

# THE BIG INTERVIEW

**112WATCH** interviews Joshua Kurlantzick, senior fellow at the Council of Foreign Relations in Washington DC, on the impact of Article 112 on the future of Thailand.

**112WATCH:** King Vajiralongkorn has been on the throne for almost 6 years now. How do you assess his role and position, given that the monarchy has long been considered an important political institution in Thailand?

**Kurlantzick:** This king clearly has taken Thailand farther from being a constitutional monarchy, which it never truly was under Rama IX, but at least it was closer to being under Rama IX. Instead, King Vajiralongkorn, with the support of some of his advisors and some arch-royalists, has moved the monarchy back in the direction of the absolute monarchy that existed before the revolution of 1932. His moves to directly intervene in an election, to take personal control of assets under the Crown Property Bureau, worth probably at least US\$30 billion if not more (rather than allowing them to be handled by professional money managers), to demand changes to the constitution and also full prostration, all suggest a slide toward absolute monarchy. (Of course, there was also the suspicious disappearance in 2018 of the statute commemorating the end of the absolute monarchy, although that cannot be blamed directly on Rama X.)

He is now, in many ways, far more powerful than his father – except that his father was able to draw on extensive popular support, and love, to enhance his aura and, at times, allow him to use the role of the monarch for good. I do not think Rama X can take Thailand all the way back to absolute monarchy, but he has moved the royal institution in that direction. Lacking such popular support, though, it is hard to tell whether Rama X, despite all the power he has amassed, might actually undermine the monarchy in the long-term. He may do so because he is not able to draw upon the popular support his father enjoyed, and in fact has engendered the most open discussion of, and protest against, the monarchy in recent Thai history.

**112WATCH:** Were you surprised to see the protests, launched in 2020, with the reform of the monarchy as a key agenda? In your view, what were the driving forces behind such an agenda?

**Kurlantzick:** No, I cannot say I was surprised. There had been an undercurrent of anger at the monarchy since the transition, and there is such a negative feeling among young Thais about virtually everything – the failure of any real democratic transition, the continuing destruction of anyone or any parties that try to push forward democratic

reform, the lousy job market, the poor education system. Not all of that can be placed at the feet of the king, of course, and a lot of the protests did focus on these other issues – the poor job market, the restrictive education system that is not equipped to prepare Thais for higher-value jobs, the managed 2019 election, the crackdown on the Future Forward party, etc. But I think just the swelling and swelling of anger has now broken the dam and people have started to talk more openly about monarchical reform, even though that discussion is now facing severe repression in the form of lese-majeste laws.

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**112WATCH:** The discursive use of lese-majeste law has been on the rise. The monarchy seems to be disinterested in accepting the reform. Should this continue, how will it impact the political trajectory in Thailand?

**Kurlantzick:** I think Thailand is headed for a major clash, and it depends in part on the next election. If the next election continues to maintain the stage-managed nature of the 2019 election (and the recent vote in parliament to favour small parties, which will help pro-military parties and hurt Pheu Thai and possibly other pro-democracy parties, is not a good sign of a fair election coming), and young Thais remain so desperate, and lese-majeste usage continues to rise, and Thailand heads for a possible recession and a lot of economic pain, I just see the possibility of explosive anger in the streets, on the



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level of some of the worst incidents of Thailand's past. Beyond that, I really don't know what will happen.

**112WATCH:** Thailand is seen having tilted toward China in recent years. Observers believe that the closer relationship with China has allowed Thailand to behave undemocratically. Do you agree with this statement?

**Kurlantzick:** I'd rather not answer this question in detail as I talk about it extensively in a forthcoming book. I don't think Thailand has tilted strategically toward China in the past few years. Obviously, China is the dominant economic force in Southeast Asia now, despite China's own major domestic problems, including its zero-COVID strategy, which is killing its economy and alienating its own people and hurting global supply chains. But I think Prime Minister Prayuth and the Royal Thai Army actually has moved back more closely toward the United States strategically. As far as China allowing Thailand to behave undemocratically, there is perhaps some element to that, but I think Thailand's own domestic factors are the main reasons for its democratic regression.

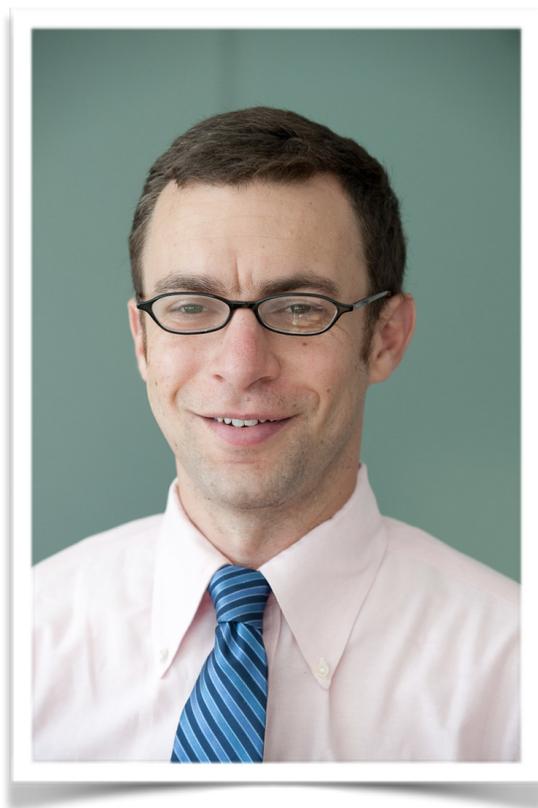
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**112WATCH:** How can the international community, particularly the United States, help Thailand move ahead with the sensitive issues of lese-majeste and especially the reform of the monarchy?

**Kurlantzick:** I think it is up to Thailand to sort these issues out. No other country, including the United States, is going to get involved with the issue of lese-majeste or monarchical reform in Thailand. Leading democracies – not just the United States but also Asian democracies, Australia, the European Union – can support truly free and fair elections in Thailand, and criticise a deteriorating legal system and increasing military power. But other countries are not going to play a major role in reforming Thailand's monarchy. Thailand has to do that for itself, in my humble opinion.



**Joshua Kurlantzick:** senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR). He is the author, most recently, of *A Great Place to Have a War: America in Laos and the Birth of a Military CIA*.