

# Where have the media reformers gone?



Members of the press hold placards opposing a media bill ahead of the National Reform Steering Assembly debate as they submit a petition to NRSA deputy chairman Alongkorn Poribabot demanding the draft law be dropped, in this 2017 photo. THANAPARK JOHNTON

## ABROAD AT HOME

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**A**fter two decades marked by two military coups in 2006 and 2014, Thailand is supposed to be a “reformed” country by now. While all kinds of reforms were promised with each military takeover — from political parties, parliament and constitution to the bureaucracy, military and police — none has taken place. In fact, pledged reforms have gone in the opposite direction in the past. Nowhere is this reaction and restoration of old power and interests more evident than in Thailand’s media industry.

A quick glance at Thai politics since the 2014 putsch, which came on top of its 2006 forerunner, reveals political decay and deterioration in all of the major institutions. Political parties are run-of-the-mill, purpose-built to serve the powers-that-be. The Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) is a case in point, as a party of convenience and vested interests that was set up to back Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha as prime minister, working together with the coup-appointed Senate. The only party that dared to call for and act on political and economic reforms, namely the Future Forward Party, was duly dissolved by the Constitutional Court. Its successor vehicle, the Move Forward Party (MFP), is also at risk of disbandment because it keeps calling for reforms of outdated institutions that rule this land.

Instead of undergoing institutional reforms, the armed forces and the police have become more entrenched in their abusive and unaccountable ways, while the bureaucracy steers

Thailand's ship of state at a glacial pace, characterised by nepotism, patronage, and a lack of ideas in moving the country forward. But under the radar and less conspicuous is the media.

Two decades ago, a media reform movement had flourished. Media reformers from civil society comprising academics and journalists stood up to a newly elected politician, a brash and flamboyant leader of a new party called Thai Rak Thai who galloped into town like a cocky cowboy as if he could do anything and knew more than anyone else. His name was Thaksin Shinawatra.

He promised to kick out the International Monetary Fund (IMF), restore Thai pride, move the economy forward with cluster development projects and niche industries, impose "social order", make Thailand a regional hub, eradicate poverty, and so on. He was full of himself, brimming with ideas, surrounded by acolytes and business associates, with former classmates in the police and military. Within weeks of taking power in 2001, he began to exert influence over all of the major institutions mentioned earlier, including the media.

Thaksin's family-owned Shin Corp had bought iTV, a local independent TV channel sponsored by the military coup and political crisis in 1991-92. The spirit of reform in the 1990s called for a new TV channel outside the control of the state machinery and the military more directly. To be sure, the Thai army owns most of the terrestrial TV stations, operating them directly or leasing them to private operators for profit and income. The same goes for radio stations. Of 566 radio frequencies, the armed forces and the police own nearly half, with the rest under the control of state agencies. These TV and radio channels were (and are) operated and leased out for cushy income like cash cows.

Back in Thaksin's time, media professionals, civil society activists and academics fought back as state agencies used TV and radio channels in favour of government policies and posture. A major "media system reform project" was set out in 2003, headed by a local research institute and included a team of reform-minded academics and journalists who wanted to liberalise the media landscape. The aim was to make the electronic media independent and in service of society, rather than supervised by state agencies in favour of the government of the day.

When Thaksin's cousin became army chief in 2003 and media channels increasingly became government mouthpieces, the media reform project became more vociferous as if they were on the right side of history, fighting a civilian-led and abusive authoritarian regime. Ultimately, the media reformers

under this project helped undermine the Thaksin government's legitimacy and expose its wrongdoings. The project's participants later joined the anti-Thaksin movement that led to the coup in September 2006. The Shin Corp-owned iTV was converted into a public broadcasting service (PBS) in the process.

Yet the state of Thailand's media industry has remained the same, still owned and run by the very same armed forces and state agencies. TV and radio channels still put out pro-government news in support of the ruling royalist-military regime, but no one is taking them to task. In the Thaksin era, reformers who stood up to him may have been liable to increased scrutiny from the tax department, while vocal newspapers could see pricey advertisements by Thaksin-related companies withdrawn. Now reformers get a knock on the door from security officers and slapped with charges and summonses under suppressive censorship laws.

Not only are these media reformers nowhere to be seen — some have joined the other side, as in membership of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission, a body approved by the Senate. When you apply for an important public sector position in Thailand these days, the search committee does not look only at your merits and qualifications; they look to see who you are, whether you will rock the boat, and how much you will get on with their programme.

The implication is that the longer the military is in power, the more Thailand will suffer. Media reformers were so defiant against Thaksin because they could get away with it. The issue now is whether to be co-opted and rationalise for upward career mobility, or be left out with not much in return.

As the military's tentacles expand and extend to more places in Thai politics, economy and bureaucracy, longer-term structural damage is becoming evident. For example, the state-enterprise sector has seen more top brass joining boards of directors than ever. It will take a long time to undo this damage, and only a civilian-led government can get the job done.

For media reformers who have seen the political vicissitudes of the past two decades, the fight was little more than a power contest all along. That it was the good guys versus the bad guys was a concocted myth.

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## TELECOMMUNICATIONS

AUCTIONS OF  
71 RADIO FREQUENCIES

## STARTING BID PRICES

## BID PRICE INCREASE PER ROUND (BAHT)

• 40-60 million baht	500,000
• 30-39.99 million baht	400,000
• 20-29.99 million baht	300,000
• 10-19.99 million baht	200,000
• 1-9.99 million baht	50,000
• 400,000-999,999 baht	20,000
• 100,000-399,999 baht	4,000

Source: NBTC

BANGKOK POST GRAPHICS

Upcoming frequency auction  
expected to generate B500m

## KOMSAN TORTERMASANA

Roughly 500 million baht is expected to be generated from the auction of 71 radio frequency ranges used for FM broadcasting by radio stations, scheduled to take place on Monday, according to the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC).

The event is part of a transformation from a state-owned frequency holding system to a licensing regime, which is due to start on April 4, according to the NBTC's master plan for radio broadcasting.

NBTC acting secretary-general Trainat Viriyasirikul said the regulator originally allotted 74 radio frequency ranges for auction. However, one of them had no bidder and another two saw interested bidders fail to place bank guarantees for the auction.

"The NBTC office will ask the board to find a solution for these three radio frequency bands. They could be put up for new auction or allocated for public use," Mr Trainat said.

A mock auction was held yesterday at the Centra by Centara Government Complex Hotel & Convention Centre in Chaeng Watthana.

A total of 30 companies are scheduled to participate in the bidding on Monday, including state-owned broadcaster MCOT, which will contest for 55 frequencies — the largest amount among contestants.

Under the auction, eight frequency ranges will be allotted for Bangkok, six for the Central Plains, 16 for the North, 20 for the South and 21 for the Northeast.

The starting bid prices for eight frequencies allotted for Bangkok are in the range of 36.3-54.8 million baht, depending on frequencies. In other regions, starting bid prices range from 105,000 baht to 3.19 million baht.

A 60-minute timeframe is set for each frequency auction. Participants must place their first bid within five minutes, or else they will be eliminated and have their bank guarantees confiscated.

If more than one bidder place equal bid prices, another five minutes of a new auction round will be held.

If no one offers higher bid prices, lucky draws will be held to select the winner.

The bid winners are obliged to pay for frequency licenses by March 24. A license term is seven years.

The 106.5-megahertz frequency allocated for Bangkok is quoted with the highest starting bid price in the country at 54.8 million baht. GMM Media Plc is the only contender for the frequency allotted for the capital. In Bangkok, each of the eight frequencies has only one bidder.

The 98.5MHz frequency allotted for Khon Kaen is expected to see the most intense competition with six contestants — the highest number of participants in the country.