 476 people detained; 209 of those were arrested because they expressed their ideas in public and 78 people were arrested on suspicion of partaking in violence. Of the arrested, 125 people have been prosecuted in military court and 46 in civilian court. Currently, there are still at least 98 of these people in prison and the military, demonstrating its close ties to the monarchy, has charged 53 people on suspicion of *lèse-majesté* (iLaw, 2015). The government has also converted the Eleventh Military Circle, a military camp in Bangkok, into an ad hoc prison to house political detainees. This is called the "Ad Hoc Prison of Nakhon Chai Si."

Students and universities have also been targets of the military's threatening and hunting techniques. The army has arrested lecturers and students who organized academic activities. University lecturers have no academic freedom and there have been at least 38 activity interdictions against planned academic forums (Somchai, 2014). Four students in Bangkok put up stickers at their university stating, "We don't want a military state, we don't want a coup d'état" and "Let the people decide." The army stepped in and handcuffed the students violently before blindfolding them and taking them to a military camp. The military threatened that four graves were dug waiting for the group of students. A student at Khon Kaen University, the most famous university in Northeast Thailand, was arrested, owing to his memorial performance on the 40th anniversary of the October 14, 1973 student uprising against the dictator PM Thanom Kittikachorn; the student was accused of *lèse-majesté*, which usually results in a 5-to-20 year jail sentence. Furthermore, the army arrested five Khon Kaen University students who protested a visit by PM Chan-ocha; the army also threatened to expel them from the university, and intruded

into their houses. The military forbade students at Thammasat University to organize a ceremony in remembrance of the 38th anniversary of the October 6, 1976 student massacre at Thammasat. Worst of all, it appears that some soldiers who were out of uniform threatened to rape one university student who protested in favor of democracy in Bangkok. She gave an interview saying that she was quite scared because the threat of rape had come after she had been followed by the plain-clothed soldiers, as if they were trying to provoke her to get really angry (“Military Court Sentences 7,” 2014).

There are numerous examples of the military jailing and intimidating students and faculty at universities across the country. Military officers attacked students who organized protests on the occasion of the first anniversary of the coup on May 22, 2015, and incarcerated 14 of them. Soldiers have intimidated politically active students at their homes. For example, soldiers came to the house of one student to tell the student’s aunt to forbid the student from participating in political movements, and threatened that if the student did not refrain from political activities, they would come to see the student’s father. They reportedly said, “Take good care of your child and wait until the situation has calmed down before expressing your opinion.” In another incident, three uniformed soldiers visited the parents of Chonticha Chaengreo, a female student who was jailed for opposing the coup. The soldiers asked the parents how they were raising their child, that she came to oppose the government, and asked why they did not control her. Assistant Professor Sawatree Suksri, a female lecturer at the Faculty of Law at Thammasat University, reported that soldiers came to see her at home five times and three times at the university and called her on the phone three times (Srikhao, 2015).

This process of threatening and hunting has even extended to a woman, Nattathida Meewangpla, who is a key witness of the mass

killings in May of 2010, in which soldiers fired on civilian protestors. Soldiers in military uniform and two other military personnel in civilian clothing came to her house in a van and a sedan, arrested and detained her incommunicado, citing martial law. They offered no explanation for the arrest (“Military Allegedly Detains,” 2015). Later, the army accused her of *lèse-majesté*. Video footage and pictures of the protests in 2010 in which Red Shirt supporters were killed by soldiers and police clearly show that the military violently suppressed the people; despite the calls for reconciliation that date to the aftermath of those protests, the truth is still subject to suppression. Key evidence has been destroyed, witnesses intimidated, and even now, the military is constructing a new truth in which no soldier shot any civilians. This revision of the truth is incompatible with the truth telling requirement of true reconciliation.

The government has also made threats against the media, officially declaring that the mass media must not criticize its work, and that if media outlets do publish criticisms, they will be shut down immediately. General Chan-ocha also warned journalists against investigating his wealth and that of his brother, a high-ranking military officer, saying those who asked questions on the subject should beware of their safety (“General Prayuth Said His Brother Has Done No Wrong,” 2014). In February 2015, General Chan-ocha declared he had the power to close media outlets. In March 2015, when asked how the government would deal with journalists who did not adhere to the government’s line, he took an even harsher position and said “We’ll probably just execute them” (“We’ll Probably Kill Journalists,” 2015, par. 1). In the same month, he said, “I was asked by a reporter: What are the results of the government’s work? I almost punched the person who questioned me in the face” (Haworth, 2015, par. 10).

These examples demonstrate that obliteration of political opposition, and the continued

threatening and hunting of critics is part of the military government's tactics for reconciliation. Thongchai Winichakul, a professor of history at Wisconsin University, and Tyrell Haberkorn, a lecturer at the department of political and social change at Australian National University, stressed that, "For the military government, reconciliation means the elimination of apparent social or political conflict. Attitude adjustment means accepting indoctrination by the junta obediently" (Winichakul & Haberkorn, 2015). Despite the military's claims that these tactics constitute reconciliation, the elimination of conflict through repression is incompatible with true reconciliation. Richard Bennett, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Director, concluded that freedom suppression in Thai society causes a "spiral into silence," saying, "denying the space for debate and jailing peaceful critics through the repressive *lèse-majesté* law will do nothing for the 'national reconciliation' that the authorities have promised" (Amnesty International, 2014b). Similarly, Freedom House has included Thailand in its list of countries where people's freedoms have been significantly curtailed. Brad Adams, the executive director of the Asia division of Human Rights Watch, said in September 2015, when the military was still summoning many people for attitude adjustment that, "Thailand's climate of fear is intensifying" (Petty, 2015, par. 15). A climate of fear, in which the ruling party acts with impunity against the citizens represents continued conflict and violence. It is incompatible with true reconciliation.

Removing the Red Shirts from Thailand's Social Memory

The third way in which the military attempts to carry out reconciliation is by removing the Red Shirts from Thailand's social memory. Dismantling the history of the Red Shirts is an attempt to rebuild the Thai nation in a particular mold that serves the military and its

allies' interests. This is why "dismantling" and "forgetting" are such a big part of the military's current efforts; dismantling is an important precondition for forgetting (Frazier, 2007). As Ernest Renan (1996) argued, "forgetting is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for (the principle of) nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial" (p. 45). Similarly, Stanley Cohen (1995) coined the phrase "social amnesia" to describe

a mode of forgetting by which a whole society separates itself from its discreditable past record. This might happen at an organized, official and conscious level—the deliberate cover-up, the rewriting of history—or through the type of cultural slippage that occurs when information disappears. (p. 13)

Although dismantling and forgetting can sometimes be necessary, as scholars have noted, it can also threaten the conditions necessary for reconciliation. After the coup, the Shinawatras, leading former government ministers, and the Red Shirts were targeted for suppression and silenced. In addition, the military deliberately dismantled reminders of them. For instance, military officers removed democracy supporters' village signs in North and Northeast Thailand. The mass media were forced not to present news about the Shinawatras ("Thai PM Orders Media," 2014). There were seizures of some political magazines that had Yingluck on the cover and also, at the beginning of July 2014, there regularly appeared on the news military officials visiting markets and shops to take away all stickers supporting *Pheu Thai* and Yingluck. In the middle of September 2014, the Education Ministry revised a social science textbook for students, which had deleted Thaksin from Thai political history (Fuller, 2014b).

In addition, as part of its crackdown on the media, the military blocked the official Red Shirt website and other well-known sites that advocate democracy. Furthermore, the government closed satellite TV channels of the Red Shirts and community radio stations which are seen as the most important channels of information for a large number of Red Shirt supporters. On June 29, 2014 in Chiang Mai, five armed soldiers in a Humvee arrested a dried-squid vendor who wore a red shirt with the image of Red Shirt leader Jatuporn Prompan, and forced him to take off the shirt immediately (“Troops in Humvee,” 2014). On December 8, 2014, in northern Thailand at Mae Hong Son, five military officers removed a booth selling strawberry wine because the wine bottles had a Thaksin look-alike figure on the label (“Military Dismantles Tent,” 2014).

In 2015, the government forbade Red Shirt members from organizing a ceremony commemorating the fifth anniversary of the 2010 massacre, stopped Red Shirts attempting to organize an event on the one-year anniversary of the May 22, 2014 coup, and did not allow events commemorating the ninth anniversary of the 2006 coup against Thaksin. The Red Shirts were also kept from holding press conferences or exchanging ideas related to the drafting of the constitution by the NLA, even though the military government has allowed Yellow Shirts and PCAD supporters led by Thaugsuban to hold press conferences in support of the government and the drafting of the constitution. Further, General Chan-ocha stripped Thaksin Shinawatra of his rank as police lieutenant, claiming that Thaksin’s police rank was a threat to national security and, hence, necessitated urgent action (“General Prayuth Invokes Section 44,” 2015). The army also took down signs that people in the north and northeast had made to celebrate the birthdays of Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra.

The government not only attempts to erase the memory of the Red Shirts, it also draws a picture of the Red Shirts as evil. For instance, in

the aftermath of the August 17, 2015 bombing, in which 20 people died and many hundreds were injured in Bangkok, the government spokesman issued a press release that there is no need for investigation because the act was done by political losers who want to ruin an atmosphere of happiness in Thailand, referring to the Red Shirts (“Bangkok Bomb at Rajprasong,” 2015). Later, the investigation focused on the Uighur people being sent back to China by the Thai government.

Dismantling history and forcing amnesia with regard to historical events in Thai society is ongoing. It resembles what Paul Connerton (2008) called the most brutal form of forgetting—“repressive erasure”—which usually is done after the outright destruction of all enemies, and which will leave no record of the enemies. This is a model of absolute oblivion, which is characteristic of absolute dictatorship—the creation of a new state and destruction of the old narratives. As we have seen, based on the seven required tenets of reconciliation, absolute dictatorship and the denial of history are incompatible with true reconciliation.

Returning To Ironic Happiness

The post-coup reconciliation discourse of the military government, to the grief of the democracy supporters, is presented in the slogan, “Returning Happiness to Thailand.” The meaning of happiness here is a painful reminder of the past, as it goes back four years to a time when the government and the military used the slogan “Returning Happiness to Bangkokians,” after the 2010 massacre of Red Shirt protestors. The military government may believe that offering happiness is likely to divert the citizens’ attention from politics to cheerfulness and delight. Since the coup, there have been a number of peculiar happiness offerings, as described below.

At the end of May 2014, the military organized reconciliation activities in Pathum Thani, a province in central Thailand, which included

many games and activities such as karaoke, along with offerings of free haircuts, free food and drinks, and lurid dance performances by some military officers (“Military Activities: Reconciliation,” 2014). Further, in June, the government organized a return-to-happiness night of music, food, a pageant of handsome boys and girls dressed in military uniforms, and a show of military horses. This event was replicated in one province after another all over the country. The government also ordered a large number of soldiers to hold musical performances by the army orchestra. Several nurses were also on hand to offer blood pressure checks to passers-by. And at the events, transvestites gave cabaret performances in Pattaya, an important seaside tourism destination of Thailand. These events were held under the slogan “Bringing Happiness Back to Thais” (“Rewards of 500 Baht,” 2014). In July, the government organized the event called “Creating Reconciliation and Returning Happiness for the Nation,” which was attended by more than 1,000 people. Songs of admiration for the monarchy were sung. In August, during reconciliation activities in Nakhon Nayok, another province in central Thailand, there were many girls in two-piece outfits performing coyote dancing to entertain the audience and create a joyful atmosphere which was aimed at reconciliation (“Reconciliation with Nakhon Nayok’s,” 2014). The military also composed a song, “Happiness Returns to Thailand,” which is played daily on television and radio at 6 p.m., and twice on Fridays, both before and after PM General Chan-ocha’s weekly television address, also titled, “Return Happiness to Thailand,” which is broadcasted on all public channels. Schools are required to play patriotic songs after the usual ceremony paying respect to the Thai flag at 8 a.m., and also at noon (“Ministry of Education Forces Schools,” 2014). Every student also now has to record their moral activities in a goodness log book, and teachers award points for these deeds. The military’s policy requires

primary and secondary students to collect these points as part of their educational record. All students have to recite the “12 core values of the Thai people,” which include “Love for the nation, religion and the monarchy”; “Preserving Thai customs and traditions” and “Discipline and respect for elders and the rule of law.” The government created free downloadable stickers for the *Line* application for Thais under the slogan “returning happiness to all Thai people” (Haworth, 2015).

In addition to promoting patriotic songs and reconciliation events, the government has organized a number of giveaways. The government encouraged people to watch the film “The Legend of King Naresuan” part V, “Elephant Battle,” an ahistorical film that is nonetheless widely believed, to encourage patriotism, and gave away free tickets to screenings. The government distributed 20,000 free cinema tickets for mothers and children to watch movies on National Mothers’ Day on August 12, 2014. The government also arranged the broadcast of the 2014 World Cup on public channels, using government funds to pay for the deal. In late July, the government organized a free concert, “Love Songs, Fun Songs, Happiness Returns to People,” in order to create reconciliation. Many famous singers participated, including Thongchai McIntyre, one of the most popular singers in Thailand.

After the reconciliation slogan “Returning Happiness to Thailand” had been used for several months, the government changed it to “Fulfill Happiness,” which it has used since December 2014. Under this new slogan, almost 40,000 soldiers were commanded to clean temples, community buildings, and canals. The government also requested that shopping malls all over the country discount goods and supplies for citizens to buy to fulfill their happiness during the New Year holidays. The government also arranged a “Thai Identity in four Regions” performance to create reconciliation, which

presented culture, music, and food from each of Thailand's four regions, and was held throughout the country in 2015.

Many people have doubts about how this return of happiness relates to reconciliation, and the meaning of "happiness" has been diluted, a fact not lost on the international community. John Oliver, host of *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* on HBO, mentioned these returning happiness campaigns to mock the Thai government (poipoi709, 2014). Doug Bandow (2014), a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, said, "in Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's view the primary path to happiness is obeying his dictates...and... Thailand's people are to be happy at bayonet point" (par. 5). In an ironic twist, when the media asked government officials whether these "Returning Happiness" activities constitute populism, PM General Chan-ocha has defended what the government is doing, saying it is not populism, but Thainess-ism ("Prayuth Uses "Thainess-ism"," 2014), a crucial distinction for an elite that has long despised the populist policies of the Shinawatrass.

Once again, this reconciliation strategy of the military government is incompatible with reconciliation. The offerings of "happiness" and entertainment amount to tokenism and dismissal, not compensation or restitution as required by true reconciliation.

Although the military government has always affirmed that after the coup Thailand will move toward reconciliation, true reconciliation will be impossible to achieve in this context because the current reconciliation as promoted by the military is incompatible with proven principles of reconciliation. The meaning of creating reconciliation of the government is, therefore, free-floating and disconnected from its true meaning without substance, principles, and self-paradoxical. And reconciliation stands for anything that benefits the government politically. An examination of the junta's actions under the banner of reconciliation since the May 22, 2014

coup reveals that the four strategies the military employs to enforce reconciliation are intimidating, and have complicated true reconciliation. The surveillance kingdom penetrates throughout the country, and obliteration of political opposition, threatening, and hunting are clearly polarizing the nation. These tactics leave no space for different opinions, and allows for the neglect of victims' human rights. Reconciliation should also come from remembering history and dealing with its consequences, rather than dismantling it; letting citizens keep their memories is their right. Certainly, genuine happiness must come from liberty, democracy, and self-determination, not from activities imposed by the military. Undoubtedly, reconciliation in its current categories will lead Thailand further down a path of political and social polarization, with no hope of real reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

The conflicts in Thai society that began after the 2006 coup reached their climax during the mass killings of Red Shirts in 2010. The conflict between opponents of Yingluck Shinawatra government supporters in 2013 and 2014 led to the failed election in February 2014 and a military coup on May 22, 2014. This coup and its aftermath have again broken bonds within Thai society. Although many Thais desire to resist the coup, they have been forced into silence under martial law and Section 44 of the 2014 interim constitution. The government is simultaneously working to create a surveillance Kingdom to obliterate the political opposition by threatening and hunting critics, to dismantle the history of the Red Shirts and erase them from Thailand's social memory, and to promote a return to happiness. Together, these activities show that the military's version of reconciliation is leading Thai society away from true reconciliation. The military believes that reconciliation means

only a lack of political opposition and a perfect adherence to the same values. Furthermore, the military promotes the idea that those who do not accept this version of reconciliation are not really Thai.

Reconciliation is now operating like a mythology, and society is being asked to believe and forced to act as if reconciliation can occur at the bayonet-point. The continuing power and outsize influence of the military, evidenced by the military's continued political control and ever-increasing budget, weakens the prospects for true reconciliation, because without democratization, reconciliation is not viable. The reconciliation activities of the current military government is polarizing society and creating additional hatreds among groups. Unquestionably, this situation undermines the reconciliation process both in the short term and long term. In order for Thai society to undergo true reconciliation, the first thing that must happen is the return of power to the people, and the transformation of Thailand into a democracy of civilian supremacy. Undoubtedly, unless there is a real transfer of power from the military and its elite backers, to the citizens, even a future election will not represent a transition to democracy (Welzel & Inglehart, 2008). Only in an atmosphere of democracy in which everyone can express themselves freely, protected by the rule of law, can Thai society begin to experience or even consider reconciliation.

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