STATE-SPONSORED ONLINE DISINFORMATION:

IMPACT ON ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THAILAND

ASIACENTRE

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Impact on Electoral Integrity in Thailand

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

CCA	Computer Crime Act
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCPR	Human Rights Committee
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CIB	coordinated inauthentic behaviour
DOLA	Department of Local Administration, Ministry of Interior
ECT; EC	Election Commission of Thailand
EIP	Election Integrity Project
FFP	Future Forward Party
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICT	Information Communications Technology
(I)NGO	(International) Non-governmental Organisation
IOs	Information Operations
MDES	Ministry of Digital Economy and Society
MIL	Media Information Literacy
MP	Member of Parliament
NCPO	National Council for Peace and Order
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
PM	Prime Minister
PPP	People's Power Party
PR	Public Relations
PRC	People's Republic of China
PT	Pheu Thai
TRT	Thai Rak Thai
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
UN	United Nations
US	United States

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

State-Sponsored Online Disinformation: Impact on Electoral Integrity in Thailand outlines how organised disinformation campaigns or Information Operations have become the latest variable to impact the quality of elections in the kingdom.

Electoral integrity is a vital characteristic of healthy democratic systems. To ensure elections are conducted fairly and without external interference, it requires transparent and consistent enforcement of just election laws and procedures, secure and reliable voting systems, equal and fair access to voting for eligible voters, and accurate results reflecting the will of the people. In the digital age, disinformation has emerged as a new threat to the quality of elections. Disinformation is false or misleading information spread intentionally to deceive people and manipulate public opinion. During election cycles, disinformation campaigns, increasingly state-sponsored disinformation, are being used to discredit political parties and candidates, thus undermining their chances during elections and, by extension, electoral integrity.

Since the kingdom abolished absolute monarchy in 1932, the move towards electoral democracy has been beset with issues of electoral integrity. While Thailand's electoral rules and procedures evolved significantly with the implementation of new constitutions, such legal provisions barely met international standards. Throughout the years, recurring military takeovers have brought down democratically elected political representatives and governments leading to the accompanying rewriting of electoral rules - further diluting electoral integrity. Additionally, demonstrations and protests by pro-royalist groups to subvert democratically elected reformist governments have also contributed to lowering the quality of elections.

With the rising use of the internet and social media from the early 2000s, political parties and candidates adopted new strategies in their electoral campaigns. In the clash between members of the yellow and red shirts in 2006, online disinformation was used to unseat an elected government. Later on, political parties using false information to undermine each other's credibility became a standard campaign practice. Following the 2014 military takeover that installed General Prayut Chan-o-cha as Thailand's prime minister and during the 2019 general election, state-backed disinformation campaigns became clearly identifiable as a government strategy to undermine political opposition and protect itself from anti-coup and anti-junta protests, regardless plausible deniability by government officials. In the background, foreign interference in the form of nondescript endorsement of such authoritarian strategy was also recognisable.

Drawn from past evidence, the report identifies four forms of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns that are likely to impact the quality of the 2023 elections. First, the creation and dissemination of one-sided pro-establishment campaigns. Second, the online harassment of those who hold alternative political views. Third, the spread of disinformation to distort the election process. Fourth, the use of disinformation to polarise and divide society. Together these state-sponsored actions stand to decrease electoral integrity and shape the outcome of the 2023 general election.

To address the impact of state-sponsored disinformation and other forms of disinformation, this report recommends the following multi-stakeholder action: call for a cease to Information Operations; identify, monitor and call out agencies and actors who engage in and endorse disinformation; review the country's regulatory framework to ensure that its provisions are on par with international standards and support electoral integrity; and improve fact-checking mechanisms and provide digital literary to Thai people.

These and other joint efforts can improve electoral integrity in Thailand and strengthen its democratic credentials.

1. Introduction

Since the early 2000s, online fake news has put electoral integrity into jeopardy. This new threat indicates a shift in the factors that curb electoral integrity in Thailand - from national electoral laws that are below international standards, military coups aimed at unseating elected governments, and street protests that pressure reformist governments, to state-sponsored online disinformation, also known as Information Operations, that undermines the electoral system. This report identifies four such types of information operations that are likely to impact and shape the results of the 2023 general election. These are: regime self-promotion; harassment of electoral candidates; distorting electoral information and polarising voters. To address these issues, the report recommends that both government and non-government actors implement measures to stop the negative effects of state-sponsored disinformation and strengthen measures that will lead to the integrity of the electoral process to ensure political stability in the country.

1a. Methodology

This study was conducted between 1 November 2022 and 31 March 2023 and consisted of two stages. In the first stage, the Asia Centre team undertook desk research to frame the research concept, clarify key concepts, and identify the research gaps. To do so, the team reviewed United Nations (UN) documents, such as submissions to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). Electoral laws and regulations that affect election advertising and campaigning were also consulted. Additionally, reports that examined elections and state-sponsored disinformation released by International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs), NGOs, international organisations, think-tanks, media outlets, and statistics published by UN agencies, government departments, and technology companies were reviewed. In the second stage, the research team interviewed eight key stakeholders who shared their expertise and experiences with false information campaigns in Thailand. Their inputs were used to validate the desk research, fill the gaps identified in the desk research and expand on the findings.

1b. Election Integrity and Disinformation

'Electoral integrity' refers to the notion that there should be a set of rules and laws to govern and standardise election practices with the aim of ensuring free and fair elections, forming the basis of a strong democratic system. This involves following a set of agreed-upon international conventions and global norms that are applied universally. These conventions cover the pre-election period, the campaign, polling day, and its aftermath (Garnett et al., 2022; Norris, 2014). One of these conventions, the right to vote, is enshrined in Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (1966). The article also establishes that genuine – free and fair – periodic elections must be held while ensuring universal suffrage, secret ballot, and freedom of expression for the electors. In its General Comment No. 25 (1996), the UN Human Rights Committee (CCPR), under the ICCPR Covenant, recommends states ensure and protect people's right to vote, including the protection of the elector's will from any influence or coercion, the requirement for an independent electoral authority to supervise the electoral process and to ensure that all elections are conducted fairly and impartially, adhering to national and international standards.

Figure 1: Electoral Integrity Key Concepts

| Regular & Periodic | Ballot Secrecy | Universal | Free & Open | Informed Choice |
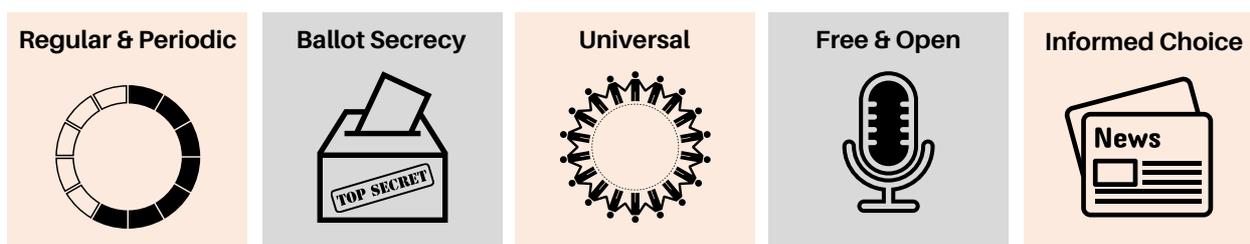
The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2021) emphasises that holding elections in line with international criteria is important to ensure strong electoral integrity. This involves convening regular periodic elections, universal and equal suffrage, secret ballots, and providing the electorate with independently verified news sources to make informed choices. This includes the right to seek and receive information, which allows voters to formulate and express their will freely. However, in the digital era, the spread of disinformation poses a challenge to the quality of information required for informed choices. The OHCHR highlights that such disinformation may violate the necessary rights for free and genuine elections.

Since digital tools and media started intersecting with the political sphere in the early 2000s, the Election Integrity Project (EIP) identifies disinformation as one of the most significant threats to the quality of elections worldwide (Garnett et al., 2022). While disinformation in the context of elections is not a new phenomenon (Fessler, 2020), its impact has been magnified by the widespread availability of social media platforms and other forms of digital communication. Disinformation can take many forms during elections, including the dissemination of fake news to discredit political opponents, misleading voters, manipulating polling data, and conducting fake election monitoring and observation (Bader, 2018). The range of these false information campaigns purveyors is broad and includes ruling political parties that want to discredit their opponents, cyber troops acting on behalf of a sitting regime to strengthen their narrative, and even netizens themselves who want to attack individuals or public figures with different views (Sombatpoonsiri, 2022). This report focuses on the government as a key purveyor of disinformation campaigns (Onwubiko, 2021). Governments, often partially influenced or endorsed by foreign actors, have been known to use false information campaigns to discredit political opposition and protect their interests (Ibid.) The strategic use of disinformation undermines democratic principles, erodes trust in political systems and election bodies, devalues fact-based political debate, and suppresses political participation. These negative impacts can lead to the destabilisation of political environments, increase the potential for electoral-related violence, thwart the will of voters, entrench authoritarianism, and undermine confidence in democratic systems (NDI, 2019).

Disinformation is a growing issue during elections across the globe that impacts the quality of elections of electoral integrity. The EIP (Garnett et al., 2022) which compiles the Perception of Electoral Integrity Index for countries around the world between 2012 and 2021 has tracked this phenomenon. In the Asian continent, it ranked Taiwan with the highest score (82), while Syria was ranked the lowest (19). In Southeast Asia, indexes range from 67 to 29. Timor-Leste has the highest index (67), followed by Singapore (59), Indonesia (58), Myanmar (57),[1] Philippines (48), Laos (48), Thailand (38), Malaysia (34), Vietnam (34), and Cambodia (29).

1 The assessment was conducted pre-coup.

Figure 2: Southeast Asia's Electoral Integrity, Perception of Electoral Integrity Index, 2019–2021
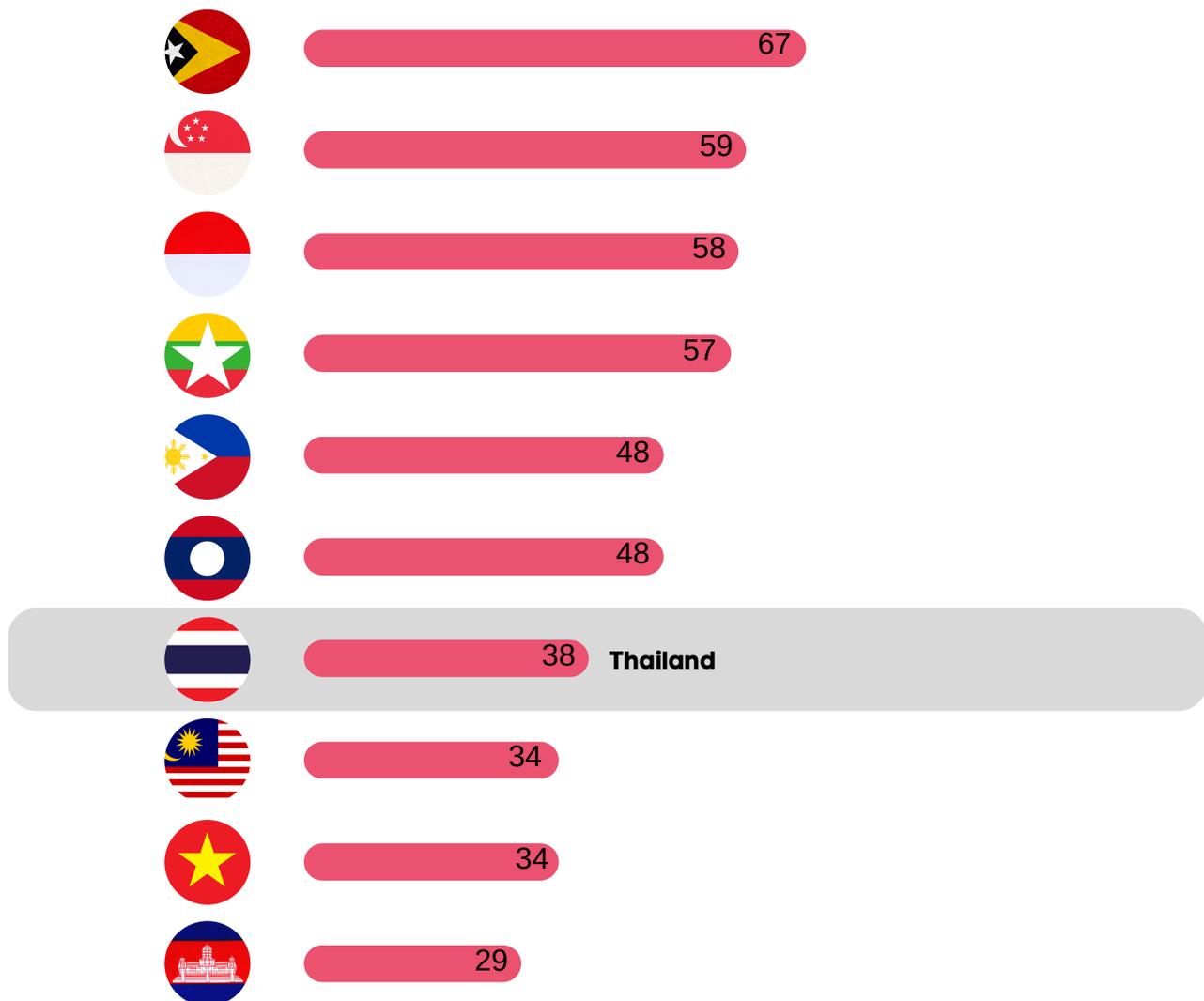
The EIP rankings show that Southeast East Asia has not been an exception to this trend. Online disinformation during elections in the region has increased, as voters increasingly rely on social media and messaging apps as their primary sources of news (Newman et al, 2022). Political parties and candidates across the region have used disinformation as a campaign tactic, including falsely claiming grassroots support, discrediting opponents and journalists, and advancing their positions while downplaying undesirable topics (Funk, 2019). Governments have also used state resources to create false information campaigns that undermine political opposition to increase or at least maintain their political grip. This tactic is known as state-sponsored disinformation, and it is also the main focus of this report.

1c. Elections and Disinformation in Thailand

This section examines Thailand's electoral integrity issues in two parts. The first part discusses how electoral standards from 1932 to the early 2000s before the internet had a significant impact on electoral integrity in the country. It analyses how electoral rules and procedures, military coups, and demonstrations to forcefully unseat democratically elected governments have undermined the role of elections.. The second part looks at developments arising in the internet era and how state-sponsored disinformation, with the tacit support of some foreign governments, has created a new threat to electoral integrity in the country. The use of online political disinformation to influence the electorate is an issue that stands to impact the 2023 elections. Together, the two parts highlight the long-standing problems associated with Thailand's electoral integrity and signpost the shift on how disinformation, particularly state-sponsored information operations, along with electoral rules and practices that do not meet international standards, stand to impact the integrity of the 2023 election.

1ci. Elections and Disinformation in Thailand

Since the establishment of parliamentary democracy in 1932 after the end of the absolute monarchy, the electoral system underwent numerous modifications, including the requirement for candidates to be party-affiliated and the creation of the Poll Watch Committee to monitor the electoral process. A plurality system was also implemented, enabling a candidate to win an election with a simple majority. Single-member constituencies adopted the 'first-past-the-post' system, while three-member constituencies elected candidates with the top three scores as MPs. The Ministry of Interior administered general elections, with the Department of Local Administration (DOLA) managing the electoral process and the Department of Police working to maintain orderliness during elections and curb "deviant" electoral behaviour (Kokpol, 2002). These electoral rules and designs would, in theory, strengthen the quality of elections and the newly implemented democratic system.

Regardless of the establishment of electoral democracy and clear mandates for all elected representatives, electoral rules and procedures, a series of coups d'état, and protests to unseat democratically elected government officials have undermined the role and quality of elections in the country since 1932, halting its democratic progress. Since the abolishment of the absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand has experienced 22 coups d'état by royalist-military forces, with 13 being successful and 9 being unsuccessful (Reuters, 2020). Most of these coups have overthrown democratically elected governments whose political standpoints did not align with those of conservative pro-military political actors, resulting in periods when the military governed the country or, alternatively, underwent periods of military-royalist governments with some roles for elected politicians (Ibid.).

These periodic military takeovers have continuously impacted electoral integrity as the resulting governments do not originate from the consent of the people expressed through free and fair elections. Often the new leaders establish new electoral institutions or suspend existing ones, denying citizens the right to participate freely in the political process since many of their rights – including freedom of speech, assembly, and press freedom – are restricted in an immediate post-coup environment.

The 1997 "People's Constitution" established in principle a more democratic political system in Thailand. Greater authority was placed with the judiciary and the establishment of independent constitutional bodies to ensure impartiality in the electoral process, safeguard human rights and, overall, strengthen electoral

integrity. The constitution created a bicameral parliament with members elected through popular voting, and its primary goal was to increase electoral integrity and advance democratic development (Wongcha-um & Johnson, 2020). However, holding free and fair elections was still challenging due to corruption and lack of transparency issues. In 2001, the first election was held under the new electoral system introduced by the 1997 Constitution. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party won a comfortable majority of 248 out of 500 seats in the House of Representatives and formed a government. Despite allegations of vote-buying and irregularities, the Election Commission confirmed the results as valid. This victory marked a turning point in Thai politics, with TRT dominating the political arena for the next decade (Pongsudhirak, 2005).

However, Thaksin's adoption of populist policies and political strategies led to division within the population, resulting in violent demonstrations and counter-demonstrations to unseat his government, which ultimately undermined the legitimacy of the electoral process. Critics of Thaksin accused him of using ethnic differences for political gain and weakening democratic institutions. Moreover, he faced allegations of restricting the powers of other branches of government, including the judiciary and media, and consolidating power around himself. These actions were said to undermine the system of checks and balances and erode democratic values (Hawkins & Selway, 2017). When the demonstrations were not enough to unseat his government, Thaksin critics tacitly supported a military coup against him. The systematic infringement of electoral rights, the undermining of democratically elected governments, the curtailment of freedom of expression, the restriction of press freedom, and the right-wing narrative of politically conservative Thais led to the view that it was too soon for the country to become a liberal democracy (Phakdeewanich, 2019; Pongsawat, 2019).

Thailand's elections have been assessed as not conforming to international standards for electoral integrity. For instance, a review of the 2019 election (ANFREL, 2019; HRW, 2019) revealed issues with the uneven implementation of electoral rules and procedures, which some regarded as unconstitutional (iLaw, 2020). There were also unusual delays in the announcement of results. Overall, this has led to Thailand scoring poorly in indexes measuring the quality of democracy. Freedom House (n.d) which monitors the evolution of political rights and civil liberties globally since 1973 shows a systematic increase and decrease in its freedoms due to periodic coups d'état in Thailand. On a scale of 0 to 7, where 0 means free and 7 means not free, Thailand's indexes of political rights and civil liberties were 7 and 5, respectively, in 1973. In 1998, after the implementation of the highly relevant 1997 constitution, its indexes for political rights and civil liberties improved to 2 and 3, respectively. In 2007, after another coup, indexes decreased to 7 and 4.

Figure 3: Evolution of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, 1973–2021
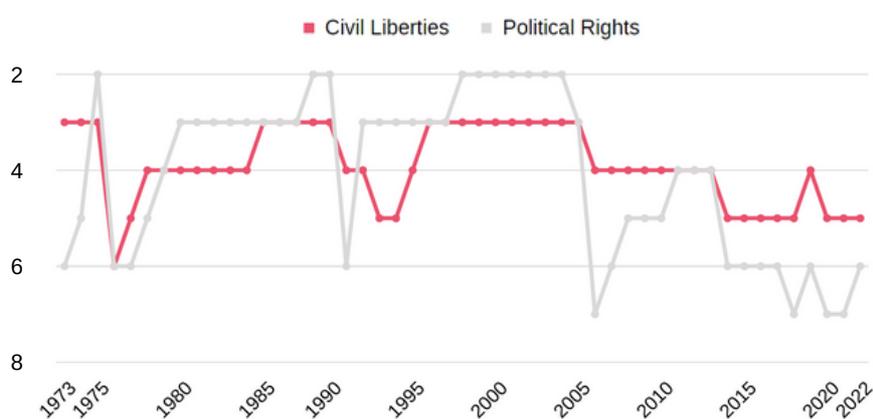
In short, the abolishment of the absolute monarchy in Thailand did not result in meaningful electoral democracy. The kingdom's democratic progress has been hindered by electoral rules and procedures that were not aligned with international standards, the regular unseating of elected governments by military coups, as well as protests and demonstrations that sought to pressure elected reformist governments. Together, these elements impacted Thailand's election integrity in the pre-internet period. The next part of this report focuses on the use of disinformation campaigns as a turning point for electoral integrity in Thailand. More specifically, it shows the shift to state-sponsored disinformation as a new variable that limits the development of electoral integrity.

1cii. Elections Integrity in the Internet Era

The internet era in Thailand began in the early 2000s. In the year 2000, the internet penetration index was low, at 4% (World Bank, n.d.) – see Table 1. Therefore, its impact on the political sphere was rather limited. That is why, at the outset of the digital age, the factors that impacted electoral integrity the most were those of the pre-internet era outlined in the previous section, namely electoral rules below what international standards mark, military coups, and protests against reformist governments. As the internet penetration index started to increase (22% in 2010 and 39% in 2015 (Ibid.)), new features associated with fake news emerged and started to impact election integrity in the country. These features include the transmission of disinformation over the internet and social media to: mobilise protesters by the establishment and pro-military groups to pressure and unseat elected governments; allow state agencies to discredit political parties, its leaders, and candidates in the run-up to, during and after elections; and harass and negatively frame pro-democracy protesters, political parties, their leaders, and candidates. The rest of this section shows the shift from the pre-internet variables that impacted electoral integrity to the rise of disinformation, in particular, state-sponsored disinformation.

Figure 4: Internet Penetration in Thailand, 2000–2023 (%)
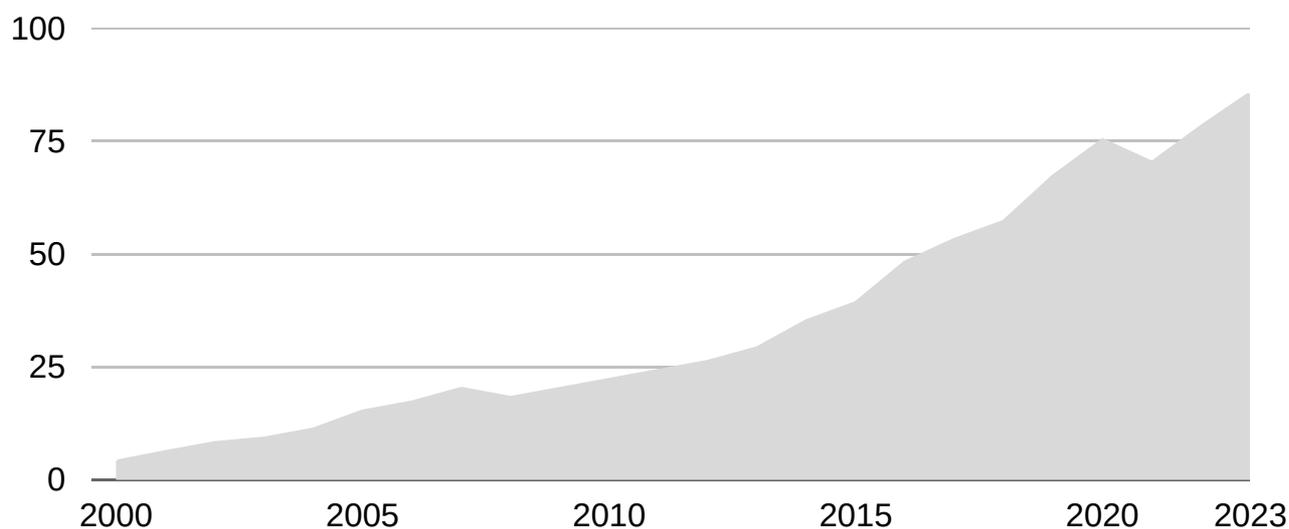
(World Bank, n.d.; We Are Social, n.d.)

The internet's influence on Thai politics emerged during the Yellow and Red Shirts conflict in the mid-2000s. Thaksin's leadership caused a divide between the Yellow Shirts (royalists, middle-class urbanites, and the elite) and Red Shirts (farmers, rural villagers, and working-class urbanites). The Yellow Shirts accused Thaksin of corruption and disloyalty to the monarchy, which resulted in protests and counter-protests by both groups. This political division also prompted Thaksin and his supporters to use the internet for political communication, making it a vital platform for political expression and debates. Nonetheless, the shift towards the use of online methods – disinformation – evolved progressively and, during its onset, the non-digital factors that had contributed to low levels of election integrity in the country prevailed.

Table 1: Eligible Voters, Election Result & Internet Penetration Rate since 1997

Year	Constitution	Eligible Voters (million)	Key Election Result	Internet Penetration Rate
2001		42	Thaksin-led TRT party won 248/500 seats	6%
2005	1997	44	TRT won a landslide victory – 377/500 seats	15%
2006		45	Election invalidated by Constitutional Court	17%
2007		44	PPP led by Samak Sundaravej won 233/480 seats	20%
2011	2007	46	PT led by Yingluck Shinawatra won 265/500 seats	24%
2014		48	Election invalidated by Constitutional Court	35%
2019	2017	51	Prayut elected as PM	67%
2023		52	N/A	85%

(ECT, 2005; IFES, 2006; ThaiPBS, 2019; The Standard, 2019;
Legislative Institutional Repository of Thailand, 2001; 2007; Petcharat, 2022; World Bank, 2023)

In April 2006, Thaksin called for early elections resulting in the TRT winning by a large margin. However, the Constitutional Court nullified the election due to voting booth misplacement. Therefore, interference of the judiciary was critical in undermining the role of the electoral process, leading to political turmoil that would culminate in a new military coup led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin in September 2006. The military dissolved the parliament, suspended the constitution, imposed martial law, and appointed a civilian government until new elections could be held (BBC, 2012; Globe, 2020) – thus stressing the importance of non-digital tactics to unseat a democratically elected government. The coup further polarised the country and exacerbated political divisions (Kongkirati, 2018). In 2007, Thailand held a general election under a new Constitution designed to limit the political power of parties and politicians' capabilities (Hicken, 2007). The military's capacity to rewrite the electoral norms was, as a result, a decisive factor in downplaying the importance of free and fair elections and, by extension, electoral integrity.

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Although the internet penetration kept growing in the late 2000s and the digital sphere was becoming increasingly important – explained below – non-digital developments still took place, which kept preventing electoral integrity from consolidating. In late 2013, Pheu Thai's proposed amnesty bill stirred mass protests across Bangkok and the country. In February 2014, PM Yingluck responded to the political crisis by calling for an early election. The opposition attempted to boycott the 2014 election which was later declared invalid by the Constitutional Court for not being completed within one day throughout the country (BBC, 2014a). In 2014, those events resulted in the latest military coup in the country as of 2023 when General Prayut Chan-o-cha seized power from the caretaker government of Yingluck during that episode of political turmoil (BBC, 2014b).

As the paragraphs above show, electoral integrity in the early stages of the internet era was primarily impacted by pre-internet era elements. However, the digital sphere and, specifically, disinformation, started to play a key role in curbing electoral information. As mentioned earlier, the military takeover in 2006 exacerbated political divisions in the country (Kongkirati, 2018). Under the junta regime, anti-coup websites were censored from spreading information containing messages contrary to the junta's interests, thus preventing citizens from receiving plural and free information to make informed choices. One of those websites, http://19sept.org, organised by the 19 September Network against the coup, was reportedly shut down on the orders of the Information and Communications Technology Ministry (The Nation, 2007).

In 2007, Thailand held a general election under a new Constitution designed to limit the political power of parties and politicians' capabilities (Hicken, 2007). Despite these changes, the People's Power Party (PPP) won the election, replacing the TRT. This was also the time when social networks, especially Facebook, began to emerge, ultimately replacing web boards and virtual community sites as a significant force in transforming Thailand's online environment. With the increased use of digital tools and media, allegations against Thaksin reemerged and spread quickly through the internet. That was especially relevant in the context of the 2007 election and included old issues regarding tax evasion (ANFREL, 2007) and anti-royalty discourses (Likitkijsomboon, 2007; Puapongpan, 2007).

Disinformation campaigns also targeted Samak Sundaravej, a PM from the PPP Party, to create a negative image of him as a politician. He was accused, without grounds, of being in cahoots with Thaksin Shinawatra – who was then in exile – to give the disputed Temple of Preah Vihear to Cambodia (MGR Online, 2008). This issue went through a vote of no confidence, proposed by opposition parties (Prachatai, 2008), which the Samak administration survived (Institute of Public Policy Studies, 2008). During Somchai Wongsawat's premiership, Thaksin's successor and brother-in-law, footage of someone physically reassembling him emerged. In the footage, that person was depicted as being involved in illicit affairs. Even though there was no proof it was him, the footage was circulated virally through the internet, primarily pushed by Yellow Shirt protesters, to demand his resignation (Prachatai, 2008).

After the Constitutional Court dissolved the ruling party PPP, the factional conflict between Yellow and Red Shirts intensified again in 2008. In 2011, a new general election was called by the military-backed PM Abhisit Vejjajiva following the crackdowns on the red-shirt group United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship. The internet was an integral part of that election since digital platforms became the primary means of communication that political leaders and party representatives used to communicate with the electorate. Out of 40 parties competing in the election, most of them had created their websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts to engage with their electorate (Paireepairit, 2012). The Pheu Thai (PT) Party, led by Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's youngest sister, won the election. During the election period in 2011, disinformation included an allegation that PT MP candidates had a connection to "red shirt movement terrorists" (ANFREL, 2011). Further, throughout Yingluck's premiership, hate speech against her populated the digital sphere with sexist messages, including adultery allegations against her to undermine her image (MGR Online, 2012; 2011). Cases of harassment against her person are also exemplified by numerous references to her public-speaking gaffs to convey the message that she is a "stupid woman" (Soccersuck, 2015).

After the 2014 coup, the shift towards state-sponsored disinformation as the central element downplaying the role of elections consolidated further. Nonetheless, it is important to remark on the fact that the new strategies that emerged in the digital era still coexist with non-digital tactics. Under Prauyt's leadership, a new Constitution was adopted by referendum under the military junta National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) in 2017. On the one hand, the new electoral system favoured the military-backed Phalang Pracharat Party and allowed medium and small parties to gain more seats (Sirivunnabood, 2019). In March 2019, the General Elections were held, and Prayut was re-elected as PM.

On the other hand, this election was considered the first social media Thai election, with the internet as a strongly consolidated tool to shape political information during the campaign to disseminate news and information rapidly to a majority of the electorate (iLAW, 2018). With the widespread use of the internet to engage in politics, false narratives about the untrustworthiness of opposition politicians proliferated during the 2019 general election, particularly to harass and frame negatively pro-democracy actors. For example, several disinformation campaigns alleged that the Future Forward Party held republican views and had links to former PM Thaksin (Freedom House, 2019). Notably, Nation TV, a channel with ties to the junta at the time of the election, circulated a falsified recording that purported to show Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the FFP, conspiring with Thaksin Shinawatra, the ousted PM (Freedom House, 2019; Thaitrakulpanich, 2019).

In 2020, Twitter (2020) identified and suspended 926 accounts attributed to the Royal Thai Army involved in Information Operations promoting content that supports the military and the government, while also targeting notable political opposition figures. Leaked documents also revealed a systematic approach involving 17,000 personnel to process tweets and avoid being banned by the tech company (Bangkok Post, 2020a)

The Thai military denied using taxpayers' money to create and use such a number of Twitter accounts (Bangkok Post, 2020a). Deputy Army Spokeswoman Sirichan Ngathong said "the accounts were anonymous and did not belong to the army – which had only its official account." (Reuters, 2020). Col Sirichan Ngathong, a deputy spokeswoman for the army said that the content used online is used to honour the monarchy and promote the army's peacetime missions.

The constitutional amendment bill approved by Parliament in 2021 to modify the election system reinforces the idea that state-sponsored disinformation campaigns co-exist with non-digital methods. It would favour larger parties, including the Palang Pracharath Party, over smaller ones. The new system

primarily utilises mixed-member proportional representation, with more single-member constituency seats elected through first-past-the-post voting and fewer party-list seats using proportional representation. The two-ballot system was reintroduced, enabling voters to cast one ballot for candidates in single-seat constituencies and another for their preferred political party (Phaicharoen, 2021).

The Prayut government has been systematically criticised for curtailing basic rights, stifling dissent, and mishandling the country, including the use of online false information campaigns - called Information Operations (IOs) - against opposition political leaders and human rights defenders and activists. Further evidence from Freedom House's (2022) country report for Thailand on the state of freedom in the country indicates that a member of parliament from the Move Forward Party disclosed papers outlining the arrangement of a network of commentators linked to the Thai military consisting of soldiers who assigned to disseminate opinions in favour of the government, react to disapproving remarks regarding the administration, and aim at online figures who oppose the government.

This has undermined electoral integrity in the country and, broadly speaking, has curbed the quality of democracy in Thailand. Human rights watchdogs have captured these violations in their freedom indexes, stressing Thailand's struggle to improve its electoral integrity. In 2022, the Freedom House's political rights index was 5/40 and 24/60 for civil liberties (Freedom House, 2022). The same country report also emphasises that PM Prayut was not elected through free and fair elections and that the results of the 2019 elections "were tainted by irregularities, with ballots "lost" and initial vote tallies changed", and that the country's electoral laws and framework are not fair (Ibid.). Similarly, in the Electoral Integrity Project report, Thailand's average electoral integrity index between 2012 and 2022 is 38 out of 100 and the country is labelled as a "closed autocracy" (Garnett et al., 2022).

Kunthida Rungruengkiat, Director of the Progressive Movement, highlights differences of IOs deployment before and after elections.

> I think before elections, it is more like generally discrediting persons and organisations. In the context of the Deep South, the state budget is used to support this kind of disinformation targeting academics and human rights defenders who probably criticised the military. There is clear evidence in the national budget showing the army support blogs or those kinds of platforms that spread disinformation. But, when it comes to elections, it is likely that the IO operation can be used to manipulate and distort what oppositions have said or what non-fans would love to hear.

In sum, despite efforts to introduce electoral democracy since the end of absolute monarchy, the country has failed to meet international standards of quality elections. In the pre-internet era, electoral integrity was impacted by electoral rules and procedures that did not align with international standards, military coups that unseated democratically elected governments, and protests by pro-royalist groups to pressure reformist governments. When the internet and social media increased, the use of disinformation to influence voters became a key election campaign strategy. In the 2023 general election (Bangkok Post, 2023), disinformation campaigns, are likely to play a crucial role in influencing voters and attacking opposition parties, As was the case during the 2019 general election, in the run-up to the 2023 general election, several suspected accounts have disseminated disinformation that the Move Forward Party will cut pensions for civil servants if it wins the election (CoFact, 2023). The next chapter outlines how these disinformation campaigns or Information Operations, one of the most remarkable outcomes of the development of the digital sphere and its intersection with the Thai political scene, threaten electoral integrity in the kingdom.

2. State-Sponsored Disinformation

Given the rise in the use of the internet and social media in elections, this chapter outlines the key ideas around disinformation. In the first section, political disinformation is discussed. The second section analyses disinformation campaigns in Thailand, known as Information Operations, arranged or backed by the government. The third section examines China's and Russia's information operations and how they indirectly endorse Thailand's state-sponsored disinformation.

2a. Political Disinformation

Disinformation campaigns consist of the intentional spreading of false information to mislead and deceive the public (Hernon, 1995). It can also be referred to as a "hoax" and is created to manipulate a large audience (Della Vedova et al., 2018). However, the definition of disinformation can vary depending on the context. In this report, disinformation concerns the political arena.

Asia Centre (2020) identifies at least four types of disinformation in the report "Defending Freedom of Expression: Fake News Laws in East and Southeast Asia". First, *clickbait* is false and sensational content created to generate web traffic on social media. Second, *hate speech*, targets specific groups with the intention of inciting violence or mobilising support. Third, *political disinformation*, which is a type of disinformation that is intentionally spread by political actors to attack opponents and manipulate public opinion. Targets can include electoral candidates, activists, NGOs, INGOs, and international organisations such as the UN. Disinformation campaigns tend to intensify before and during elections due to their potential to discredit targets and influence public opinion. Fourth, *foreign government disinformation* aims to manipulate political outcomes by creating internal conflict or damaging the reputation of other governments.
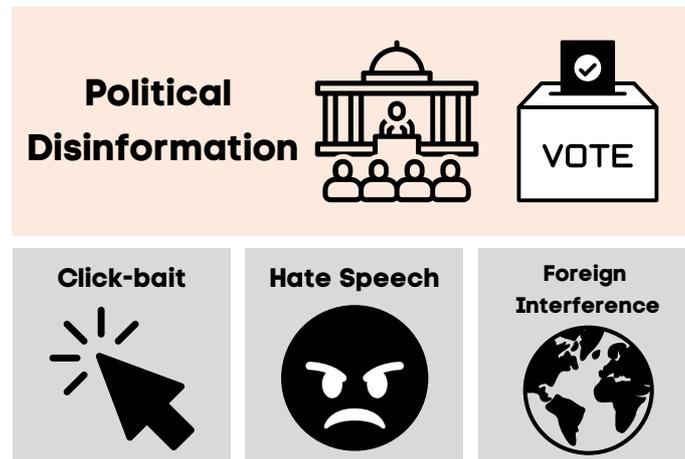
In the realm of political disinformation, the role of governments in deliberately creating, disseminating and endorsing one-sided information using state resources has become increasingly relevant, often aided indirectly by foreign agents. Such disinformation is usually spread by government-linked cyber troops to influence public opinion. Other non-state actors, such as public relations (PR) firms, content companies, government-friendly media, private contractors, and volunteers such as influencers supporting or collaborating with the government are equally apt in the creation and amplification of disinformation (King et al., 2017; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Asia Centre, 2022).

State-sponsored disinformation can be categorised into three groups (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019). The first is *identity grievance campaigns,* which exploit stereotypes to polarise social identities and promote disinformation. Sharing identities or values can reduce polarisation. The second is *information gaslighting*, which strategically distracts and sows uncertainty among targets, causing cognitive exhaustion and anxiety. Improving information literacy is crucial to counter gaslighting. The third is *incidental exposure*, which casually exposes false information to a wider audience through various channels.

As outlined earlier, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns share certain traits across contexts and countries. Nonetheless, they also have highly contextual elements that make each campaign unique. The next section explores state-sponsored disinformation campaigns in the Thai context, also known as Information Operations.

2b. State-sponsored Disinformation

The term "Information Operations" (IOs) is widely used to analyse state-sponsored disinformation. IOs can also be analysed through military and intelligence services activity. This involves the coordinated use of information during military operations to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of enemies. Various types of information can be used in information operations, including malinformation, misinformation, and disinformation. Malinformation, which can include partial facts and even include stolen information, is positioned to mislead. Misinformation is unintentionally spread, while disinformation involves creating false news stories that are altered before being released to achieve a specific outcome (Theohary, 2022).

Information Operations refers to coordinated use of information, during military operations, together with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of enemies. Different types of information can be applied in information operations.

Twitter has monitored such activities closely. This social media company records attempts by foreign or domestic state-backed entities to use the platform to influence elections and political discourses, which goes against the platform's manipulation and spam policy (Roth, 2019; (Twitter, 2021). The technology conglomerate Meta (Facebook, 2021) uses "influence operations" to refer to coordinated efforts to manipulate or corrupt public debate for a strategic goal. Influence operations can be implemented by governments – including military, intelligence, and cabinet-level bodies – and non-state actors, including groups unaffiliated with a government, like hacktivists, financially-motivated troll farms, private sector, political parties and campaigns, and special interest or advocacy groups. Nonetheless, since Elon Musk assumed control of the tech company, "hundreds of Russian and Chinese state propaganda accounts are thriving on Twitter after Elon Musk wiped out the team that fought these networks", according to a BBC report (2023). According to Twitter experts and ex-employees, most of the members of the dedicated team to counteract IO by countries like Russia, China, and Iran – whose objective was to influence public opinion and undermine democracy – have either resigned or been fired, leaving the platform exposed to foreign interference (Ibid.).

Meta monitors a subset of these called coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB), which involves any coordinated network of accounts that use fake accounts to mislead Facebook and its users. Since 2017, Facebook (2021) has removed over 150 covert influence operations networks, including two networks that originated in Thailand, which had targetted domestic actors, thus violating the platform's policies, as well as the principles of electoral integrity. The top five sources of CIB networks, according to Facebook's report, include Russia (linked to the Internet Research Agency, intelligence services, and media websites), Iran (linked to the government and state broadcasters), Myanmar (linked to the military or police), the USA (linked to conspiratorial or fringe political actors, PR or consulting firms, and media websites), and Ukraine (linked to PR agencies and political parties). Meta notes several significant trends in influence operations, such as a move towards smaller, more targeted operations, blurring the lines between authentic debate and manipulation, creating false perceptions of electoral manipulation, becoming a commercial service, improving operational security, and diversifying across platforms to avoid detection and reduce risks (Ibid.).

TikTok is now a significant news and media platform worldwide. In Thailand, ByteDance's (which owns TikTok) data indicates that TikTok ads reached 69.1% of adults aged 18 and above at the start of 2023 (Kemp, 2023). Concerns have been raised about TikTok's obligation to support CCP security and intelligence initiatives without proper governmental oversight. In the US, the FBI Director has warned that TikTok could be used to manipulate the public, and Forbes has identified CCP propaganda accounts on the app. China aims to undermine US strategic power and influence, and TikTok's user base presents an opportunity to pursue these goals (Farahany, 2023).

TikTok and ByteDance can gather user data, including attitudes and preferences, which may be used to manipulate the opinions of its user base and serve CCP interests. The CCP considers data as critical to developing global influence, machine learning models, and market advantage. TikTok has accessed US journalists' locations and could infect devices for malicious purposes. Given its history of exploiting user data and deference to the CCP, there is a risk that the CCP will use TikTok's data to pursue intelligence-related goals and target individuals abroad (Center International Security, 2023). The platform's CEO, Shou Zi Chew, assured lawmakers during the hearing in front of the US Congress in March 2023 that they have always taken concerns seriously have addressed them through concrete actions. They developed Project Texas, a firewall that safeguards user data from foreign intrusion (Silva, 2023; Tech Policy Press, 2023).

The paragraphs above outline state-sponsored disinformation campaigns in the digital age. First, these examples show that IOs are a central part of state-sponsored activities worldwide. Second, this has been recognised as a problem by the world's largest tech companies such as Meta and Twitter, which have operated at a global scale (including Thailand) for nearly two decades. TikTok, a much newer platform, whose popularity is growing faster, has also become a source of concern regarding the spread of disinformation and the possible use of its analytics by the CCP.

2c. Information Operations in Thailand

In Thailand, information operations are carried out by a range of actors, including state agencies, private or public relations companies, and pro-establishment volunteers. These actors create and spread disinformation to manipulate public opinion and target dissidents and pro-democracy supporters. Combined, these actions are partially responsible for the country's low compliance with international electoral integrity standards (Asia Centre, 2022; Asia Centre and EngageMedia, 2022).

Figure 5: Ecosystem of State-sponsored IO in Thailand

Key Actors

"IO PR"   "IO Army"   "IO Jit-arsa"

IO Content

"White Wing": promoting state institutions

attack on critics: "Black Wing"
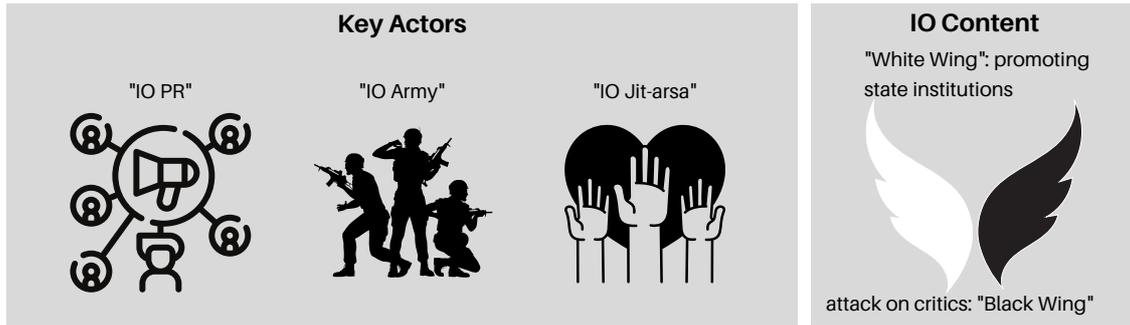
IOs aim to discredit opponents, spread hate speech, and distort facts, creating social disharmony and reinforcing the establishment's power. Wiroj Lakkhanaadisorn, a former MFP MP, revealed information on the Thai army's IOs during a televised debate. The IOs Army targets dissidents, politicians, activists, academics, influencers, and human rights defenders who oppose the establishment. The IOs Army allegedly operates disinformation websites to discredit and devalue politicians, activists, and human rights defenders in southern border provinces (TODAY, 2020a). Wiroj also detailed the Army's systematic information operations before the 2019 election. The Centre for Information Operation worked with 30-40 military IOs units across the country, totalling over 1,000 operators. Their primary tasks were to support the establishment by posting, and commenting, while attacking or reporting dissents. Operators received guidelines, sim cards, and monthly stipends, and their performance was evaluated daily against key performance indicators, with information operation centres awarded based on their performance (Ibid.).

In December 2020, Pannika Wanich from the Progressive Movement revealed information about army-controlled operators and private companies involved in IOs, also known as Public Relations (PR) IOs. The operation was divided into two factions: the white wing, which promoted the government, army and monarchy, and the black wing, which attacked and devalued dissidents. Each wing had two parts: the operating section focused on social media engagement, and the supporting section created and refined content. Private companies S-Planet and M Group, with close ties to the Thai army, operated Free Messenger and Twitter Broadcast applications to facilitate the army's IOs (Voice TV, 2020). These PR IOs reportedly supplied content to the army for their information operation (RaphivichakarnTU, 2020).

PR IOs on Twitter manipulated the online information space by retweeting within their networks to increase engagement, aiming for algorithms to pick up on the messages and share to other users. These operations published content that fabricated the truth (Voice TV, 2020). It was revealed that 54,800 Twitter-based IO accounts exist, with 17,562 controlled by the 2nd Infantry Division of the military (The Nation, 2020).

In addition to the IOs Army and IOs PR, there are also volunteer information operators called Jit Arsa. These individuals support the establishment and engage in information operations without payment, using disinformation and manipulated content produced by IOs Army or IOs PR to amplify their impact (RaphivichakarnTU, 2020; TODAY, 2020b). Dr Janjira Sombatpoonsiri from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok provided insights on this issue.

> One main characteristic of IOs in Thailand is that it is highly institutionalised. There are state actors or state-aligned actors involved in these campaigns. And the second characteristic is that, unlike neighbouring countries like the Philippines or Indonesia, during the election, political candidates largely receive support from 'trolls for hire' such as those from political advertisement companies to run misinformation campaigns. However in Thailand, although this trend has emerged, the nature of the campaign remains state-based. They are centralised, institutionalised, and funded by key political institutions.

Yingcheep Atchanont, Manager of iLaw,[2] assessed Information Operations in Thailand stating that:

> Disinformation always impacts people's perceptions. In 2021, Twitter took down a network of Thai Army IOs. A follow-up analysis by Standard University showed the Army's IOs had low impacts (just "cheerleading without fans").
>
> I totally disagree. The analysis underestimated the operations. I believed those accounts taken down were not very effective. But I assume the army has better information operations. IOs system possibly covers government supporters or royalists. I noticed that there are some sets of disinformation that are reproduced by these operations to change people's perceptions. Such coordinated behaviours can make an impact. Based on my observation, among IOs networks, leaders will manage how and what to post and also plan strategy. Specific content will be reproduced. More importantly, IOs by the state have the capacity to reproduce content. These coordinated behaviours are very dangerous because reproduction can change people's perceptions.

Social media platforms have actively taken action against IOs. In October 2020, Twitter removed 926 fake accounts linked to the Royal Thai Army for allegedly promoting pro-government and army content and attacking political opposition figures (Bangkok Post, 2020b). The Stanford Internet Observatory later revealed that this network of accounts coordinated to promote the establishment and attack the political opposition (Goldstein et al, 2020). Additionally, the pro-royalist account @jitarsa_school, linked to the Palace, was suspended in November 2020 after violating Twitter regulations with spam and manipulative messages (Tostevin & Tanakasempipat, 2020). In 2021, Meta removed 185 accounts and groups that coordinated inauthentic behaviour in Thailand, targeting audiences in the southern provinces where ethno-religious conflict is ongoing, and spending approximately $350 on Facebook and Instagram advertisements (Tanakasempipat, 2021).

Disinformation tends to be more widespread in the lead-up to elections in Thailand, with these operations having a significant impact on voters, discrediting opposition groups and eroding the integrity of the electoral process. During the 2019 general election, for instance, false audio was circulated by Nation TV, a media outlet linked with the military junta at the time of the election (Thaitrakulpanich, 2019). The audio recording falsely claimed that Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the popular Future Forward Party, had conspired with the ousted PM Thaksin Shinawatra. In 2021, the Anti-Fake News Centre Thailand spread a false rumour that all voters were required to get the COVID-19 vaccine before voting in a local administrative election (Anti-Fake News Center Thailand, 2021). Similarly, during the 2022 Bangkok gubernatorial election, independent candidate Chadchart Sittipunt was targeted by disinformation claiming that he had a link with the Pheu Thai Party (Thairath, 2022). Meanwhile, Wiroj Lakkhanaadisorn, a gubernatorial candidate from the opposition Move Forward Party, was falsely accused of planning to increase land tax if elected. Both candidates had to correct this false information on their own. To help the general public identify and assess information operations during the 2022 Bangkok Governor election, media outlet The MATTER developed a checklist of such operations (Kanittakul, 2022).

The cases above show how the Thai military uses social media as a platform to connect with people, rebrand its image, and communicate with the public. Nonetheless, evidence also shows that the army also integrates social media into its information warfare strategy (Goldstein et al, 2020) to create systematic, organised and sophisticated disinformation campaigns. Still, the spread of false information cannot be solely attributed to the government. In the Thai context, the role of foreign governments in the creation and spread of state-sponsored disinformation campaigns must be understood and its relevance considered. The next section outlines the Chinese and Russian state-sponsored disinformation in Thailand.

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2 A non-profit organisation with an aim to create Social Reform by increasing public participation and demand for legislative change.

2d. Foreign Interference in Thailand

The role of foreign actors is equally important to understand state-sponsored disinformation in Thailand since they also contribute to influencing the political sphere. This section analyses the role of the Chinese and Russian governments in complementing IOs in Thailand. These two case studies show that their role is not one of actively producing and spreading misleading information on behalf of the government. Instead, China and Russia's role lies in their efforts to influence the local political narrative by endorsing the pro-establishment views of the government which holds anti-democratic and anti-reformist views. This not only affects social cohesion in the country but it abets the political polarisation in the country. It also erodes trust in democratic institutions and principles and weakens electoral integrity since electoral information on the internet is carefully manipulated to favour the interests of the ruling elites.

2di. China

China is dubbed a global disinformation superpower for its foreign influence operations with the use of state media (such as CGTN and Xinhua), sophisticated disinformation campaigns, and digital infrastructure (such as information pipes, building cables, 5G networks) (Scott, 2022). For its leaders, conformity to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) party line is used as a global criterion to separate its allies or enemies. As such, disinformation campaigns are employed to mobilise alliances and silence enemies (Lu, 2022) by promoting narratives aligning with or supporting CCP narratives.

State Media	Disinformation Campaign	ICT Infrastructure

In 2019, leading Thai media outlets signed a content-sharing agreement with China's Xinhua News Agency, giving them access to republish Xinhua's news materials (Khaosod English, 2019c). Also in 2019, after weeks of protests in Hong Kong, Khaosod English, a major online news outlet in Thailand, presented a news report that copied content from Xinhua, including the propaganda that US politicians were inflaming the Hong Kong protest (Khaosod English, 2019a; Roney, 2019) and that peace and order were brought back to Xinjiang through an education and training programme (Khaosod English, 2019b). These examples of Chinese propaganda being reproduced by these outlets show Beijing's influence and local media and professionals welcoming of China's presence in Thailand's information environment.

China's efforts to influence local media in Thailand also include sponsoring Thai journalist associations and providing funds, as well as government-funded training programs and cultural trips to China for Thai media professionals (Loomis & Holz, 2020). These attempts are aimed at promoting key narratives for China's strategic interests, such as rebranding China's image, promoting mutual benefit between Thailand and China, and portraying China as a responsible member of the international community (Ibid.).

Chinese state-sponsored disinformation campaigns in Thailand also operate on social media platforms, with the ability to recruit netizens to participate in digital warfare (Lu, 2022). The operators, known as "wu mao," are mobilised to monitor the internet and influence public opinion. They are paid 0.5 yuan per post

and are linked to the Chinese government, as they are required to circumvent the country's internet firewalls and access banned websites or social media. Their numbers reportedly range from 500,000 to 2 million (Lau, 2016).

There have been concerns about the impact of China's disinformation campaigns in Thailand on elections. Some experts suggest that China may be using its influence to shape the outcome of elections in Thailand by spreading disinformation and propaganda to support politicians aligned with Beijing's interests. For example, in 2020, during youth-led protests in Thailand, Global Times – a mouthpiece of the CCP – released a conspiracy theory that the US and Western countries were behind protesters who were calling for the reform of the constitution and monarchy (Thai PBS, 2020a).

These types of campaigns are detrimental to elections and electoral integrity since they contribute to influencing the electorate – in the frame of political protests – based on untrue information that endorses the political views of pro-establishment groups, which hold anti-democratic and anti-reformist views. China-sponsored disinformation campaigns fail to attract younger audiences and tend to be bought by older people who are more susceptible to manipulation. The lack of digital literacy among Thais to identify disinformation and the government's inaction to counter China's influence efforts are factors that contribute to the success of China's disinformation campaigns in Thailand (Tang, 2021).

2dii. Russia

According to Facebook, Russia is now the largest driver of disinformation on social media in Thailand (Lardieri, 2021). Russia's disinformation and propaganda ecosystem is built on government proxies, unattributed communication channels, state-funded global messages, and platforms used to create and amplify false narratives (Global Engagement Center, 2020). The contemporary Russian propaganda model is characterised by a high number of channels and messages and a willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fiction (Paul & Matthews, 2016).
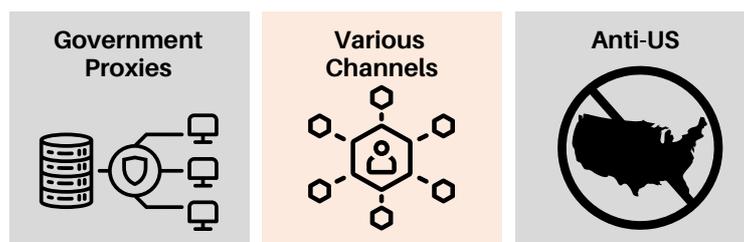
There are detections of Russian government's sponsored disinformation operations in Thailand. In 2019, Facebook removed numerous pages, groups, and accounts connected to the Moscow-based Russian government-funded journal, New Eastern Outlook. This network coordinated to boost engagement, distribute content, and drive people to off-platform blogs. It frequently amplified divisive narratives and comments on topics about Thai politics, US-China relations, protests in Hong Kong, and criticism of democracy activists in Thailand (Ruiz, 2019). One of the pages that were removed, New Eastern Outlook, had 19,432 likes in total and an average of 49.29 likes per post. The page was created in May 2010 and had three managers based in Thailand, Greece, and Russia. In 2019, New Eastern Outlook posted an article from the website of the Institute of Oriental Studies under the Russian Academy of Sciences, a state-authorised geopolitical think-tank, which accused the United States of interfering in Thailand's March 2019 general election amid the growing ties between China-Thailand (Robertson, Karan & Kaul, 2019).

In 2022, Russia, led by President Vladimir Putin, invaded Ukraine, resulting in tens of thousands of casualties, destroyed cities, and a weakened economy. Alongside the military operations, Russia waged a coordinated state-controlled disinformation campaign aimed at influencing public opinion domestically, in neighbouring countries, and worldwide (European Union External Action, 2022). Twitter proved to be an effective tool for amplifying Russia's disinformation, with even official Russian embassy and ministry accounts coordinating posts and retweets (Cheong, 2022). In Southeast Asia, pro-Russia disinformation narratives related to the war tapped into anti-US and anti-Western sentiments among local audiences (Cheong, 2022). In Thailand, in March 2022, a false video news report was broadcast on Channel 5, an army-run free-TV station, showing Ukrainians faking casualties, which was actually footage from a climate change protest in Austria (Pete, 2022). In the same month, executives from Channel 5 met with the Russian ambassador to Thailand and agreed to provide factual Russian news about the war in Ukraine, claiming that international media was flooded with fake news (Parpart, 2022).

Dr Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, Research from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok wraps up the issue of foreign interference as follows:

> After the 2014 coup, we start to see a lot of cases coming out from foreign media outlets, basically framing anti-coup protesters as being supported by the US and the EU sometimes, and the list [of the so-called foreign lackeys] gets longer and longer.

The role of foreign actors like China and Russia in influencing the digital sphere to support the political position of the establishment in Thailand is therefore a complement to the actions of the government in creating state-sponsored disinformation, as recognised by some of the world's biggest tech companies, to gain political support among the public at the expense of electoral integrity. The next chapter addresses four specific ways through which state-sponsored disinformation campaigns in Thailand have impacted the quality of elections.

3. Impact on Electoral Integrity in Thailand

This chapter reviews four types of state-sponsored information operations and how they negatively impact electoral integrity. These are: pro-incumbent disinformation campaigns at the expense of political opposition; the harassment and undermining of candidates from marginalised groups to discourage their participation in politics; distorted electoral information that denies voters access to contrasted information to make informed decisions; and the further polarisation of the electorate.

3a. Pro-Incumbent Disinformation Campaigns

Article 25(c) of the ICCPR states that all individuals will be granted the privilege and ability to exercise their rights, with no unjust constraints, thus having access, to public service in their country. In such regard, CCPR General Comment No. 25 (1996) highlights that "the allocation of powers and the means by which individual citizens exercise the right to participate in the conduct of public affairs protected by article 25 should be established by the constitution and other laws". Based on the Code of Conduct for Political Parties in Campaigning in Democratic Elections (1999), the government is prohibited from abusing its position, power, privilege or influence to serve political purposes, whether by rewarding, threatening, penalising, or by any other means. It must also not use public resources for campaigns. Such principles are guaranteed in the Regulation of the Election Commission of Thailand on the Use of State Resources or Officers (2020), which prohibits the caretaker government, in place during electoral periods, from exploiting state resources and officers for campaigns that cause inequality in elections.
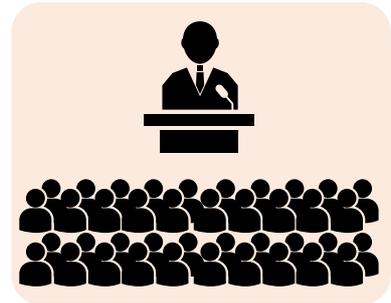
Nonetheless, evidence shows that the government has used state resources to spread disinformation and malinformation in the digital space to strengthen its image and narrative. Using a mixture of these two fuels the promotion of pro-incumbent narratives across social media platforms to promote and defend the government's performance and policies, the military, and the monarchy. Therefore, the government increases its chances to be seen more positively by the public, putting the government in a position of advantage compared to its political rivals when electoral cycles begin. This does not contribute to strengthening electoral integrity since it gradually influences people's views on the government, which will be key when casting a vote.

For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the government's legitimacy was questioned due to its inefficiencies in handling the situation. The Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration prioritised a mix-and-match policy between two non-mRNA vaccines, Sinovac and AstraZeneca, to vaccinate the Thai population. It only imported mRNA vaccines, which were scientifically proven to be effective against the virus, later on. An investigation into social media conversations found widespread dissemination of narratives that supported the government's vaccine plan and disinformation that discredited the mRNA vaccines and those who criticised the government (Amarinthewa, 2022a). A report by the New York Times, which claimed that Chinese vaccines are superior to vaccines produced elsewhere, was used. Another false news circulated was a warning that mRNA vaccines could generate severe adverse effects (Ibid.).

The pro-government tactic used by information operation accounts also includes promoting the actions of individual cabinet members, particularly Prime Minister Prayut and Deputy Prime Minister Prawit. The pro-government tactic used by information operation accounts also includes promoting the actions of individual cabinet members, particularly Prime Minister Prayut and Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan. These campaigns highlight their dedication, performance, and achievements via hashtags such as #ลุงตู่ (#uncleTu (Prime Minister Prayut)), #ทีมลุงตู่ (#teamuncleTu), #ลุงป้อม(#unclePom (Deputy Prime Minister Prawit)), or #ทีมลุงป้อม (#teamunclePom).

There are other examples of IOs to enhance the image of the government. Following the 2014 coup, the Royal Thai Army expanded its cyber engagement into social media (Goldstein et al, 2020). Information operations or disinformation campaigns used several hashtags to draw attention and manipulate public opinion. These hashtags mainly promote the army, its slogan, and military events. They include #กองทัพบก (#Army), #ทหารช่วยเหลือประชาชน (#Soldiershelpingthepeople), #กองทัพบกเพื่อประชาชน (#Armyforthepeople), #กองทัพบกเพื่อชาติศาสนกษัตริย์และประชาชน (#Armyforthenationreligionkingandpeople), #ทหารเป็นที่พึ่งของประชาชนในทุกโอกาส(#Thaiscanalwayscountonsoldiers), #ทหารของพระราชา (#Soldiersoftheking), and #ทหารใต้ร่มพระบารมี(#SoldiersunderHisgraciousness). Twitter took down accounts in 2020 that mostly tweeted and retweeted content with these hashtags, cheering the army and honouring soldiers for their community service and sacrifice, as well as military activities such as Thai-US military exercises (Ibid.).

The Army's information operations manipulate online content by emphasising issues related to the monarchy to legitimise its involvement in politics, promote the military-backed government, and undermine the pro-democracy movement. In 2020, thousands of Twitter accounts reportedly coordinated to disseminate similar tweets, using common texts, hashtags, and even pictures (Voice TV, 2020). These information operations accounts mainly focus on traditional relationships between the king and the people, emphasising the protection of the royal institution, love, and loyalty to the king.

The hashtags used by these accounts include: #พ่อคือผู้ให้ (#Father[King]isagiver), #Longlivetheking, #Savetheking, #อนุชนรักชาติศาสนกษัตริย์ (#Newgenerationlovesnationreligiokiing), #ราษฎรไทยใต้ร่มพระบารมี (#ThaisunderHisgraciousness), #เรารักสถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์ (#Welovethemonarchy), #เรารักพระเจ้าอยู่หัว (#Welovetheking), #ในหลวงสู้ๆ (#Kingkeepfightingon), #31ตุลาเรารักในหลวง (#31Octoberwelovtheking), and #28ตุลาปกป้องสถาบัน (#28Octoberprotecttheroyalinstitution) (Ibid.).

Dr Puangthong Pawakapan, a political scientist at Chulalongkorn University, commented that:

> IOs are commonly used throughout eight years of the military government. One of its functions is to promote conservative narratives by propagating the monarchy, government policies, Prime Minister and Ministers. In the lead-up to the election, IOs will be operated to cheer the ruling parties.

The examples above show that a combination of disinformation and malinformation from IOs in Thailand, are used with the aim of self-promotion and strengthening the image of incumbent politicians and the government while harming the reputation of political opponents. This is detrimental to electoral integrity since such IOs can influence public opinion and voter behaviour. When false or misleading information is spread intentionally to deceive voters or manipulate their beliefs, it can undermine the credibility of an election and erode public trust in the democratic process.

3b. Harassment of Marginalised Candidates

International standards require states to guarantee political participation without discrimination for women and other social groups that face specific challenges, including (but not limited to) minorities, indigenous peoples, the LGBT+ community, youth, people with disabilities, and those living in poverty. General Comment No. 25 (1996) specifies that persons eligible to stand for election should not be disqualified by unreasonable or discriminatory requirements. Also, candidates must not

suffer from any kind of discrimination or disadvantage because of their candidacy (OHCHR, 2021). In Thailand, Section 97 of the 2017 Constitution ensures the right of Thai people over 25 years old, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, and religion, to stand for an election for the House of Representatives.

Regardless of these legal provisions included in the Thai constitution, disinformation is increasingly being weaponised to target marginalised groups to suppress and undermine their political engagement, having a detrimental impact on electoral integrity since diversity is discouraged. The weaponisation of disinformation targeting marginalised groups is dangerous for electoral integrity since it spreads distorted information about the candidates, leading to confusion and mistrust among voters. This can result in exacerbated inequalities in terms of political representation that further marginalised underrepresented groups. This erodes trust in electoral processes, causing people to become disillusioned with the democratic process.

Studies show that members of marginalised groups, such as women and racial minorities are especially targeted by coordinated campaigns characterised by the spread of falsehoods concerning their candidacy in elections is a global issue (Thakur & Madrigal, 2021; Woolley, 2022). This is also the case in Thailand, where women, members of the LGBT+ community, and ethno-religious minorities are under attack by Information Operations because of their political, human rights, and pro-democracy activities, in what is seen as an attempt to question their legitimacy and capacity to engage in political activities. This undermines their credibility and, as a result, they are put at a disadvantage compared to other candidates or political actors.

Women are victimised by information operations and disinformation campaigns that often portray them as overly sexual, untrustworthy, weak, and stupid. These disinformation tactics aim to block women from political participation, suppress opposition, infringe on their rights, and undermine democratic institutions and values (#ShePersisted, 2021). In Thailand, women are primarily targeted by information operations and disinformation for their political and democratic activities. One piece of research revealed that Pannika Wanich, a spokeswoman for FFP, received 184 hostile mentions by IOs accounts that were taken down by Twitter, which is higher than any other Future Forward Party or Move Forward Party candidates (Goldstein et al., 2020). IOs and disinformation accounts often coordinate to attack women politicians, human rights defenders, and activists with three main narratives that devalue them, shame their bodies, as well as implicate them in sexual scandals.

First, women politicians from the pro-democracy camp are often harassed on social media platforms with lies that devalue their capacity and insult them. For example, in 2014, Yingluck Shinawatra, Thai former Prime Minister, was claimed to have given an irresponsible answer to unpaid farmers,[3] thus questioning her capacity to engage constructively with a range of citizens from various backgrounds. In 2019, Pannika

3 The source has not been included in this report to anonymise these individuals.

Wanich was labelled as as a very naive politician after she urged relevant stakeholders to take action against fake news,[4] further exemplifying how the credibility of female politicians is quickly undermined in the online sphere. In 2022, Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Pheu Thai Family chief and the youngest daughter of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was allegedly the victim state-sponsored online disinformation when it was claimed that she had copied a policy from a past administration,[5] constituting another attempt to question the political skills of female politicians.

Second, another tactic exploited by IOs and disinformation accounts is body shaming. During an interview with Voice of America (VOA) in 2019, Pannika Wanich expressed her disappointment at being targeted on social media platforms for having a short neck and a big face. She further noted, as other commentators agreed, that this tactic is only applicable to women (VOA Thai, 2019).

Third, women are discredited by linking them to immorality or sex scandals. In 2019, Pannika Wanich was attacked by IOs accounts for allegedly having an affair with her party colleagues (Srisuwan, 2019). In 2021, a fake Line chat was circulated on social media between Chonticha Jangrew, a political activist turned Move Forward Party MP candidate, and a former US Embassy official. The chat was fabricated to mislead people into believing that the US was meddling in Thai domestic matters and to defame the female activist with a love affair (Prachatai, 2021).

LGBT people are also targeted by online harassment from information operations and disinformation campaigns. Tanwarin Sukkhapisit, the first transgender member of the parliament of Thailand, is among the top ten accounts attacked by information operations (Bright Today, 2020). Political activist and Move Forward Party MP Chonthicha Jangrew shared that:

> For the victims, disinformation undermined their dignity and confidence. It also causes mental health problems. I experienced several gender-based online disinformation and attacks, including death and rape threats. This is toxic and damages my mental health. Furthermore, such online attacks have transformed into physical insecurity. People are misunderstood by disinformation. False statements mislead people to believe that a victim is a bad person. Then, the misleading changes into attempts to attack the target in the public space. One incident happened when I was having dinner with my family. People who were misled by disinformation came to attack me in a public space.

> Women are often targeted by disinformation campaigns partly because there is a wrong perception that women should not participate in politics. These wrong perceptions facilitate the dissemination of disinformation. In addition, gender or identity-based disinformation easily worsens mental health. As a result, they become the first choices for IOs. Men are attacked in terms of their ideologies, but women and LGBT+ people are attacked by the weaponising issue of gender or identity.

Gender-based disinformation tends to become normalised and continues to be used to harass female politicians without proper awareness and safeguards. Kunthida Rungruengkiat, Director of the Progressive Movement, highlighted this issue, stating that:

> I think it affects us in a way that we become too familiar with it. How could it have become something normal? It should not be normal. We talk about it as if it is part of the job, but it should not be the case.

4 The source has not been included in this report to anonymise these individuals.
5 Ibid.

Furthermore, politicians, activists, and human rights defenders from ethnic and religious minorities in Thailand are targeted by information operations and disinformation campaigns. In the southern region, which is predominantly Malay-Muslim, these tactics are employed to devalue the work of local politicians, activists, and human rights defenders and link them with the insurgency. For instance, a website called pulony.blogspot.com, which is alleged to be supported by Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) (Isranews, 2020), disseminates content that praises the role of soldiers and lies to discredit local politicians, activists, and human rights defenders, as well as sow division. One of the articles on the website falsely alleged that a student human rights advocacy group in the Deep South, PerMAS, did not want peace but instead mobilised locals to call for autonomy. Another article devalued three women human rights defenders in the Deep South, Angkhana Neelapaijit, Anchana Heemmina, and Pornpen Khongkachonkiet, by claiming that they worked for the insurgency rather than for the public interest. In the lead-up to the 2023 election, this narrative was reproduced by IOs suspected accounts to target Romadon Panjor, a peace activist who then became MP candidate for the Move Forward Party, by claiming he was sympathetic towards the insurgency.[6] Astapon Piriya, Data Analyst from Patani Forum highlighted that:

> Human rights defenders, academics and CSOs who work in the Deep South are targeted by these anonymous pages and accounts. Men and women activists in the South both experience attacks and harassment by anonymous accounts. But, women often face gender-based attacks such as calling them 'aunty' or shaming their bodies. Malay Muslim identity is also attacked by linking them (activists) with the insurgents or separatists. Such a narrative is manipulated among people who feel fear, hatred, or prejudice against the religion of Islam or Muslims.

In 2023, this content remained posted on social media accounts of a conservative Buddhist organisation reportedly protesting what they considered pro-Muslim policies by the junta government. In the north of the country, a Move Forward Party MP from the Hmong indigenous community was devalued by disinformation claiming that he was exploited by the party for the campaign and needed to compensate the party's investors (CoFact, 2023a).

The use of state-sponsored disinformation to undermine candidates and members of under-represented groups highlights the need for awareness and proper safeguards to combat IOs in order to ensure that all candidates are properly represented in election cycles regardless of their background, thus positively influencing electoral integrity in Thailand.

3c. Distorted Election Information

Being able to make informed choices when casting a ballot is an essential element to achieving high levels of electoral integrity. Therefore, access to accurate and contrasted information about candidates, their policies, parties, and the electoral process must be ensured for all voters so they can freely and accurately express their political will (OHCHR, 2021). With the popularisation of the internet and the increasing number of IOs, electoral information can easily be distorted, resulting in biassed data that prevents the electorate from having access to verified information. As a result, their ability to make informed decisions undermines electoral integrity. Making public policies publicly available has become increasingly relevant in Thai politics as a strategy to gain people's votes (Sirivunnabood, 2023). In the internet era, IOs have been used as a tactic by the government to distort electoral information about the policies proposed by opposition parties to bias the electorate and increase its political support.

6 The source has not been included in this report to anonymise these individuals.

In 2020, Move Forward Party Deputy Leader Sirikanya Tansakul had to deny that her party had proposed cutting pensions for civil servants after false information had circulated via Line groups (Thai Post, 2022). In the lead-up to the 2023 General Election, the Move Forward Party's policy campaign was once again distorted, claiming that the party had proposed a pension cut again. False news claimed that the country's development was being hindered by budget allocations for the pension. It warned that pensioners might face difficulties if the party won the election (@Deoantana, 2023). In response to such disinformation, Pita Limjaroenrat, the Move Forward Party Leader, clarified on his official account that the party did intend to implement a pension cut.

During the May 2022 Bangkok governor election, the MFP candidate Wiroj Lakkhanaadisorn debunked disinformation that had gone viral on social media, claiming that he had initiated a policy to increase land tax. He confirmed on his official social media accounts that he had never proposed such a policy (Lakkhanaadisorn, 2022). In another case, the Party claimed that it would immediately abolish the positions of district chief, subdistrict headman, and village headman as part of its decentralisation policy.[7]

Discrediting political parties is another strategy employed by information operations and disinformation campaigns. This is because a party's image and reputation remain significant factors that can attract and influence voters across the country (Boonrat, 2020; Sonchaeng, 2018). In November 2019, the blog Pulony disseminated an article alleging that the Prachachart Party had called for a halt in the enforcement of special security laws to facilitate the insurgency's operation (pulony.blogspot.com, 2019). In February 2020, during a parliament debate, MFP MP Wiroj Lakkhanaadisorn claimed that an army's information operation spread rumours online attempting to establish a link between the dissolved Future Forward Party and the shooter in the tragic Lopburi mall shooting in 2020, which resulted in three deaths and four injured people, claiming that the shooter was a supporter of the Future Forward Party (TODAY, 2020a).

Disinformation campaigns have also spread false news to discredit the Move Forward Party. For instance, false content claimed that an MP from the party had hired protest leaders for 10,000 Baht to organise a protest in Chiang Rai province.[8] Fake news was also circulated that the Move Forward Party collaborated with the Barisan Revolusi Nasional separatist movement in the south and supported the separatist movement.[9] Amid the Russia-Ukraine war, a suspected IOs account uploaded false information that MFP wanted to bring Thailand into the conflict.[10] Content shared by several suspected IOs accounts also claimed that the Pheu Thai Party wanted to cancel state welfare cards, initiated by the Prayut administration because the party wanted to see inequality remain.

Information about the election process is also subject to distortion. This tactic can invalidate people's votes, undermine trust in the democratic system, or even lead to a lawsuit. After the 2019 General Election, disinformation spread on social media – from unknown sources – claiming that some ballot papers outside the Kingdom were not counted, which could lead to electoral fraud. Another false rumour was that a truck driver carried a ballot paper to destroy Samut Songkhram province. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) issued a statement debunking the two pieces of disinformation (Anti-Fake News Center, 2019a). In 2021, the Anti-Fake News Centre also debunked false news that voters were required to get vaccinated before electing the Chief Executive and council members of the Subdistrict Administrative Organization (Anti-Fake News Centre, 2021). During the May 2022 election to select Bangkok's governor, a disinformation campaign to deceive voters and prevent them from voting went viral, claiming for people to bring their own blue pen to mark the ballot paper. Otherwise, their votes would be invalidated (CoFact, 2020).

Election management bodies are often targeted by disinformation campaigns. Disinformation against the EC is widely spread to devalue its performance and question its neutrality, given its links to the National

7 The source has not been included in this report to anonymise these individuals.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.

Council for Peace and Order. In March 2019, a few days after the General Election, the EC rejected messages spread on social media platforms claiming that the commission would give 28 red cards to some political parties for committing irregularities (The Nation, 2019). In March, fake news was shared on Facebook claiming that two election commissioners were sacked and that 600,000 bogus ballots were mixed into the vote count. Nine people were arrested for sharing this false news under the Computer Crime Act (AFP, 2019). Later, in December, similar false news re-emerged, claiming that the election body would penalise the anti-junta Pheu Thai Party and Future Forward Party (Anti-Fake News Centre, 2019b).

All in all, increased flows of distorted or false information is one of the impacts of the increased number of IOs in Thailand. It poses a threat to integrity since it induces confusion and hinders voters' ability to make informed choices, further undermining the legitimacy of elections since the electorate does not have access to contrasted information – often without being aware that this might be the case.

3d. Deepen Political Polarisation

Thailand is polarised along competing political ideologies. On the one hand, royal nationalist and pro-establishment groups consider the king as the rightful ruler of the country. On the other hand, reformists argue that the ultimate sovereignty belongs to the Thai people and the King's role in Thai politics must be limited (Sombatpoonsiri, 2020). State-sponsored disinformation campaigns promote identity politics, distorting the existing narratives further and widening existing social and political divisions to gain votes, rather than prioritising policy-based actions. This prevents members from both sides from engaging in healthy debates, stressing confrontation over cooperation – particularly in the context of elections (OHCHR, 2021). The following controversial topics are reproduced by IOs which exacerbates this polarisation during the election.
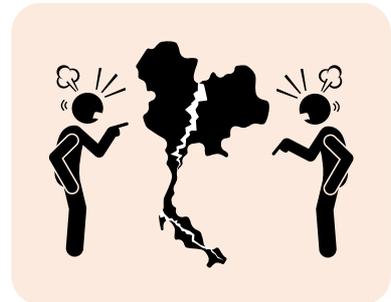
To manipulate online discourse and increase the confrontation between groups, information operations and disinformation campaigns primarily exploit the narrative of abolishing the monarchy (ล้มเจ้า) to target pro-democracy camps. Popular hashtags like #ล้มเจ้า (#AbolishMonarchy), #ขบวนการล้มเจ้า (#MovementToAbolishMonarchy), #พรรคล้มเจ้า (#PartyofAbolishingMonarchy), #ล้มล้างสถาบัน(#AbolishtheInstitution), #ล้มล้างสถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์ (#AbolishtheRoyalInstitution), and #สนับสนุน112 (#Support112) are used to label those at the democratic and liberal end of the political spectrum as republicans. This narrative operates at multiple levels: individual, policy or agenda, and network. At the individual level, activists and politicians are labelled as advocates for the abolition of the monarchy. For example, suspected IOs accounts often mention Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, Secretary-General of the Progressive Movement, as someone who aspires to abolish the monarchy, citing his social media posts that include articles on the French Revolution. This is, however, unfounded (Tantiwittayapitak, 2019; TODAY, 2020) and triggers hatred, which further polarises society.

At the policy level, the political agendas of parties and social groups are also distorted. Youth-led movements calling for the abolition of the monarchy – that primarily emerged after the dissolution of FFP in late February 2020 – are often in the spotlight of IOs and labelled as groups supporting the abolition of the monarchy (Anders, 2021; Chotanan, 2020; ThaiRath, 2020). Attacks on them are an attempt to distort the narrative that led to multitudinous mobilisations calling for more accountability from the ruling elites and the monarchy (Phaholtap & Streckfuss, 2020). Similarly, MFP, which proposed amending Article 112 of the Penal Code (the lese-majeste law), is subjected to this kind of distorting disinformation attack.

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Lastly, IOs falsely link individuals like academics, critics with the establishment, political activists, journalists, members of political parties, media outlets, and civil society organisations, claiming that they are network who all share common political views or goal, such as ending the monarchy (Jeamteerasakul, 2015). One example is the "Abolishing the Monarchy" network (Bangkok Post, 2021). After claiming that these supposed networks exist, IOs accuse their members of being connected to political groups in the country – such as Thaksin in the case of anti-monarchy networks – and overseas that support their ideas. Voranai Vanijaka, a journalist who then became a candidate for the Chart Pattana Kla Party stated that:

> A disinformation narrative of the abolishment of the monarchy is used, mentioned and persuaded by a lot of people. Its impact is very evident. This is possibly the most sensitive issue in Thai society. And once you are branded as a person who has aspirations to abolish the monarchy, you will become an outcast in society.

Dr Puangthong Pawakapan, a political scientist at Chulalongkorn University, further explained that:

> Information operation is run to undermine the opposition's credibility by accusing the opposition or critics of not being Thai, being anti-patriotic and conspiring with foreigners to sabotage national security and ideology. When it comes to elections, the Move Forward Party and Pheu Thai Party are mainly targeted by IOs.

Therefore, by exploiting the differences between individuals, political parties and social groups, and by creating networks that allegedly support a specific political view or stand that is highly sensitive or controversial in the country, IOs can easily benefit from these differences to further set people apart. This was also the case during the COVID-19 pandemic when Information Operations and disinformation campaigns exacerbated the existing political polarisation in Thailand. In 2020, Thailand's suspended Twitter accounts had primarily retweeted pro-government messages about COVID-19 and praised the Army's efforts to combat the virus using hashtags such as #ไวรัสโคโรนา (#coronavirus), #COVID19, #ไวรัสอู่ฮั่น (#Wuhanvirus), and #ไวรัสโคโรนาสายพันธุ์ใหม่2019 (#Newcoronavirus2019) (Goldstein et al, 2020). Another investigation into Facebook conversations on different types of COVID-19 vaccines detected online coordinated activities conducted by authorities and individuals to disseminate narratives and false information discrediting mRNA vaccines, while supporting the government's plan to rely on non-mRNA vaccines, and suppressing online dissent (Amarinthewa, 2022b).

As previously mentioned, during the ongoing ethno-religious conflict in southern Thailand, IOs are being employed to promote the Army's operations, discredit NGOs, CSOs, and human rights defenders, and link opposition politicians with the insurgency. In 2019, a Facebook page shared an article from the blog Pulony, which alleged that a Malay Muslim former minister from the Thai Rak Thai party, Wan Muhamad Noor Matha, attempted to amend Article 1 of the Constitution to allow for the establishment of federal states (TODAY, 2020). In August 2020 (2020a), the blog released an article that propagated the idea that military rangers were visiting schools to provide education for students and prevent them from being exploited by the insurgents. Later in October, the blog accused several independent media outlets, local CSOs, and INGOs, including Prachatai, Thai Netizen, Cross-Cultural Foundation, iLaw, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, of receiving financial support from George Soros to influence the

population and oppose government policies. In addition, the blog (2020b) falsely claimed that an organisation provided people with negative information to oppose national development.

These cases, where IOs serve the purpose of further polarising Thai society using existing controversies, show how in the digital era, identity politics have become more prevalent than ever. This emotional practice harms electoral integrity since it prevents the electorate from engaging in factual political debates that allow them to develop their political ideas. Instead, IOs appeal to existing divisions to further exacerbate differences in an attempt to gain political support. Along with the three other impacts presented in this chapter – the creation of pro-incumbent disinformation campaigns, harassment of marginalised candidates, and distortion of election information – each of these four issues undermine electoral integrity in Thailand, thus preventing citizens from voting in fully free and fair elections. More broadly, limited electoral quality poses a challenge to the promotion of democratic governance in the country. Given these challenges, the next chapter presents a set of recommendations to a range of actors to ensure that electoral integrity improves in Thailand, creating the right social and political environment for a strong democracy to flourish.

4. Recommendations

In the digital age, a shift towards Information Operations as a key strategy for any government to secure its political dominance threatens electoral integrity, thus undermining the role of elections in creating a democratic society. In Thailand, given the consolidation of the internet and its intersection with political participation, IOs are likely to have an impact in the upcoming general election of May 2023. Asia Centre presents the following set of recommendations to shield voters from the threats of IOs and all other forms of disinformation to ensure electoral integrity. Recommendations are directed at the international community, the Government, tech companies, political parties, the Electoral Commission, and civil society organisations.

International Community

The international community should:

- Use diplomatic channels to convey to the Thai government, its military and intelligence services stakeholders' concerns and calls to halt Information Operations by the responsible agencies in the government of Thailand.

- Identify, track and dialogue with foreign governments who engage in Information Operations in Thailand and dialogue with them to cease such actions

- Engage through the use of UN mechanisms such as UPR, SRs, and OHCHR working groups to request Thailand to cease its Information Operations that impact civil and political rights.

The Government should:

Government

- Be aware of the IOs undertaken by the various government agencies and cease non-democratic actions.

- Answer factually in Parliament questions related to Information Operations.

- Evaluate the current regulatory framework to introduce legislation and actions against rouge elements within the government that engage in disinformation.

- Engage with the international community, through the UN mechanisms and through dialogue with other relevant stakeholders, to receive feedback and implement suggestions to reduce the impact of IOs on election integrity.

Election Commission

The Electoral Commission should:

- Increase its efforts to ensure that electoral laws are on par with international standards to guarantee electoral integrity in the country.

- Establish an election fact-checking mechanism to debunk all forms of disinformation and verify information that circulates in the online sphere.

- Work with a range of stakeholders in Thailand, including the Parliament, political parties, the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, CSOs, and the media sector to devise new strategies to combat all forms of disinformation that impact election integrity.

Tech companies should:

Tech Companies

- Increase their efforts to monitor and remove accounts that are used for Information Operations in-between elections and during the election.

- Update and strengthen the manipulation and spam policies of their platforms to detect cases of foreign agents contributing to Information Operations.

- Be provocative in removing online content that is part of Information Operations and other disinformation campaigns, which can potentially mislead voters.

- Cooperate with the Government and local partners to strengthen media and information literacy among the population.

Political Parties

Political parties should:

- Call out Information Operations by the state sector and affiliated groups via UN mechanisms.

- Use their manifestos to explicitly reject the use of Information Operations to influence voters.

- Promote their official websites or social media sites as fact-checking sources and take measures that they themselves do not engage in disinformation.

- Provide safeguards for candidates who are targeted by Information Operations and disinformation campaigns, especially those from marginalised groups.

Civil society organisations should:

Civil Society

- Continue to monitor cases of Information Operations, document them, and report them via domestic and international mechanisms.

- Provide voter education and promote digital literacy among all groups of people in Thailand to help people identify Information Operations and protect themselves against all forms of disinformation.

- Work closely with tech companies to assist them in detecting cases of Information Operations and also in combating them.

- Initiate alternative fact-checking mechanisms for the public.

- Election NGOs must include observing information operations and disinformation campaigns which potentially affect electoral integrity.

5. Conclusion

Electoral integrity in Thailand has been in jeopardy since the implementation of parliamentary democracy in 1932, resulting in the low-quality of elections that, in-between military takeovers, have kept the kingdom on the democratic back foot.

Several factors have threatened electoral integrity over the years. Before the internet era, internationally below par electoral frameworks, periodic coups d'état that have almost always unseated democratically elected governments and pro-establishment protests that undermine the legitimacy of reformist governments chosen by the people contributed to Thailand's poor electoral integrity and democracy rankings.

Although these three factors are still relevant as of 2023, the main threats to electoral integrity have shifted towards the digital sphere since the popularisation of the internet in the early 2000s. State-sponsored disinformation campaigns – or Information Operations – have become the main strategy of the government, the military, pro-monarchy groups, and foreign agents to influence voters and gain political power at the expense of electoral integrity. Yet, the government has systematically and plausibly denied this.

This report has shown that Information Operations undermine electoral integrity in Thailand on at least four fronts. These include an increase in pro-establishment and biassed information that praises the government at the expense of opposition political groups, disinformation campaigns that target and harass political members of under-represented groups to decrease their political activism, the creation of distorted electoral information that creates confusion about the policies of political parties, and campaigns to spread inflammatory political content with the aim of further polarising Thai society. All these impacts of Information Operations have systematically put electoral integrity in jeopardy and put pro-establishment groups in a position of advantage compared to pro-democracy groups.

As the internet's importance in the political scene in Thailand will increase exponentially in the next years, Information Operations as the mainstream factor undermining democratic developments is also expected to become more prominent and more widely used by pro-establishment groups to undermine the legitimacy of pro-democracy groups. This does not mean that non-digital methods that have been curbing electoral democracy since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932 – namely restrictive electoral laws, military takeovers of democratically elected political representatives, and civil society protests – will not be relevant anymore. However we will witness a shift to the use of state-sponsored disinformation for democratic subversion and less frequent military takeovers.

Addressing the impacts of Information Operations requires action from a range of stakeholders in Thailand and beyond its borders. In this regard, the efforts of the international community are paramount to call out electoral integrity violations and use diplomatic channels to engage with the Thai government to address them. The Parliament needs to commit itself to amending restrictive electoral laws that do not allow the celebration of elections that meet international standards. In this process, cooperation between local authorities and the international community is essential. Tech companies also have the responsibility to create digital platforms that do not easily facilitate the spread of hate content that undermines political parties and candidates. Political parties need to closely monitor cases of Information Operations and call out these cases. Similarly, local CSOs must continue to work with local communities to assess the impacts of disinformation campaigns at a grassroots level.

While the digital sphere is evolving quickly, a collaborative effort to tackle the challenge that Information Operations represent for electoral integrity in Thailand is urgently needed. It is only with the effort of a range of actors, from local agents in Thailand to the international community, that the quality of elections in Thailand can improve.

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