

War without limits among the privileged - An unending political crisis in Thailand

Tuesday 30 September 2008, by [SABAI Danielle](#), [SANUK Jean](#) (Date first published: 10 September 2008).

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Thailand

Since the beginning of 2006, a major crisis has opened up between various factions of the Thai army, monarchy and the bourgeoisie for control of state power and the key to control of public contracts and mega-investment projects.

The first phase of the struggle started in September 2005 and culminated in the coup d'état of September 19, 2006 [[1](#)]. It was organized and carried out by a heterogeneous alliance: the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). This grouping is composed of businessmen, monarchists, factions of the army and members of the Democratic Party, traditionally allied to the military and the monarchy.

In a country where there is a total confusion between politics and business, this coalition, led by a press baron Sondhi Limtongkul and grouping together the old Establishment, did not like having been evicted from power by Thaksin Shinawatra, who had come to power through democratic elections in 2001 and was triumphantly re-elected in 2005. Under the guidance of Thaksin and his party the Thai Rak Thai, large "friendly" contractors had succeeded in dominating the political and economic life of the country, managing the latter to further their interests [[2](#)].

Financial interests and the power of the royal family, but also of the army and certain "great financial families" unrelated to the Thaksin clan were very seriously threatened.

Using nationalist themes and a legitimate frustration with corruption, the PAD had succeeded in broadly mobilizing the middle class of Bangkok against the Thaksin government in 2006. In spite of mass and continuous demonstrations for nearly one year, Thaksin's popularity among the masses remained unshaken and his opponents found an alternative route to power only through the coup d'état of September 19, 2006.

Business as usual

There followed a 15 month period of an inept government appointed by the military who highlighted the fact that, if there had been a change of scenery and actors, it was business as usual, whereas the situation of the most deprived worsened because of a rapid rise in the cost of living.

The junta made use of these fifteen months to write a new constitution whose objective was to reduce the power of the Prime Minister and the executive, to reinforce the leading role of the army

and to limit considerably the power of elected politicians. All this was done to reduce the influence of Thaksin: the dissolution of the Thai Rak Thai (TRT), prohibition of political activity of 111 of its top cadres, a ban on campaigning for a “no” vote at the time of the referendum on the approval of the new constitution, obstacles to the candidacy of ex-members of the TRT at the time of the legislative elections of December 23, 2007. Despite all the junta’s attempts, the elections returned to power those who had been driven out of it. The People’s Power Party (PPP), formed to replace the Thai Rak Thai, was elected with a large majority whereas the Democratic Party, supported by the ruling junta, was far behind. The military, reeling from their defeat initially sought to slacken their relationship to the PPP, which resulted in particular in the return from exile of Pojaman Shinawatra, soon followed by Thaksin, her husband.

The crisis resurfaced when the opponents of Thaksin sought to transform the result of the elections to their advantage by invalidating some of the PPP candidates thanks to the kindness of judges of the constitutional court, all faithful “royalists” and pro-coup. In response, the government of Samak Sundaravej sought to amend the new constitution in order to secure itself against a possible dissolution of the PPP. At the same time, the government resumed the populist policy of its Thaksin predecessor, reinforcing its strength among the rural voters of the North and North East of Thailand. The PAD, reconstituted in May 2008, then decided to launch a crusade against the government, accused of wanting to amend the constitution with the aim of cancelling the corruption charges weighing against Thaksin. Very quickly the watchword of the coalition was the resignation of the Prime Minister, Samak.

PAD and government: two reactionary forces

Beyond the facade of the fight against corruption (of which its members are not free), the principal goal of the PAD is to end the sovereignty of the people and the system of election of Parliament according to the principle “one person, one vote” [3]. According to its leaders, the ignorant rural and working masses sell their votes to local bigwigs at the elections. They would like the elected deputies to represent no more than one third of the chamber with the remaining deputies being primarily retired officials (in particular from the military) and “important people” as well as carefully selected trade-union and NGO leaders. They also foresee the military playing a permanent political role in the so-called fight against corruption, protecting the monarchy and national sovereignty.

All means are used to create a level of agitation and violence sufficient to justify a new coup d’état, and to advance these deeply undemocratic ideas. In the demonstrations, the PAD does not hesitate to resort to provocation to create violent incidents, claiming they have been attacked by pro-government supporters while they are themselves at the origin of the tensions. The objective is to create a situation of conflict which would justify recourse to the army to restore order.

Concerning the Khmer temple of Preah Vihear, the PAD did not hesitate to try to destabilize the government, to exacerbate Thai nationalism, by holding up the threat of a loss of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the origin of this nationalist storm is the joint signature by the Thai and Cambodian governments of a UNESCO request to give the site (temple and surrounding area) the status of a “world heritage site”. A 1962 decree by the International Court in The Hague allots the temple to Kampuchea. But 4.6 kilometres of territory giving access to it are in Thailand. The PAD, supported by the Democratic Party, started this political crisis against what it considered an abandonment of territorial sovereignty. No less than 300 Thai personalities including actors, senators, and intellectuals signed a letter of protest to UNESCO to denounce this joint request. A war between the two countries is not inconceivable, each government having good reasons of domestic policy to make full use of these nationalist themes [4].

The current government is led by a representative of the far right. Samak was among those responsible for the massacres of 1976 at the university of Thammasat (where 40 died) and of 1992 (demonstrations in Bangkok for the re-establishment of the democracy). He defends the interests of the fraction of the commercial, industrial and financial bourgeoisie related to Thaksin driven out of power by the coup d'état. Even if he maintains the social measures taken previously by the Thaksin government (free basic health care, debt moratorium for peasants, credits to small producers and villages and so on), he is developing a class politics in the service of the big bourgeoisie.#

A dispute disconnected from social demands

The current conflict does not unfortunately result from the social struggle but from a confrontation for the control of power within the dominant classes. The workers' movement in Thailand is characterized by the weakness of trade unionism and an absence of political parties representing its interests. The independent and combative trade unionism which had been forged during the exceptional struggles of 1973-76 which had built links with the peasant and student movements was strongly repressed by the coup d'état of 1976, then by the coup d'état of 1991 to take only the most outstanding events. The prohibition of the right to strike, of association, and meeting in the months which follow each coup d'état, alternating during the phases known as of "parliamentary democracy" with an industrial legislation which very strictly limits the field of trade-union activity to the level of the company; make the exercise of the right to strike, solidarity action and the expression of a political standpoint very difficult. The various governments, civil or military, have in addition facilitated the creation of trade-union confederations with an aim of dividing trade unionism and of allowing conciliatory bureaucrats, even pure gangsters in the pay of the police force or army, to monopolize the bodies of representation of the workers. These corrupt bureaucrats regard trade unionism as a profitable business allowing access to important and even more lucrative positions in the apparatus of State, with the proviso of making an alliance with the rising factions of soldiers, police officers and businessmen, and of taking actions only when that is wished in high places. This is what explains, for example, the involvement in the PAD of the leadership of the trade-union confederation of the public sector, the State Enterprises Workers' Relations Confederation (comprising forty-three trade unions with two hundred and thousand members).

In spite of these obstacles, independent trade unionists have maintained an activity at enterprise level, sometimes choosing to create NGOs rather than trade unions, in order to circumvent the legal obstacles to trade-union activity, and creating geographical coordinations in the working class concentrations. Very courageous struggles have taken place, in particular in textiles, for wage increases, against excessive working hours, the numerous occupational illnesses and industrial accidents, and for the elementary rights of the workers. But they have remained very few and scattered, not managing to converge in a national movement as in 1973-76. The alliances forged with combative NGOs have been invaluable in increasing the level of consciousness of the workers and building links with peasant or village associations fighting over-indebtedness and the destruction of the environment. In spite of these advances, combative trade unionists and militants in the associations have not managed for now to link themselves to create an independent political party which could represent the workers of all sectors during the episodes of parliamentary democracy, or organize resistance to the coups d'état. The sad end of the Communist Party of Thailand in the mid-1980s, laying down its arms after twenty years of sterile Maoist guerrilla warfare, which had led it to desert the factories, contributed to confusion and demobilization. As everywhere in the world, a new socialist perspective for the 21 century has to be redefined in order to offer an understanding of the current world and possible alternatives.

The legal obstacles set up by the Thai state are another explanation of the absence of a social

democratic or revolutionary party. Workers must vote in the city or the village from which they originate and not in the city where they live and work. As the majority of urban workers are of rural origin, they cannot vote for a candidate originating from their ranks. Obviously, the various governments have always refused to amend this legislation.

Building a progressive alternative

On Tuesday, September 9, the nine judges of the constitutional court dismissed the Prime Minister for having violated the constitution on the grounds that he appears on television cooking programmes for which he is paid. If to be paid by television channels while being in charge of the State obviously poses a problem, it is an obvious pretext: once more the “pro coup d’état” judges assume the right to settle the political debate. Yet this measure will do nothing to settle the crisis. It seems likely that Samak will again be supported and elected Prime Minister by the coalition of 5 parties which form his parliamentary majority.

Opened de facto by the arrival in power of Thaksin in 2001, this acute political crisis within the dominant classes is far from being settled. In the absence of alternatives, certain progressive elements are tempted to support the government, asserting that it was democratically elected, or the PAD in the fight against the corruption of the government. The workers do not have anything to gain from choosing one camp rather than another. It can only result in a new reduction of democratic political space and a greater difficulty in rebuilding an independent political movement representing the interests of the workers.

Let us hope however that the political debate opened will make it possible for progressive associations to advance their own demands.

P.S.

* From International Viewpoint Online magazine : IV404 - September 2008.

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Footnotes

[1] See: Sanuk Jean, Sabai Danielle [Coups d’état en Thaïlande : une spirale sans fin ?](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article3605) (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article3605>)

[2] See: Sanuk Jean, Sabai Danielle [Thaïlande : le « pays du sourire » à l’heure d’une nouvelle crise politique](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article1799) (<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article1799>)

[3] See: “PAD: bulldog on a leash or another nail in democracy’s coffin?” Chang Noi, July 21, 2008 <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/padmeaning.htm> On ESSF [Thailand – PAD: bulldog on a leash or another nail in democracy’s coffin](#)

[4] The Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen has also used this incident when on the election trail.