

The would-be revolution in Thailand

Tuesday 30 September 2008, by [CHANYAPATE Chanida](#), [CHOMTHONGDI Jacques-chai](#) (Date first published: 29 September 2008).

Events in Thailand in the past few months have baffled many people, not just outside, but also within Thailand. A large group of protestors, mainly comprising middle aged men and women, have occupied the grounds of Government House under the banner of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), demanding the removal of the democratically elected Prime Minister Samak Sundravej and his People's Power Party (PPP). Both sides - PAD and PPP — claim to represent people's power, and published opinions on this phenomenon swing between the two extremes: "the tyranny of the minority" according to Thitinan Pongsudhirak (*Bangkok Post*, September 1, 2008) or "the tyranny of the majority" according to Sutthichai Yoon (*The Nation*, September 11, 2008).

Among Thai NGOs and social movements who have built their credibility on opposing dictatorship and promoting participatory democracy, and who have in the past employed street protests and blockades to pressure the authorities and publicize their demands, there has been much internal debate on what positions to take. Several public discussion fora have been organized to help society find ways out of the political deadlock. This article summarizes these discussions and actions among those of us who find ourselves caught in the middle of the verbal battle that has been raging on and off for the best part of the last two years.

In early 2006, at the height of the campaign against former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (NGO-COD) — the main network of NGOs and people's organizations — were visible supporters of the PAD. Key NGO-COD members joined several of their friends and affiliates who became PAD leaders giving speeches on the PAD stage. The main objective was to raise public awareness of the issues of concern to the majority. These were the Thaksin government's policies, ranging from the effects of trade liberalization on small farmers and producers, privatization and the poor's access to energy and water, drug patents and access to medicines, etc., and their impact on ordinary people. It was noted that the PAD supporters, at times numbering over a hundred thousand, were readily appreciative of these more progressive analyses, not least because they gave fuel to the fire of their rallying call "Thaksin, get out!"

FTA Watch, a coalition of NGOs, academics and social movements of which Focus is a member, had been buoyed by the success in physically halting the 6th Thailand-US free trade negotiation round two months before the PAD was formed. The appearance of the PAD offered a new opportunity to debunk the myth of free trade and to expand their case against future FTA negotiations.

In response to the PAD, about 8,000 villagers from the North and Northeast regions, calling themselves the "Caravan of the Poor for Democracy" rode on motorized farm wagons to camp at a park just outside Bangkok to show support for Thaksin and his decision to hold a snap election as a way to end the PAD protest. Their call was simple: let democracy run its course. They reasoned that so far their people were satisfied with what they got from the Thaksin government, i.e., access to loans from the one million baht village funds, land title deeds for some occupiers of degraded forest reserves, and the thirty-baht universal healthcare scheme, and they wanted to make sure the promised two head of cattle per household were duly delivered. This side was given space to voice their opinions at a forum organized by Focus at Chulalongkorn University at the height of the confrontation.

An interesting fact was that one of the 15 leaders of the Caravan of the Poor was also a leader of the Assembly of the Poor (AoP) from Roi-Et province. While the official position of the AoP - a national coalition of social movements — was non-involvement in what they saw as turf-fighting between political elites, this leader decided to seek a new platform to voice her opinion.

When the Thaksin government went for a snap election in April 2006 to seek a new mandate, the Thai electorate was split. Although the major opposition parties boycotted the election, twelve million voted for Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party while ten million simply voted 'no' to express their opposition.

The military coup d'état of September 19, 2006, despite its rationale of preventing widespread bloodshed between the pro and anti-Thaksin mobs and calling for national unity, was an obvious attempt by the power bloc, comprising the military, the bureaucracy and the judiciary loyal to the King, to wipe out the power embedded in not just Thaksin, but all visible supporters of the party. Although some sectors welcomed the coup, Focus was not alone in denouncing the coup as "the most regrettable setback in the country's democratization process".

Following the April 2006 election, Thaksin's Thai Rak Party was found by the courts to have broken the law in trying to win uncontested constituency elections (which required a minimum number of votes to be valid). Under the law at that time, this would have led to the dissolution of the Thai Rak Thai party. But then, under retroactive application of a provision of the 2006 interim constitution written by a military-appointed committee after the offence was committed, all 111 Thai Rak Thai party executives were banned from politics for five years.

At the Thai Social Forum in October 2006, thousands of Thai activists including NGOs, farmers and workers gathered and marched in defiance of military rule, calling for progressive social and political reform. Subsequently various open fora debated the content of the new constitution throughout most of 2007. The common understanding was that these voices were independent of both the PAD and the Caravan of the Poor and other pro-Thaksin groups.

FTA Watch led a campaign specifically on the inclusion in the constitution of an article requiring prior public participation and parliamentary approval of all trade and partnership negotiations with foreign countries. When the draft constitution was put to the national referendum in August 2007, members of the NGO Coordinating Committee, including FTA Watch, decided against it for the simple reason that overall the new constitution gave more power to the military, the judiciary and the bureaucracy than to the ordinary people. The NGO-COD and FTA Watch also joined forces with the larger independent NGOs, workers and farmers' groups in a protest blockade of the final meetings of the coup-installed National Legislative Assembly that was rushing through other pieces of legislation, particularly the Internal Security Bill, that were deemed in violation of human rights. The argument was that with a new constitution passed and elections scheduled, there was no necessity for an un-elected assembly to hurriedly pass legislation that could be left for an elected assembly to deliberate in a month's time.

In the meantime, a number of Thaksin's supporters were joined by a number of anti-coup activists to form the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) to organize rallies against the military and the coup-installed government. Among other things, they also called for rejection of the new constitution.

The constitution, however, was passed by about 60% majority vote in the August 2007 national referendum, after a relentless pro-constitution propaganda effort by the military and the government they had installed. Although the new constitution was designed to prevent Thaksin's return to power, the elections of December 2007 saw a Thai Rak Thai comeback. Re-branded as the People's

Power Party, with the same membership base, MPs and buildings, and almost the same logo as the Thai Rak Thai party, and led by Samak Sundaravej, a veteran politician hand-picked by Thaksin, along with the wives, relatives and in-laws of the 111 banned Thai Rak Thai Party executives, PPP won the highest number of seats in the parliament, although not quite enough to form a government in its own right.

When it became obvious that the new coalition government's first objective was to amend the new constitution in order to reverse the ban imposed on the Thai Rak Thai party, the PAD, which had been dormant during the interim government installed by the coup, re-mobilize to stop this move. The NGO Coordinating Committee and their networks, however, took a different position arguing that any amendment must follow a process of inclusive popular debate and approval by referendum.

Although the Samak government backed off from the constitutional amendments, the PAD stepped up their demands to include the removal of Samak and his "proxy" government altogether. Both Samak and the PAD leaders called upon all the people to take sides. After occupying a major intersection for weeks, the PAD declared their intent of advancing towards their "last battle" and occupied Government House.

The response from the NGOs and people's organizations was split for the first time in history. The NGO-COD of the Southern Region openly declared its support for the PAD while the national-level and other regional committees chose not to. Several state enterprise workers' unions and several urban and rural community groups also joined PAD, while the rest remained sceptical.

At the last count, the politically neutral silent majority that refuses to take sides amounted in Bangkok, where PAD is thought to be strong, to 60%, while the PAD received 20.5%, and the Samak government, 19.6%. In the north-eastern province of Nakhon Ratchasima, thought to be a pro-Thaksin area, the silent majority was even higher at 65.8%, with the PAD and the government 17.7% and 16.5% respectively (ABAC and Rajabhat University polls reported in the Bangkok Post, September 8, 2008).

The PAD as it is currently constituted calls itself the "force of purity". It is a motley group comprising Bangkok middle-class followers of media personality and entrepreneur Sondhi Limthongkul and ex-politician and leader of a non-mainstream Buddhist community Chamlong Srimuang. It also includes supporters of state enterprise union leader Somsak Kosaisuk. Joining these are some community-level organizations from the East, Northeast and the South loosely connected to the Campaign for Popular Democracy led by Piphob Thongchai and Suriyasai Katasila, and finally an academic turned opposition politician, Somkiat Pongpaibun, who was long known as advisor of the Assembly of the Poor.

It is thus hardly surprising that their long-term goals have not been expressed in a coherent way, sometimes even in a contradictory way. What is clear is the PAD's staunchly nationalist approach of reaffirming their allegiance to the nation, monarchy, and religion. They speak of a "sacred mission" to eradicate the country of "the evil of money politics" as epitomized by Thaksin and his associates in the "Thaksin regime" (PAD Announcement No. 20) which had been inherited by Samak and the People's Power Party. But both sides have one thing in common; they keep hurling lese majeste charges at each other.

Many may agree with the problem of money in politics. This operates at the level of vote-buying, mostly in rural areas, although the middle-class analysis of this is quite shallow. It also works at the level of MP-buying. This was most blatantly practiced by Thaksin, who recruited local politicians like paid employees of a company of which he was a CEO.

But many also have concerns about the “new politics” model floated by the PAD as an antidote to the problem.

In order to break the patronage system dominated by local “canvassers”, the PAD’s idea is to reduce the number of representatives directly elected from geographical constituencies by balancing these with “public representatives” selected from occupation- or group-based constituencies.

There are widespread concerns about how this can in practice preserve the principle of equal and universal voting rights. First there has been some confusion about how the representatives of occupations or groups will be chosen. Are they appointed, as early PAD statements seem to show? If so, by whom? Or are they elected? And if so, how would the problem of money politics be prevented from re-appearing? This is not to mention the near impossible task of classifying the population by occupation.

If vote-buying is the root of the problem of Thai democracy, as the PAD claims, surely the problem-solving process starts by investigating its rationale and proposing solutions among the people assumed to be guilty of vote-selling, not by depriving them of their voting rights or by decreasing the weight of their votes.

In July, Thaksin’s wife, Podjaman, was sentenced to three years in jail for tax evasion, the first in a series of corruption cases brought against the Thaksin family and Thai Rak Thai politicians. She and Thaksin then slipped bail and fled the country. Some activists want to take advantage of the sense of collective triumph over this to take a short-cut to a new political beginning by rooting out Thaksin’s political cohorts once and for all. But many are wary of the nationalist and royalist sentiments that seem to guide the PAD’s ideas of political change, not least because such changes are more likely be regressive than otherwise.

The PAD has used unprecedented media power and organization in getting aunties, uncles and parents, and later young students, to sacrifice the comfort of their homes to camp out in the streets and in the grounds of Government House. Yet many cannot agree with their unquestioned belief, reinforced in daily pronouncements by their core leaders, that their’s is the force of good and that anybody who disagrees with them is consequently unredeemably bad. This mirrors the passion that authoritarian Thaksin instilled in his followers.

The dust and din of the battle of words and the threats of violent clashes have drowned out the voice of a minority that tries to propose a more progressive agenda for political reform, including a broader-based participatory process. Long seen as an enemy by the pro-Thaksin side, as soon as this part of civil society challenges, or even questions, the PAD, it immediately falls victim to regular virulent attacks from the PAD stage and through its TV and press media outlets.

Whatever is thought of their tactics, the PAD has made one noteworthy step for the Thai society: it has made its oppositional voice heard against the monopoly of state power by politicians with vested interests and has created a space to challenge the legitimacy of the government. The fact that the PAD has been able to occupy Government House for over a month, forcing the PM and Cabinet to work elsewhere, that the PAD leaders can ignore court summons, and that even under emergency powers, the security forces seem reluctant to move against them, leads to the conclusion there is no shortage of tacit supporters and sympathizers, particularly in high places. But while the PAD may enjoy the secret support of the privileged and powerful, what is lacking is the voice of the poor and the underprivileged.

The test of whether the PAD can instigate positive changes does not depend on how long it can occupy the Government House, but on how it can generate a more inclusive political and social

reform process. New politics would require new processes that are not dictated by one group, but that guarantees equal participation of all independent-minded groups.

P.S.

* From Focus on Trade #143, September 2008.

* Chanida Chanyapate is the coordinator of Focus on the Global South and Jacques-chai Chomthongdi is a research associate. Both are working with Focus' Thailand programme.