

RED SHIRTS

Thailand : Two Elites and a Proletariat

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The two month long street protests in Bangkok by thousands of 'red shirt' opponents of the Abhisit Vejjajiva government demanding fresh elections and the violence that followed has been described as the worst conflict Thailand has ever faced in its modern history. It left in its wake at least 88 dead, hundreds injured and close to US\$2 billion worth of property destroyed, the toll being much worse in all aspects than previous political violence of October 1976 and May 1992.

Much of the loss of life and damage came in mid-May when the army brutally cracked down on the protestors using trained snipers and war weapons to take on street demonstrators armed mostly with slingshots, burning tyres and Molotov cocktails. Angry, retreating dissenters in turn set fire to over two dozen buildings in Bangkok including Central World, the second largest shopping mall in South East Asia.

How all this came about, in what seemed to be one of Asia's most stable countries, is a long and complex tale. There are already many versions, each one coloured by the prejudices of those who tell it.

As an outsider, who has spent over a decade reporting out of Thailand, this correspondent's version is fairly straight-forward—a well entrenched but ageing King is vying for power with an ambitious and charismatic capitalist and the paradoxical result is a rebirth of the country's long dormant left movement. The real question to ask now is whether the new baby will be healthy or stillborn?

THE THREE CAMPS

The Thai story essentially involves three political and social camps—the traditional elite, the emerging new elite and the rural/urban poor.

The first camp is represented by the long reigning but aged King Bhumibol Adulyadej and consists of the military, the bureaucracy, the banking oligarchs and Bangkok-centric political parties like the Democrat Party of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. Close allies of the United States during the Cold War, they have been in power for much of the last century and don't want anyone to challenge the cosy political, economic and cultural arrangements they have worked out over the years.

Facing them off, for the past decade or so, is a coalition of business, regional and rural interest groups led by the corrupt but also clever and charismatic telecom tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra. Swept into power in the 2001 general elections his dream—before he was ousted in September 2006 by a military coup—was to build a modern capitalist Thailand with a strong welfare state like Singapore or Malaysia. He, of course, was to perpetually play the role of Lee Kuan Yew or Mahatir Mohammad.

As far as faith in democratic institutions or processes goes, both the traditional and the new elite would ideally preferring to rule without any accountability or challenge

from rivals. Neither of them—one representing feudal and the other corporate interests—really has any love for democracy or what it entails.

The royalists, who have dominated Thailand for many decades now, have regularly backed or utilised military coups to get their way—there being nothing less than 20 coups in the last 77 years. While occasionally there has been divergence between the monarchy and the military mostly the two have cosily waltzed together, keeping all rivals off the dance floor with a mix of native guile and naked force.

Even in the ongoing crisis for example the Thai traditional elite have shown their contempt for democratic norms. In 2005 when Thaksin got re-elected in a landslide victory they first got their 'yellow shirt' supporters to organise raucous street protests against his government and then openly backed a military coup against him the following year. The royalist supporters in the Thai media and civil society even perversely justified the coup against a popularly elected Prime Minister as being a 'democratic' one, glossing over the fact that the Thai military itself was certainly not a paragon of clean governance or democratic values.

Not content with all this, when Thaksin's parties won the 2007 general election once again the King's men pressurised the judiciary and other institutions to keep his nominees out of power, under one pretext or the other. 'Yellow shirt' pro-royalist mobs who vandalized key institutions in Bangkok and in late 2008 even closed down the Bangkok international airport did not face any prosecution.

In their Thaksin-phobia the monarchists ended up demolishing Thailand's fledgling democracy, like someone setting fire to their own house to get rid of an intruding thief. Even after all the recent violence in Bangkok the traditional elite does not seem to have learnt any lessons and continues on with its violation of all democratic principles—an approach that surely spells disaster for Thailand.

Thaksin, on his part, despite being elected 'democratically' with overwhelming majorities in three successive national polls since 2001, used power in a disturbingly authoritarian manner during his reign. He tried to muzzle media critical of him, carried out a bogus 'war on drugs' that took the lives of over 2500 people in extra-judicial killings and bent rules to suit his business and family interests. In other words, though he has certainly been wronged by his more established rivals Thaksin is no real democrat either.

Another characteristic both the traditional and new Thai elite share in common is the fact that, despite all their protestations of 'concern for the poor', both have a lot of undeserved wealth to protect. For example the King of Thailand was ranked by Forbes magazine in 2008 as being the richest monarch in the world and worth over US\$37 billion. Thaksin Shinawatra, on the other hand, became the richest businessman in Thailand in less than a decade during the late eighties by cornering television, mobile and satellite broadcasting monopolies and for him getting back to power is the key to maintaining these ill-gotten riches.

The third camp involved in the Thai political dynamic—the rural and urban poor—mostly hail from the much-neglected North and Northeast Thailand and are the only ones who have a stake in establishing democratic institutions and processes. The consistent demand among the red shirts protesting in Bangkok recently for example was for holding fresh elections, respecting democratic norms and restoration of the country's 1997 Constitution, which gave wide ranging powers to citizens to hold their rulers accountable.

THREE PROCESSES

The three camps described above are participants in three parallel processes, which are at work in Thai society, each adding to the tensions in its own way.

The first process involves intense rivalry between different business lobbies, with most Thai political parties being fronts for one lobby or the other. For a decade since the mid-1980s, Thailand was one of the fastest growing economies in the world and at that time the competition was for lucrative government concessions and contracts- like the monopolies Thaksin managed to get hold of using political connections.

In 1997 however, when the Asian economic crisis saw the fortunes of many completely wiped out, the race was to organise state-sponsored bailouts for failed businesses. Even in the current Thai crisis, behind the scenes, there are powerful business lobbies at work, adding to suspicions about the true motivations of politicians espousing either 'democracy' or 'national security'.

The second process at work in Thailand—the growing aspirations as also a class consciousness of ordinary Thais—is also due to economic growth within the last three decades. Since the mid-eighties the country has witnessed a tripling of the average real per capita income. In this period there have also been dramatic changes in the kind of work that most Thais are doing. Compared to a generation ago when agriculture was the livelihood for two-thirds of households now less than two-fifths are engaged in the profession. The surplus labour over the years has been typically absorbed in the growing service and industrial sectors resulting in better cash incomes but also higher expectations among ordinary Thais of a better share of national wealth.

The biggest losers of the 1997 Asian economic crisis were people from the north-east of Thailand, an agriculturally poor area with low social indicators and traditionally the source of Thailand's cheap labour for its tourism and industrial sectors. A very large number of the rural migrant labour working in Bangkok—an estimated 3 million of them- lost livelihoods, savings and real incomes.

In turn, it was also these same folks who benefited most from Thaksin's populist social welfare initiatives like the universal health care scheme, cheap credit to farmers and investment in rural enterprises, all of which he initiated during his first term in power. A study by the Thailand Development Research Institute credits Thaksin's '30 baht' health insurance scheme with lifting at least a million people above the poverty line. And according to the UNDP's Human Development Report on Thailand for 2009, national poverty fell from 21 to 8.5 percent between 2000 and 2007- the same period when Thaksin was Prime Minister.

However in the current Thai turmoil, the anger of these red shirts wearing rural folk is not just because they are worried about discontinuation of the economic benefits that Thaksin showered on them. It is equally and even more so because they feel the traditional Thai elite has treated their political choices with contempt and them personally like idiots.

There has always been historic resentment among Thailand's north-easterners over the Thai elite in Bangkok looking down upon them culturally and now they have taken Thaksin's ouster from power in 2006 through a military coup as a direct attack on themselves.

WHAT NEXT FOR THAILAND?

While for the time being things have quietened down in Bangkok and other parts of Thailand and the leadership of the red shirts surrendered to the authorities, by no means has the conflict really ended. There is a strong sense everywhere that in the days and months to come the red versus yellow battle will continue and could even lead to a full-fledged civil war.

There are simply too many unresolved issues in the country for peace and normalcy to return so easily. To begin with is the issue of holding fresh elections and also under what conditions.

The Democrat Party of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is not capable of winning a national election all by its own and so will try to cling on to power for as long as possible. Given the continued popularity of Thaksin and numerical superiority of his followers the Puea Thai Party he backs is sure to win despite many of their leaders being banned from politics or being under arrest.

Secondly there is the contentious issue of whether or not to restore the 1997 Constitution, arguably the most democratic in much of Asia and one that was forged through widespread public consultation in the country. The Democrat Party and its backers among the Thai elite want the new Constitution imposed by the military coup of 2006 to continue as they feel this is advantageous to them.

Then there is the question of the monarchy and its role in Thailand. The current King Bhumibol Adulyadej has been around for over six decades but is now extremely sick. His death is likely to set off a bitter war for succession and even the royalists fear now that after the current king there may be no one to replace him in a viable manner. In the meanwhile there is also a not-so-subtle undercurrent of republicanism emerging within the red shirt movement. Though they have not said anything against the monarch directly, the red shirts have openly attacked some of the King's closest aides like Privy Councillor general Prem Tinsulananda of being behind the 2006 coup against Thaksin.

The lack of political representation of marginalized sections of Thai society like farmers, workers, urban poor also continues to be a big problem. Anyone surveying the spectrum of political parties in Thailand currently can easily see that every one of them is a front for one business lobby or the other and generally right of centre. If this 'red' trend consolidates it could easily become the basis of an independent left movement that is both anti-monarchist and anti-capitalist at the same time. In a country with a long history of suppression of anything left-wing—including garden variety social democrats and normal trade unions—a new left party or coalition under competent leadership could in one stroke transform Thai society forever. □□□