

## The Democracy Monument as a Symbol of Democracy in the 2023 Thai General Election

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Received 7 July 2024; Received in revised form 5 December 2024

Accepted 6 March 2025; Available online Day Month year

### Abstract

The Democracy Monument in Bangkok has already been a longstanding symbol of democracy for the Thai people. Aside from being a symbol and spatial structure at the heart of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, this monument also served as a repository of historical events and a platform for contentious politics. Due to spatial agencies, those bodies with the capacity to shape and reshape their built environment, the meaning of the Democracy Monument has transformed into complex layers through time. The monument recently became a symbolic site and emblem for the political parties' campaign during the 2023 Thai General Election. Based on this premise, this paper interprets the democracy the parties promised and unpacks the monument's significance in the recent historic election. By analyzing multiple news articles and social media posts documenting the campaign trail and through personal observations of the author, this work looks at how the political parties defined Thai democracy through the lens of the Democracy Monument. Through their occupation of the monument, this study reveals their constructed representation of the Democracy Monument and the kind of democracy they adhere to. Undeniably, the Democracy Monument is central to Thailand's struggle for democracy and continues to be a potent space for those seeking a fully democratic society. Understanding the political parties' concept of democracy through their use of the Democracy Monument and the vivid imagery they left in the structure during their respective campaigns contributes to the democracy discourse, promotes accountability, and allows the people to remember their promises of democracy.

### Keywords

Democracy, Thai Democracy, Democracy Monument, 2023 Thai General Election

## Introduction

Despite the democratic challenges and complicated outcome of the government formation, the 2023 Thai General Election certainly brought some leadership changes in Thailand, ending the military regime of former Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. Around 39 million Thai people, or about 75 percent turnout, participated in the May 14, 2023 election and voted for the 500 legislators who formed the government along with the 250 military-appointed senators (Office of the Election Commission of Thailand, 2023). This historic election was the second election under the 2017 Constitution of the Prayut administration and recorded a high turnout and level of engagement among Thai voters.

The election, which employed the first-past-the-post method, elected the members of the House of Representatives, consisting of 400 representatives chosen by each constituency and 100 members of the party-lists selected through proportional representation. It also witnessed various political parties coming from different political spectrums and advocacies. 67 parties and 1,898 candidates participated in the proportional representation election, and 4,781 candidates from 70 parties registered for the constituency (Mishra, Rahman, & Rosales, 2023, p. 44).

Among the political parties which contested for the elective positions were Pita Limjaroenrat's progressive and left-wing Move Forward Party, the latest incarnation of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's political vehicle, the Pheu Thai Party, General Prawit Wongsuwan's Palang Pracharath Party, the conservative and oldest party in Thailand, the Democrat Party, and Prayut's United Thai Nation Party (Sawasdee, 2023, pp. 46-48).

The campaign period officially started during the registration of candidates from April 3-7 and ended on May 13. Political parties employed a range of strategies, from traditional to modern ways of campaigning. To capture the voters' attention, they adopted house-to-house visits, campaign posters and paraphernalia distribution, motorcades with loudspeakers, political jingles, digital and social media platform campaigns, and public rallies (Mishra, Rahman & Rosales, 2023, p. 60; Sawasdee, 2023, p. 46).

Political parties strategically utilized various prominent venues for their public rallies, including the Democracy Monument located at the heart of Ratchadamnoen Avenue in Bangkok (see Fig. 1). Constructed in 1939 during the administration of Plaek Phibunsongkhram, also known as Phibun, this monument, known in Thai as *Anusawari Prachathipatai*, was built to commemorate the coup and the bloodless democratic revolution of 1932. It served to legitimize Phibun's power and authority, reinforce nation-building policies and modernization efforts, and strengthen the influence of the People's

Party (*Khana Ratsadon*) (Turingan, Monument and Movement: The Democracy Monument and the 2020 Student Movement in Thailand, 2023, p. 2).



**Figure 1** Democracy Monument.

**Source:** Author's own work.

The Democracy Monument embodies a variety of intended representations, including elements reflecting the Constitution, the military, and nationalism. At its center stands a round turret topped with golden offering bowls, called *phanwenfa*, which hold a sculpture of the Constitution intricately carved into a folded document. Surrounding the monument, the wings, relief structures, and cannons symbolize militarism and nationalism. The relief structures at the base of the wings recall the historical events leading up to the 1932 revolution and illustrate the narrative of the People's Party (Turingan, *Movements and Monuments: Student Movements for "Democracy" in 1973 and 2020 and Public Monuments in Thailand*, 2023, pp. 54-64).

The structure initially symbolized a young, fragile democracy aligned with the Western school. It represented a democracy rooted in constitutional monarchy, parliamentary democracy, liberal democracy, and military influence. While Phibun acknowledged the constitutional monarchy system, the intended meaning of the Democracy Monument distanced itself from the monarchy, as it lacked monarchy-related symbols and featured the image of *Arun*, which served as an anti-Chakri emblem of the *Khana Ratsadon* (Peleggi, 2017, p. 137; Turingan, *Movements and Monuments: Student Movements for "Democracy" in 1973 and 2020 and Public Monuments in Thailand*, 2023, p. 80).

The complication of Western and Thai ideas, contradiction of meanings, and irony of the creation of the Democracy Monument under an authoritarian leader, contributed to its vulnerability to being challenged and re-interpreted over the years. The symbolic meaning and interpretations of the monument were challenged over time by spatial agencies such as Thai institutions and political groups. Spatial agencies transform this structure according to their interpretations by using it as a backdrop and symbol of their activities. By occupying this monument, the structure also contributes to the complexity of Thai democracy that this structure embodies. Various movements had already challenged the intended meaning of the monument, added layers of meaning to it, and turned this into a space of contentious politics (Turingan, *Movements and Monuments: Student Movements for "Democracy" in 1973 and 2020 and Public Monuments in Thailand*, 2023, pp. 83-85).

Chatri Prakitnonthakan (2008) highlights this interplay between memory and power in Thailand by examining Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the site of the Democracy Monument. He demonstrates how this avenue embodies the shifting power dynamics within the nation. Prakitnonthakan argues that the architecture of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, including the Democracy Monument, serves as a form of "architectural language" that provides insights into Thailand's historical narrative. Additionally, he explores how various groups have sought to shape the collective memory of Thailand by maximizing the avenue's physical landscape.

For example, the Democracy Monument became a symbolic venue for various political demonstrations in Thailand, such as the October 1973 and May 1992 protests against the military dictators, the peak of polarized politics between the anti-coup group "Red Shirts" or United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) and the broad alliance of conservatives and royalists known as "Yellow Shirts" or the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), and the re-emergence of the student movement in 2020. These political events demonstrate that the monument has become a symbolic site of protest and an instrument in Thai politics.

## **Research Objectives**

With the recent general election in Thailand, political parties have engaged in the discourse surrounding Thai democracy and the Democracy Monument, transforming this structure into a symbolic site and emblem for their political campaigns. Based on this premise, this paper explores the concept of democracy that these parties pledged to the populace as they occupied this landmark. It examines the monument's significance for the political parties and their representation of it during this historic election.

The Democracy Monument is central to Thailand's ongoing struggle for democracy, serving as a powerful venue for those advocating for a fully democratic society. Analyzing how political parties interpret democracy through their engagement with the monument and the striking imagery they have inscribed there during their campaigns enriches the discourse on democracy, fosters accountability, and helps the populace recall their commitments to democracy.

## Conceptual Framework

This study discusses democracy in Thailand by linking the relationship between the Thai political parties and the Democracy Monument. It explains the political parties' democratic ideology and promises based on their use, occupation, and constructed representation of the Democracy Monument during the 2023 General Election.

To explain the concept of democracy, this paper follows the traditional and Western school discourses of Thai democracy. According to (Mektrairat, 2020, pp. 64-93), there are two political discourses on Thai democracy—the Traditionalist School of Thought and the Western School of Thought. The "Traditionalist School of Thought" argues that democracy has long been part of Thai society through the Thai kings. Under this school, democratic institutions in Thailand had traditionally existed before the 1932 revolution because of the consent given by the Thai political community to the kings.

The concept can be traced back to the Sukhothai Kingdom's paternalistic model, demonstrating how Thai kings governed with the political community's consent. This idea was further refined during the Rattanakosin period through the Buddhist principle of *aneknikon samosonsommut*, which justified Thai monarchs' existence based on the governed's mutual consent. Subsequent monarchs built on this foundation, asserting that their rule was legitimized by the collective agreement of the political community they served.

The traditionalist school was firmly established from the early 20th century until 1932. However, it encountered considerable challenges from the Western school of democracy after the revolution of 1932. Over time, it gradually adapted to the Thai context, harmonizing with the rise of bureaucrats and military figures. Today, this school significantly influences the behavior and discourse surrounding Thai democracy.

On the other hand, the Western school of democracy emphasizes Western ideals that emerged during the 1932 revolution, often referred to as the "New Age of Hope" for the Siamese people (Mektrairat, 2020, p. 84). This form of democracy has its roots in the mid-to-late 19th century, anchored in the principles of the People's Party (*Khana Ratsadon*), which played a pivotal role in overthrowing the absolute monarchy

and establishing constitutional rule in Thailand in 1932. The Party's principles drew from French liberal teachings and the universal ideals of reason and progress, advocating for freedom, equality, fraternity, the separation of powers, and the rule of constitutional law.

This school contends that the paternalism proposed by the traditionalist school does not represent a genuine democracy and underscores the significance of constitutional laws within a democratic framework. Over time, this perspective emerged as a compromise between the Thai monarchy and the People's Party. In addition to the constitution, discussions surrounding Thai democracy emphasize the vital roles of parliament and political elections. The contrasting perspectives of the traditional and Western schools regarding Thai democracy are particularly evident in the recent election, especially in how political parties interpreted the democracy symbolized by the Democracy Monument.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

Aside from the discourses on Thai democracy, this study also follows the literature on monuments and contentious politics to demonstrate a strong connection between Thai political parties and the Democracy Monument. Monuments like the Democracy Monument are structures built to commemorate an event or person. These spaces also contribute to the collective memory of the people. However, the people's social and historical consciousness can also affect the monuments' fate. New narratives can emerge and challenge the established collective memory towards the structures (Hamilton, 1990, pp. 101-111). For example, the meaning of the monuments can transform depending on how the public and mass media perceive them. They can be active participants in social events because of their ability to communicate with people through collective memory. By participating in the present and the future, monuments can further develop the collective memory or reconstruct the past (Kulišić & Tuđman, 2009, p. 132).

Monuments' participation in contentious politics and social movements is essential in constructing the narrative and collective memory of the people. Through popular political demonstrations, these structures transform into venues of democracy. They serve as spaces for political resentments and grievances. According to Sewell (2001, pp. 55-56), spatial agency in contentious politics pertains to the ability of social movements, revolutions, and demonstrations to actively change the intended meaning of spatial structures, such as public monuments, and influence how society perceives them.

The works of Kim Dovey (2001) and Koompong Noobanjong (2018) thoroughly explore the architectural design of the Democracy Monument, as well as the power

dynamics and political narratives embedded within its structure. In his analysis, Noobanjong employs discourse theory to investigate the monument's political significance and engagement with the Thai public. He builds on the theoretical framework established by Dovey, who examines built forms and the concept of framing places. Dovey develops the notion of framing places in the case of Bangkok, demonstrating how the Democracy Monument and its associated collective memories have influenced—and continue to influence—the ongoing struggles for Thai democracy.

Thongchai Winichakul (1999) also resonates with this perspective. In his keynote address at the 6th International Conference on Thai Studies in Amsterdam, he highlighted how the political meanings of the Democracy Monument have evolved, shaped by competing narratives surrounding Thai democracy. Through the lens of public memory and monuments, the Democracy Monument embodies the narrative of 1932 Thai democracy, which has become contested and is often overshadowed by the 1973 Thai democracy demonstrations. Given the current state of Thai political society, it is essential to examine how contemporary circumstances contribute to the discourse on Thai democracy.

Thai democracy is typically defined through a statist perspective, as political actors utilize it to bolster their regime's legitimacy and hegemony. In his work, Michael Kelly Connors (2007, pp. 1-3) cited the late Prime Minister Kukrit Pramoj and his claim that “democracy” was not evident in Thailand. Despite the interest of people and scholars in discussing it, the term was seldom used and often interpreted negatively between 1932 and 1981.

The following works mentioned are beneficial in discussing Thai democracy in this study. As noted in the points above, the relationship among the monarchy, bureaucratic elite, and military with Thai democracy serves as a common denominator in the existing sources. Democracy is consistently explained from this viewpoint. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this approach and perspective, it would also be beneficial to deepen our understanding by examining its definition through the lens of spatial agency and the use of the Democracy Monument.

The Democracy Monument, as a symbol of democracy, continues to be challenged and contested because of the active involvement of spatial agency in contentious politics. This contention also mirrors the complicated concept of Thai democracy and the democratic struggles of the Thai people. Since its installation, the Democracy Monument has witnessed many administrations and social movements, making its meaning prone to reconstruction. How the different political parties view this monument and define their notion of democracy based on how they used this structure in

the recent election would reveal how and to what extent those perceptions and meanings have changed. Analyzing the political parties' conceptions of democracy through the lens of the Democracy Monument, alongside the vivid imagery they imprinted on the structure during their campaigns, enriches the Thai discourse on democracy and its connection to the monument.

## Research Methodology

This paper presents a qualitative case study that examines the concept of democracy and the various representations of the Democracy Monument crafted by different political parties during the 2023 General Election. By analyzing both local and international newspaper databases in English and Thai, along with online publications, the study identifies seven political parties that engaged in activities at the Democracy Monument during the campaign period. These parties include the Democrat Party (*Phak Prachathipat*), Move Forward Party (*Phak Kao Klai*), Pheu Thai Party (*Phak Pheu Thai*), Palang Pracharath Party (*Phak Palang Pracharath*), United Thai Nation Party (*Phak Ruam Thai Sang Chart*), Thai Chana Party (*Phak Thai Chana*), and the New Palang Dhamma Party (*Phak Phalang Tham Mai*). By utilizing a diverse range of news articles and social media posts that documented the political parties' campaign activities from April 3 to May 13, 2023, this study examines how these parties interacted with the monument through their public campaigns, speeches, interviews, activities, and press releases conducted in its vicinity.

The data gathered from these narratives aligns with secondary sources and existing literature regarding the ideologies and backgrounds of Thai political parties. This research also examines how these parties symbolically incorporated the monument into their campaign narratives, highlighting their interpretations and articulations of democracy as viewed through the lens of the Democracy Monument. Furthermore, the study goes beyond document analysis by including the author's firsthand observations and experiences during the election period, enhancing the research with valuable contextual insights.

This paper employs thematic analysis based on the traditional and Western discourses of Thai democracy as a methodological framework to analyze the collected data. This approach identifies underlying themes and discourses encapsulating the political parties' varied interpretations of democracy. This analytical approach reveals the multifaceted nature of Thai democracy discourse, highlighting the connections and relationships between the political parties and the Democracy Monument. The identified themes not only illuminate the parties' strategic use of the monument in their campaigns



but also provide a broader understanding of how democracy is constructed and contested within the contemporary Thai political landscape.

## Result and Discussion

The Democracy Monument served as a backdrop for discussions on democracy as political parties campaigned around this landmark during the 2023 General Election. By engaging with the monument, these parties reflected both traditional and Western schools of Thai democracy, linking their messages to the significance of the Democracy Monument.

### Traditional School of Democracy

The Democrat Party (*Phak Prachathipat*), founded in 1946 by former Prime Minister Kuang Aphaiwong, is Thailand's oldest functioning political party. It holds a conservative and pro-market or liberal economy stance. The party's popularity has dwindled in recent elections due to various factors, such as defections of their members to other parties and their past actions and stances on issues. From being a party that fought for democracy in the past, it allied itself in 2019 with the pro-military junta parties and supported Prayut in the prime minister position. In the 2023 General Election, the Democrat Party led their campaign with the slogan "Creating jobs, generating revenue, developing the country" under the leadership of former Commerce Minister Jurin Laksanawisit (Thornton, 2003, p. 403; Sawasdee, 2023, p. 48; Krisanaraj, 2023).

The party's conservative stance can also be seen in how they view Thai democracy and the Democracy Monument. On April 26, 2023, the Democrat Party launched their "4 dos" and "3 don'ts" campaign at the Democracy Monument to clarify their stand on political and social issues and commitment to democracy (see Fig. 2). While gathering at the monument, the party led by Jurin explained on the day that corresponds to their party number (the 26<sup>th</sup>) that the Democrat Party vows to do four things: (1) preserve and strengthen the constitutional monarchy, (2) forge an honest democratic system, (3) create a "full-stomach" democracy by building up wealth, skilled people, and a strong nation, and (4) eradicate illicit drugs through an eye-for-an-eye approach and support for the use of cannabis for medical purposes but not for a full liberalization policy. They also voiced the three things they would not do: (1) repealing Section 112 of the Criminal Code or the *lese majeste* law, (2) illicit drugs, and (3) corruption. Carrying their party banner with the number 26 on April 26, they campaigned from the Democracy Monument, went to its nearby areas, shouted "Democrat Party, Number 26, Jurin for Prime Minister," and invited the people to exercise their right to vote



Based on these premises, the Democrat Party's concept of democracy at the Democracy Monument closely aligns with the traditional school of democracy while articulating certain democratic rights, including opposition to corruption, the importance of voting rights, and the promotion of economic and social welfare for the populace.

The occupation of the Democracy Monument by the Democrat Party in 2023, as part of their campaign, is not a new occurrence. This landmark has historically served as a venue for their demonstrations. In the 1970s, the party advocated for democracy and an end to military rule. They supported the student protests of 1973 against the dictatorship of Thanom Kittikachorn. Similarly, in the early 1990s, under the leadership of Chuan Leekpai, the party united with students and pro-democracy advocates to oppose coup leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon and the National Peacekeeping Council (NPKC) (Thornton, 2003, p. 403).

During the political crisis from 2013 to 2014, which led to the ousting of former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and the establishment of a military junta under General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the Democrat Party also actively demonstrated at the Democracy Monument. At that time, the Democrat Party, led by parliamentary representative Suthep Thaugsuban, occupied the Democracy Monument to protest against Yingluck Shinawatra's government (Dems Seize Ratchadamnoen Ave, 2013).

Several leaders and supporters of the Democrat Party were engaged in the anti-Thaksin coalition known as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), often referred to as the "Yellow Shirts." This coalition comprised urban elites, conservatives, royalists, business groups not aligned with Thaksin's patronage network, and various non-governmental organizations. They actively took part in a series of demonstrations in Bangkok, including the Democracy Monument, where they accused Thaksin of lacking loyalty to the monarchy and called upon the late King Bhumibol to appoint a new prime minister in 2006 (Rojanaphruk, 2008; Pye & Schaffar, 2008, pp. 40-41).

The actions taken by the Democrat Party since 2005 led the Thai public to doubt its commitment to democracy and solidified its conservative stance. Ironically, despite its name, the Democrat Party appears inconsistent in practicing democratic principles in Thailand (Campbell, 2013). Historically, the party was known for its opposition to the progressive faction of Pridi Phanomyong and its support for the royalists. It transitioned to more liberal democratic values and the rule of law when it fell out with the military in the 1960s. Its leaders were once lauded for their economic reforms by the international community, especially during the Asian Financial Crisis and the adoption of Thailand's 1997 Constitution. Over time, the party has shifted back towards a more conservative, elitist, and anti-democratic stance, mainly due to its

involvement in often-violent anti-Thaksin movements during the years 2005-2006, 2008, and 2013-2014, boycotted the snap elections called by Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006 and Yingluck Shinawatra in 2014, and endorsed the military coups of 2006 and 2014 (Kurlantzick, 2013; Desatova, 2019).

After 2014, Suthep Thaugsuban stepped down from his position within the party, while former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, who led the Democrat Party from 2005 to 2019, grew increasingly disenchanted with the military junta. Following the party's disappointing performance in the 2019 election, Abhisit resigned as leader, and Jurin Laksanawisit, representing a more conservative faction, succeeded him (Chambers & Waitoolkiat, 2020, p. 159).

The recent occupation of the Democracy Monument by the Democrat Party during the 2023 General Election reinforces its distinctly conservative and traditional perspective on democracy. This action emphasizes the party's view of the Democracy Monument as a symbol of the traditional approach to Thai democracy, mirroring its historical roots and past interactions with this iconic landmark.

### ***Western School of Democracy***

The Move Forward Party (*Phak Kao Klai*), the successor of the dissolved Future Forward Party, is a progressive and social democratic opposition party with a different approach to dealing with the problems of Thailand. As expressed in their campaign slogan, "Choose MFP and Thailand won't be the same," the party pushes for structural changes such as demilitarization, de-monopolization, and decentralization in the country. Aside from being progressive, they are also labeled as left-wing populists who take a firm anti-establishment stance promoting policies such as military reform, abolition of conglomerate monopolies, and the controversial amendment of Section 112 of the Criminal Code (Sawasdee, 2023, p. 47). As with the Democrat Party, the Move Forward Party also has its own take on democracy. The party pushes to restore full democracy as opposed to the partial democracy they claim Thailand has (Krisanaraj, 2023). This perspective is evident in how they perceived and used the Democracy Monument in the 2023 General Election.

On April 4, 2023, the first day of registration for the party-list candidates, the Move Forward Party went to the Thai-Japanese Bangkok Youth Center in Din Daeng, Bangkok, to register their candidacy with the Election Commission. They also participated in drawing lots to decide the number assigned to their party that will appear on the ballot paper (Political parties draw lots to get a number for the election, 2023; 'Ing-

Big Tu-Big Pom-Pitha join in the chance to win the 400 districts ['อิง-บิกตู-บิกป้อม-พิธา'ร่วมลุ้น 400-เขตชิง-เบอร์], 2023).



**Figure 3** Pita Limjaroenrat with the 33 Bangkok MP candidates of the Move Forward Party.

**Source:** Khaosod, 2023

After receiving their number, Pita Limjaroenrat, the prime ministerial candidate of the party, led the motorcade and went around Bangkok starting from the Thai-Japan Youth Center, heading along the route to the Victory Monument, Ari, the Parliament Building, Samsen, and the Grand Palace. They ended the motorcade and stopped at the Democracy Monument to take a group photo with their 33 candidates for the Members of the Parliament (MP) position for the 33 districts in Bangkok (see Fig. 3). Pita explained in his interview at the monument that the party and the candidates already had their number and were ready to introduce themselves to the people, signaling the start of their campaign. He also discussed in his interview the need for the voters to memorize their party number and the numbers of their MP candidates, as it would be crucial during the ballot voting. Pita also explained that their visit to the monument was a symbolic expression of the Move Forward Party conviction that Thailand did not yet have full democracy. They are committed to a full democracy with decentralization, no coup, and an amended constitution. He also reiterated that if there were a democracy, problems could be solved for the future of the Thai people ('Ing-Big Tu-Big Pom-Pitha join in the chance to win the 400 districts ['อิง-บิกตู-บิกป้อม-พิธา'ร่วมลุ้น 400-เขตชิง-เบอร์], 2023; ผักกาดหอม, 2023).

Just outside of Bangkok, Pannika Wanich, a former member of the disbanded Future Forward Party, took the lead in registering Move Forward Party candidates in Khon Kaen province. After receiving their assigned numbers, the candidates held a parade and visited a replica of the Democracy Monument in Khon Kaen (see Fig. 4) (MP

candidates in provinces make obeisance at shrines before registering with EC, 2023). These events highlight the Move Forward Party's intentional emphasis on the significance of the Democracy Monument, showcasing how it is integrated into their election campaign.



**Figure 4** Pannika Wanich with the Khon Kaen MP candidates of the Move Forward Party.

**Source:** Move Forward Party, 2023

Aside from the Democracy Monument in Bangkok, the replica in Khon Kaen has also emerged as a prominent symbol of democracy for the Thai people, particularly in the northeastern provinces. Inaugurated in 1943, this monument has historically served as a venue for festivities commemorating the 1932 revolution. This replica played a crucial role for the People's Party (*Khana Ratsadon*) in instilling the essence of the constitution, the significance of the 1932 revolution, and the ideals of Thai democracy in the minds of the residents of the provinces (Thepsongkroh, 2018; Turingan, 2024, p. 103).

Among the *Khana Ratsadon* monuments, the one in Khon Kaen stands out as the most active structure for democratic movements outside of Bangkok. The Khon Kaen province has also been described as a hotbed of activism, as it served as the primary base for the Red Shirt movement and supporters of the Shinawatra family. Additionally, it was the birthplace of the Dao Din activists, who fervently opposed the military coup in 2014. Since then, the replica of the Democracy Monument in Khon Kaen has evolved into a site for defending democracy, particularly during student-led protests in 2020. The students emphasized the significance of this monument, adding new layers of meaning and reigniting the Thai student movement in the northeast. It became a platform for students and activists to voice their demands and resist government actions (Turingan, 2024, p. 110).

The Move Forward Party also used the Democracy Monument in Bangkok on May 15, the day after the election and when the unofficial results were released, to thank their voters and celebrate their victory. They were joined by a large number of joyful supporters who gathered at the Democracy Monument (see Fig. 5). From the Democracy Monument, Pita Limjaroenrat traveled in a convoy, thanked the supporters, and went to the nearby Lan Khon Muang opposite the Bangkok City Hall. During the party thanksgiving rally and motorcade, Pita emphasized the consensus of support they had received and vowed that he would reform the country. He also mentioned that they would accompany the people to change Thailand together. He also updated the people that they already had 309 parliamentary seats to form a majority government. The crowd made supportive noises and cheered “Prime Minister Pita” during the event. After his speech, the party continued the motorcade and went to the Ban Mo area, Old Siam Plaza, and ended the activity at Sanam Luang (Tens of thousands turn out to celebrate Move Forward's victory on May 16, 2023, 2023; พิธาปลื้ม6พรรค-ยิ่งรับ-เหียน-เขิญ ลุยตั้งรบ. 310-เสียง, 2023).



**Figure 5** Victory Rally of the Move Forward Party at the Democracy Monument.

**Source:** Author's own work.

The Move Forward Party failed to form a government despite placing first in the election. The hope and vibrant emotions that filled the Democracy Monument last May 15 were replaced by anger and disappointment on July 19. The monument once again

became a rallying point for hundreds of people. The activist group, United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD), and the supporters of the Move Forward Party gathered at the monument after the Constitutional Court suspended Pita from his duty as an MP due to the pending ruling on his owned shares in the media firm iTV and when most of the 250 military junta-appointed senators and his political opponents blocked his renomination as a prime minister. The protesters wrapped a banner around the monument's centerpiece that read "Prime Minister Pita, the consensus of the people" (see Fig. 6). Protest leaders addressed the crowd and demanded justice for Pita in the face of political persecution. The rally ended with a mock funeral for the senators and court judges, and the protesters placed cremation flowers into a coffin before dispersing at 10.30 pm (Thailand braces for mass protests after parliamentary 'coup' against Pita, 2023).

Based on how the Move Forward Party deliberately occupied the Democracy Monument during the first days of the campaign period and how they conducted their victory and thanksgiving rally at the monument immediately after the release of the unofficial results emphasized the party's belief in Thailand's lack of democracy and their commitment to restoring full democracy by winning the 2023 election. From the actions of the Move Forward Party as a spatial agency, the 2023 General Election was all about democracy, and their view of democracy in the Democracy Monument is anchored in the Western school of democracy.

During their campaign and how they used the monument to emphasize their core policies of demilitarization, de-monopolization, and decentralization, the Move Forward Party associated the Democracy Monument with the legacy of the *Khana Ratsadon* and the Western style of democracy focused on French liberal teachings and humanist universal rationality and progress, such as freedom, equality, fraternity, separation of powers, and constitutional laws. In addition, by conducting the protest on July 19, the party and its supporters also connected the monument's significance to the Ancient Greek roots of democracy, which word literally means "rule by the people", and Abraham Lincoln's "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," which are also within the concept of the Western school of Thai democracy.

While the Move Forward Party upholds Western ideals of democracy, it operates within the framework of Thailand's constitutional monarchy. In his concluding speech at the Thai-Japanese Bangkok Youth Center in Bangkok on May 12, 2023, Pita Limjaroenrat emphasized that the future leader of the country must tackle systemic challenges, particularly the need to break the cycle of military coups, in order to restore public confidence in democracy. He called for leaders who can effectively navigate



Thailand's unique political landscape, underscoring the importance of respectful interaction between democracy and the monarchy. He expressed his commitment to unify all citizens, regardless of their political views, with a message translated by Chinayos (2024, p.56) in English that resonates as follows:

*Therefore, the next Prime Minister and leaders must be able to work within a democratic system that has a King as the symbolic head. They should delicately handle royal power and status to improve relations between the King and the public...Therefore, I am ready today to serve as Prime Minister for all Thais; whether or not you agree with me, I will still be your Prime Minister.*



**Figure 6** Pita Consensus of the People.

**Source:** Author's own work.

### **Democracy as a Roundabout**

The Democracy Monument is a classic roundabout, intersecting the middle portion of Bangkok's Ratchadamnoen Avenue (*Thanon Ratchadamnoen Klang*) and Dinso Road (*Thanon Dinso*). Roundabouts are sometimes called traffic circles because they allow the traffic to move in one direction around the center to reach one of the roads intersecting it. Regarding road safety and traffic management, roundabouts promote more efficient traffic flow than traditional intersections. They are safer for drivers than traffic signals and stop signs because they force them to slow down and give way to each other (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), 1996). The monument can also be considered a roundabout for democracy because of the importance of compromise, cooperation, and common ground to achieve a functioning democratic system. Drivers passing through the roundabout are like political parties or politicians

passing through the Democracy Monument. They slow down, sometimes compromise, and give way to each other to achieve what they want, keeping traffic flowing smoothly or ensuring democracy works efficiently. While passing through the roundabout, drivers cooperate with their fellow drivers as politicians cooperate with other politicians to find common ground to reach their respective end goals or destinations. However, sometimes, not all drivers will be satisfied with the decisions of their fellow drivers, just as a political party can be unhappy with the decisions of the other parties. Parties can also use the Democracy Monument as a roundabout to proceed to their next or end destination that is not necessarily democratic or could be associated with the traditional school of Thai democracy.

This metaphor stresses how complicated democracy is for the Thai people, especially for the political parties. Since most political parties in Thailand are not ideologically based, the Democracy Monument will just be a symbolic roundabout, a landmark of a vague notion of democracy, without a precise alignment with the traditional and Western schools of democracy dichotomy. Thai democracy here can be understood from a pragmatic perspective, which focuses on practical circumstances and achievable goals. This approach highlights the importance of compromise in politics, particularly in Thailand, where polarized and conservative viewpoints are common and often unavoidable. For example, in the case of the Pheu Thai Party, despite being labeled as a party for democracy and opposition in the recent election, it became a party willing to ally with the pro-military junta parties in the end and sacrifice to have a better outcome for the Thai people.

The Pheu Thai Party (*Phak Pheu Thai*) is the third incarnation of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's political parties. Since 2001, the party has consistently secured the most seats in the general elections. The Pheu Thai Party has positioned itself as one that can reconcile ideological and normative differences, asserting its commitment to democracy while upholding the existing monarchical system. This policy framework suggests that concepts like democracy and loyalty are adaptable discourses molded for political advantage (Pensute, 2023, pp. 212-213). Guided by their campaign slogan, "Think Big, Act Smart for All Thais," the party promised to provide a 10,000 THB digital wallet for every individual aged 16 and over, raise the minimum wage to 600 THB by 2027, create 20 million jobs with income of 200,000 baht per year, turn Thailand into a regional transport hub and host of Southeast Asian festivals and events, and among other policies take a more centrist stance, in contrast to Move Forward, emphasizing economic reforms rather than structural and institutional reforms (Sawasdee, 2023, p.

47; Krisanaraj, 2023). This centrist stance can be seen in how they viewed and used the Democracy Monument during the 2023 election.

On May 13, 2023, the last day of the campaign, the Pheu Thai Party launched a motorcade to all 33 Bangkok constituencies. Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the daughter of Thaksin and Srettha Thavisin, led the campaign convoy that visited the Democracy Monument, the Parliament, other locations on the Thonburi side of Bangkok, communities in Khlong Toei, Pratunam, Silom, Victory Monument, Ratchaprasong Intersection, and Siam Square (see Fig. 7). They identified caravan points between the routes where they had momentarily stepped off the vehicle to meet the people. They chose the Democracy Monument because it was a symbol of democracy, the Parliament because it was a symbol of the legislative branch of the government, and Siam because it was the center of the new generation and the working people. They urged onlookers to vote for Pheu Thai and its candidates and highlighted the party's track record in winning past elections (Thaksin announces return to Thailand in July, ready to enter the judicial process, 2023; All roads lead to Bangkok on eve of Thailand's general election, 2023; Campaigning draws to a close before Sunday vote that could end Thailand's military rule, 2023).



**Figure 7** Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Srettha Thavisin, and the Pheu Thai Party at the Democracy Monument.

**Source:** Taylor, 2023; Pheu Thai Party, 2023

By being the first caravan point for the last day of the campaign, the Pheu Thai Party emphasized democracy as a roundabout and a starting point for addressing other socio-economic problems in society through the representation of the different places they visited, such as the communities in Khlong Toei and the business districts such as the Ratchaprasong and Siam Square area. The party also highlighted the statist and traditional aspects of democracy by visiting and representing the Parliament and the Thonburi area.

In contrast to the Move Forward Party, the Pheu Thai Party did not effectively utilize the Democracy Monument or closely aligned its image with democratic principles during the campaign period. While the Move Forward Party occupied the monument on the first day of party-list candidate registration, the Pheu Thai Party only engaged with the structure on the campaign's final day. This is also evident in how the survey results were presented before the elections. Many voters perceived the Move Forward Party as better reflecting their interests, partly because it increasingly positioned Thai politics as a contest between democracy and illiberalism. Additionally, reports indicated that the Pheu Thai Party lost some support due to voter uncertainties regarding its commitment to democracy (Sawasdee, *Breaking Bonds: Voter-Party Linkages in Thailand's 2023 General Elections*, 2023, p. 359).

It is important to note that, like the Democrat Party, the Pheu Thai Party's presence at the Democracy Monument is not new. This landmark has historically served as a venue for their demonstrations, mainly through their allies, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), also known as the "Red Shirts." Following the 2006 coup, this group emerged as a reaction to the "Yellow Shirts," representing the anti-Thaksin movement. Initially formed in 2007 as a small-scale organization in Thailand's northern and northeastern provinces, the UDD grew to encompass the urban working class and the urban poor, as well as a small segment of the urban middle class, including university students. However, not all of these urban groups expressed support for Thaksin; some were, in fact, pro-democracy advocates. The movement later changed to the National United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (NUDD). In 2008, they opposed Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's government, deeming it undemocratic and illegitimate due to the Democrat Party's lack of a parliamentary majority, relying instead on military backing. The UDD demanded that the Abhisit government return power to the people, a request that Abhisit declined. His administration faced significant protests from the Red Shirt movement in 2009 and 2010, with the Democracy Monument becoming one of the key locations for their demonstrations (Charoensin-o-larn, 2013, pp. 208-210).

This highlights that, although the Pheu Thai Party has not effectively leveraged the Democracy Monument or closely associated its image with democratic principles compared to the activities of the Move Forward Party during the 2023 General Election, the party still frequently incorporates the image of the Democracy Monument in its social media posts. Additionally, the party's longstanding connection with the Red Shirts underscores its efforts to advocate for democracy and suggests the importance of the Democracy Monument to the Thaksin movement.

The Palang Pracharath Party (*Phak Palang Pracharath*), led by General Prawit Wongsuwan, also launched their motorcade in Bangkok on the last day of the campaign to solicit support from the city residents. The Democracy Monument was also one of the locations where the party's convoy passed by. Before starting their motorcade, Prawit Wongsuwan said at their party headquarters that the election day belonged to Thai voters. Their motorcade ended at Wongwian Yai, where the King Taksin statue stands (Sawasdee, 2023, p. 47; Krisanaraj, 2023; All roads lead to Bangkok on eve of Thailand's general election, 2023).

The party has no solid adherence to a specific ideology but vows reconciliation and cooperation, and is known as a conservative populist military-backed party. It comprises veteran politicians from various factions. The Palang Pracharath Party is known for its pledge to "Turn bribes into taxes" and promise to increase the entitlements for state welfare cardholders (Sawasdee, 2023, p. 47; Krisanaraj, 2023; All roads lead to Bangkok on eve of Thailand's general election, 2023). Looking at the route of the motorcade of the Palang Pracharath Party, they used the Democracy Monument as a roundabout to move on to their end destination or goal, the Wongwian Yai. This structure is more closely associated with a traditional and conservative narrative of Thai political history.

King Taksin's monument is on a roundabout, the Wongwian Yai, in the Thonburi area (see Fig. 8). This structure glorifies the traditional outlook on militarism. During the second term of Phibun and after the Second World War, he reinvented himself and developed a new branding to legitimize his authority. The construction of King Taksin's monument became an instrument to showcase his military leadership (Wong, 2000, pp. 104-111).

The decision to conclude their motorcade campaign at the King Taksin monument while merely passing by the Democracy Monument suggests that the latter is viewed as a mere symbol of the democratic elections that guide them toward their ultimate objective, which is an emblem of Thai traditionalism and militarism. This choice of venue on the final day of the campaign reflects a perspective that intertwines

democratic ideals with traditional and militaristic elements. This alignment is not surprising, considering that the party has authoritarian roots and was founded to extend the military regime that ascended to power following Thailand's coup in May 2014.



**Figure 8** King Taksin's Monument.

**Source:** Author's own work.

After its rise to power in May 2014, General Prayut Chan-o-cha's military regime established a framework of appointed institutions to gain support from select military and civilian elites. The Palang Pracharath Party was formed in an ad hoc manner just before the general election in 2019, following the 2014 coup. In that election, the party won 116 seats, becoming the leader of a governing coalition that not only excluded parties connected to Thaksin Shinawatra but also ensured the continued leadership of General Prayut Chan-o-cha (Jatusripitak, 2022, pp. 3-4).

Since 2019, the party has faced significant challenges that tarnished its reputation and credibility. These challenges include failing to fulfill policy commitments, inconsistent performance in by-elections and local elections, and notable internal factional conflicts. Ultimately, the party's loyalty to General Prayut deteriorated, prompting him to form a new party designed to capture the remnants of his support base (Jatusripitak, 2022, pp. 6-7).

During the 2023 general election, former Palang Pracharath Party member Prayut Chan-o-cha participated in the motorcade campaign for his new political party, the United Thai Nation Party (*Phak Ruam Thai Sang Chart*), on the final day of campaigning. The party visited Bangkok's old city area and passed the Democracy Monument, which was merely a transit point. Established roughly one year before the election, the party's campaign focused on moving on with existing measures and promoting peace. The United Thai Nation Party leans much farther right than most traditional parties in

Thailand, adhering to conventional morality and upholding national and cultural values (Sawasdee, 2023, p. 48; Krisanaraj, 2023; All roads lead to Bangkok on eve of Thailand's general election, 2023).

The treatment of the Democracy Monument can be understood through the United Thai Nation Party's distinct interpretation of democracy. Former junta leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha leads the party, emphasizing a viewpoint where the nation takes precedence over democracy. An election poster from the United Thai Nation Party, featured by Khaosod English (2023) on its Facebook page, stated, "You must protect the country, not democracy, for the nation must come first; without the nation, democracy holds no value."

The inclusion of the Democracy Monument in the final-day campaign of the Palang Pracharath Party and the United Thai Nation Party underscores their association of the monument with the importance of elections as a fundamental democratic right for the people. It can be interpreted that, for them, the Democracy Monument is just another waypoint on their journey toward their next destination, rooted in their traditional and militaristic perspectives.

Before the election registration, two minor political parties had already used the Democracy Monument for their campaigns. Although these parties failed to get a seat in the parliament, examining their notion of democracy and how they used the Democracy Monument for the 2023 election reveals a variety of nuanced interpretations. Despite being minor political parties, they also embody the traditional and Western schools of Thai democracy.

On March 4, 2023, the Thai Chana Party (*Phak Thai Chana*) used the monument to officially announce their party and its prime minister candidate, the former labor minister Chatumongkol Sonakul. During their gathering, the party announced that they would aim to tackle poverty and bring a "perfect democracy" to Thailand, which would be entirely unshackled from dictatorship. Established in 2021, this party also declared disinterest in aligning with Prayut and his party even though Chatumongkol had worked with the Prayut administration from 2019 to 2020. Aside from denouncing dictatorship, they also promised a democracy related to equality, social equity, and peaceful society (Thai Chana Party promises 'perfect democracy', nominates Chatumongkol as top candidate, 2023).

Using the Democracy Monument to introduce the party to the Thai public and announce that they will bring a "perfect democracy" free from dictatorship and connected to equality, social equity, and peaceful society suggests that the party defines a general notion of democracy based on the elements of Western democracy and classifies it as

“perfect.” They perceive the Democracy Monument as a symbol of this perfect democracy.

The New Palang Dhamma Party (*Phak Phalang Tham Mai*), led by Dr. Rawee Maschamadol, also launched a motorcade campaign on March 9, 2023 and passed by the Democracy Monument. Their motorcade also ended at King Taksin’s monument at Wongwian Yai. Rooted in the Palang Dhamma Party founded in 1988 by Major General Chamlong Srimuang, this Buddhist-inspired party believes in moral democracy or “Dhamma-cracy” and rejects Western-style democracy. Chamlong was a key figure in the May 1992 People’s Uprising, also known as Black May, which ended in violence and was mediated by the late King Bhumibol. He emerged as the leader of the pro-democracy groups and enforced the resignation of the coup leader General Suchinda Kraprayoon, who assumed the premiership on April 7, 1992. Rawee revived the party without Chamlong in 2018 and backed up Prayut in 2019 for the position of prime minister. Chamlong and Rawee played a significant role in the right-leaning movement against Thaksin Shinawatra, who was also once a member of the Palang Dhamma Party before he founded his Thai Rak Thai (New Palang Dhamma Party announced, 2018; Chamlong’s reincarnated party could support Prayut, rejects ‘Western-style democracy’, 2018; บิ๊กตุ๊กกลับบ้านแล้วมือหายบวมนั่งหัวโต๊ะถกक्रम, 2023).

By concluding their motorcade campaign at the monument of King Taksin, much like the Palang Pracharath Party did during their own campaign, and by passing through the Democracy Monument, the party demonstrated its adherence to a traditional interpretation of democracy. They perceived the Democracy Monument merely as a roundabout and a designated campaign stop, reflecting a conservative and militaristic view of Thai democracy. While the Democracy Monument can be seen as a symbol of democratic rights, such as the right to vote, it aligns with a traditional and conservative understanding of democracy.

## Conclusion

Despite the obstacles and the realities of politics, the 2023 General Election ignited hope for the Thai people, marking a turning point in history following the military junta of Prayut Chan-o-cha. This election also initiated a crucial conversation about the status and significance of democracy in Thailand. This discussion illuminates the political parties’ promises and perspectives on democracy by exploring the role of the Democracy Monument, a potent symbol of Thai democracy. By analyzing the campaigns of various political parties and their use of the monument as a platform, this study reveals the



constructed representations of the Democracy Monument as well as the dominant discourses surrounding Thai democracy that surfaced during the election.

The Democrat Party's commitment to democracy, as expressed at the Democracy Monument, reflects their conservative and traditional viewpoint of both democracy and the monument itself. In contrast, the Move Forward Party's activities at the monument and their representation of it are firmly rooted in a Western style of democracy. Other parties, including the Pheu Thai Party, Palang Pracharath Party, and the United Thai Nation Party, equate the Democracy Monument with the significance of elections as a fundamental democratic right for the people, viewing it merely as a roundabout for their next political agenda. Additionally, the Democracy Monument has served as a platform for smaller parties like the Thai Chana Party and New Palang Dhamma Party, embodying traditional and Western interpretations of Thai democracy. However, these two parties' perspectives warrant further discussion due to limited data and lack of electoral success.

The recent election and the use of the Democracy Monument as the focal point of the study reveal how various political parties interpret democracy and perceive the monument as a symbol of it. However, it is even more significant to explore how these political parties remain committed to their principles and their understanding of democracy, as this perspective will inevitably influence the lives of Thai people and society.

## **Recommendation**

This study can be further developed by examining how the political parties use the Democracy Monument in their social media postings and interviews. It would also be interesting to examine how the political parties view democracy based on different aspects of the 2023 election, not just the Democracy Monument.

## **Note**

This paper is a continuation of my dissertation, "Movements and Monuments: Student Movements for 'Democracy' in 1973 and 2020 Public Monuments in Thailand," conducted at the Thai Studies Center, Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The initial version of this paper was presented at the 15th International Conference on Thai Studies, held at Burapha University in Chonburi, Thailand.

## **Acknowledgment**

This research is supported by the Faculty of History of the University of Warsaw through my postdoctoral research fellowship. NCN OPUS-24 Research Project: "The

Foothold: China, Southeast Asia, and the Global Revolution at the Margins, 1920s–1954” (Project No: 2022/47/B/HS3/02745).

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