

Understanding Thailand's political crisis

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DUNCAN MCCARGO, APR 24 2009

When Asian leaders attending a summit meeting – including the prime ministers of China and Japan – had to be whisked out of a besieged luxury Pattaya hotel by helicopter on 11 April, it was official: Thailand is in deep political trouble. In fact, Thailand has been in the throes of an extended crisis since late 2005, when groups opposed to the former prime minister – and sometime Manchester City owner – Thaksin Shinawatra began mobilising against him in Bangkok. Thaksin was toppled a year later in a military coup by generals who accused him of disloyalty to the monarchy and abuse of power. Since then, pro and anti-Thaksin forces have been struggling to gain the initiative. This is not a classic power struggle between state and non-state actors; here, the state itself is split. While most military officers support the palace and what I term 'network monarchy' (an extended set of royalist alliances), many police officers sympathise with Thaksin – an ex-cop himself – and civilian bureaucrats are divided into different factions.

And not just the bureaucrats: for more than a year, the split between yellow shirts (pro-monarchy, anti-Thaksin) and red shirts (pro-Thaksin, though not necessarily anti-monarchy) has torn married couples, families, work colleagues and lifelong friends asunder. Unrest has peaked in various waves, most recently with the long occupation of Government House by PAD (People's Alliance for Democracy) yellow shirts, culminating in the airport seizures of December 2008; and the actions by UDD (United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship) red shirts in April 2009, culminating in the disruption of the ASEAN+3 summit in Pattaya on 11 April and the ambush of the prime minister at the Interior Ministry the following day. Though ostensibly non-violent, both movements have used weapons, and members of both groups have been killed in clashes with state forces, or with one another. Thailand has become a colour-coded, deeply divided society. More than 40 per cent of the population favours one side or other, and very few people can remain neutral. Some Thais now keep their social circles in two different groups, while others have simply cut themselves off from those they disagree with politically. Platitudes about Thailand as a deeply unified, peace-loving Buddhist society, where everyone loves the monarchy and nobody is excluded, are all the more visible for what they are – useful but empty myths.

The standard explanations for the conflict, trotted out in lots of journalistic reports, are extremely simplistic. We are often told that the yellow shirts are an elite group of urban elites, in contrast to the rural poor who support Thaksin. This is a popular oversimplification that can be traced back to Thai politician scientist Anek Laothamatas's notion of Thailand as 'two democracies', an idea derived from Samuel Huntington. According to this reading, the rural masses elect politicians who are in turn rejected by the urban elites through a variety of methods. In practice it just isn't that simple. For a start, many of the 'rural poor', registered to vote in the North and Northeast, actually live and work in Bangkok. All they leave at home are their house registration documents, since voter registration officials in the capital are reluctant to allow casual workers from the provinces to formalise their residence in the capital. In many villages in Northeastern provinces such as Roi Et, it is hard to find an adult of working age except during the rice planting and harvesting periods – and at elections, when registered voters all go home to visit their elderly relatives and collect illegal payments from vote canvassers. Meanwhile the 'town districts' of rural provinces, where much of the permanent adult population of those provinces actually live, have electoral characteristics quite similar to those of Bangkok. In Thailand, there is an enormous amount of the rural in the urban, and a good deal of the urban in the rural. And in any case, the urban/rural split does not map neatly onto the red/yellow divide. Many of the most loyal supporters of the PAD were actually from the countryside, especially – though by no means exclusively – from the South. Surprisingly, many of them were middle-aged and female. During fieldwork last year, I found that very few of

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my Thai friends were joining the PAD demonstrations, but a good number of their parents attended regularly. I had the odd experience being out in a restaurant at 10.30 pm with Thai friends in their 30s who were phoning their mothers and asking them when they were going home from the PAD rallies outside Government House. It was a complete reversal of the social roles you might expect from young adults and their parents. Similarly, those who have observed the UDD demonstrations at close hand report that many people taking part were certainly not members of the poor, either urban or rural.

Why has Thailand been convulsed by these protests? Both groups claim they stand for democracy. One UDD leader told me when I interviewed him in December that the PAD did not support the sovereignty of the people. Okay, I asked him, so I assume you do stand for the sovereignty of the people? No, he replied, I don't – but for different reasons. Neither side really stands for democracy as understood in the west. Supporters of the two groups are not really separated by different ideologies, tempting though it is to construct arguments along these lines. To a large extent, the PAD and UDD are mirror images of each other. After all, Sondhi Limthongkul, the main PAD leader, was formerly a close friend of Thaksin Shinawatra. Rather, both sides are animated by a common anxiety. The legitimacy of the Thai state is not based on parliaments, political parties, prime ministers or elections, but on the well-worn shibboleth 'Nation, Religion, King'. The much revered King Bhumibol is the world's longest serving monarch, now more than eighty years old. Most Thais can scarcely dare to imagine life without him. Both yellow shirts and red shirts are acting out their fears about the crisis that may follow the royal succession. Clashes between these colour coded groups do not reflect different conceptions of democracy. Rather, the protests we have seen recently in Pattaya and Bangkok are just increasingly realistic dress rehearsals for the much bigger showdown that may lie ahead.

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