

# Watershed moment for democracy and rule of law

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The takeover of the main international airport in Bangkok by protestors going under the banner of the People's Alliance for Democracy is a watershed moment for democracy and the rule of law in Thailand. It follows some months of increasingly aggressive strategies to get the current government to resign and to block it from making amendments to the 2008 Constitution, which was prepared under the watch of the 2006 military coup leaders and their supporters and pushed through via a deeply flawed referendum.

Alliance members have since August gone from merely occupying spaces like roads and parks to occupying public buildings, in particular, the Government House. Organised armed "guards" have defended their positions both from opponents and from state security personnel. They have also illegally obtained and openly carried an array of manufactured and homemade weapons, including guns from caches that had reportedly been kept in the government premises. They have illegally detained other citizens. They have vandalised, destroyed and stolen public and private property. In the last day or two it has been reported that in addition to occupying the Suvarnabumi airport they have seized busses, and have refused to allow police into the airport to investigate explosions there during the night. They are now reportedly preparing for the latest phase in the "final battle", which is supposedly being instigated under codenames like Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the cities on which the United States military dropped nuclear bombs at the close of World War Two.

The alliance has exhibited a number of features that from past lessons of Thailand and other countries around the world pose grave dangers to the future of the country's imperilled democracy. Of these, the following can be said.

1. They spring from a far-right ideology that has for decades driven successive military-bureaucratic administrations in Thailand, which dramatic changes to political and social life of the last two decades have increasingly threatened.
2. Their coordinated attacks and actions on the pretext of self-defence and national interest are designed to cause a widespread feeling of insecurity and uncertainty and allow reactionary elite forces to push Thailand back to a 1980s model of "half-sail" semi-elected government.

3. The alliance leaders have occupied the public space and forced people throughout Thailand to either take sides for or against them, or to opt out completely, thus alienating millions of people and denying them the opportunity to have a say on the key political and social questions of their time.

Some commentators and opponents of the alliance have described its agenda as fascist. This is not an exaggeration. Experience shows that the types of systemic changes and regimes that follow such movements, although they may not describe themselves as fascist, have fascist qualities. Indeed, successive dictatorships in Thailand's modern history appreciated, expressed and used many fascist symbols and policies, and the residue of these can be found in the language and behaviour of the alliance leaders today.

If these events are allowed to continue, and it is self-evident that they are being allowed, they will effectively undo everything that was done to build a culture of democratic rights and participation in public life in Thailand during the 1990s. The damage that they are now in a position to effect will surpass anything of that caused by the ousted government of Thaksin Shinawatra, and could even provoke a greater disaster than the 2006 coup and scrapping of the 1997 Constitution. Whatever institutional and legal gains were made in the last decade or two will be undone.

Already, the criminal justice system of Thailand has been reduced to an utter joke, its agencies and personnel either unable or unwilling to intervene effectively to protect public property and people's lives, or even prosecute wrongdoers. That the security forces can carry out coups on the whimsy of generals and engage in battles over trifles with those of neighbouring countries but not responsibly protect the Government House or international airport is sheer farce. That government agencies have been forced to negotiate and cut their losses rather than insist that the law be enforced is dangerous folly. And that the senior judiciary, which through a succession of highly politicised judgments has played a major part in contributing to the current mess has nothing useful to contribute when lives are at stake and the country is in greatest need of intelligent guidance is altogether shameful.

Peaceful protest is not only a part of democratic process; it is integral to it. But the rallies and blockades in Bangkok of recent days, weeks and months have not been peaceful. Nor can they properly be called protests at all, as they are not merely demonstrations of a wish, but acts aimed at achieving goals at all costs. And the costs to Thailand have already been very high. They will get higher, and be felt in terms of the lives and liberties of all people in the country if they are not brought to an end. All people in Thailand have a right to oppose this ultra-conservative project for state dominance at their expense.

The Asian Human Rights Commission especially takes this opportunity

to call for far greater global attention on events in Thailand, which have passed for these few months without any discernible reaction from international bodies, especially the United Nations. Having vacillated on the 2006 coup the world community cannot afford to this time let things just go on without some meaningful intervention. If Thailand slips further backwards it will be to the detriment not only of its own millions but the entire region. At a time that repressive anti-democratic forces are either making comebacks or strengthening their positions almost everywhere, Thailand cannot afford to be lost.

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A Statement by the Asian Human Rights Commission