

The Red Shirt Movement in Thailand today

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As we approach the end of 2010, the Red Shirts are at a cross-road. On the other side, the Military Junta and the Royalists have not even begun to solve the political crisis or to stabilise their power. Since the PAD protests and the military coup in 2006, the Junta and the Royalists have not only destroyed Democracy. They have also destroyed the legitimacy of the Monarchy, the Military and the Judiciary in the eyes of millions of Thais. The deliberate killing of unarmed civilians, who were demonstrating for Democracy in April and May this year, and the lies told by the Government and the Military, have not only discredited the Democrat Party and the Military. The King, the Queen and the entire Royal Family are now hated by the majority of Thais because they are seen to have sided with the murderous junta. The latest double standards by the judiciary, in refusing to consider electoral fraud by the Democrat Party, has destroyed the credibility of the justice system. The Department of Special Investigation has become a laughing stock because of its lying about the April and May events. The continued mass censorship and the draconian use of lese majeste, computer crimes and emergency laws are plain for all to see. The Thai ruling class is clinging on to power only by force and the creation of a climate of fear. That is not a recipe for stability.

But on the side of the Red Shirts there is confusion and there are some serious challenges.

1. There is the issue of "reconciliation". For the junta, their "reconciliation" really amounts to a total capitulation by the Red Shirts with all authoritarian powers intact. Any back-room deal to form a "National Government" with Peua Thai participation is just one form of this forced capitulation option. Such a National Government would not be democratically elected and it would not challenge the structures of dictatorial power. What it would do, however, is to provide jobs and roles for professional politicians in Peua Thai Party. It might also be a first step towards a pardon for Taksin. What it will not be is a first step to Democracy and Social Justice.
2. The question for the millions of Red Shirts who hate the idea of such a dirty compromise is: can they organise independently of Peua Thai and Taksin? The Red Sunday events all over the country and the concept of "horizontal, grass-roots, leadership" shows that independent organisation is possible. Can this be strengthened and developed further?
3. The junta has always needed a sham "democratic face". That is why they manoeuvred Abhisit into office instead of having a long-term military government. They will need to hold an election at some point, but they will be working hard to fix such an election. Burma, Egypt and the other authoritarian states in South East Asia provide many tricks by which a ruling class can "win" an election. Red Shirts have to take elections seriously, but that does not mean having illusions in the fairness of any election held under the present junta. The junta has already changed the Constitution and used the Judiciary to manipulate the democratic process.
4. Only those Red Shirts who continuously taking part in activities in Thailand, like the Red Sunday events or those around the prisons, can have a true understanding of the importance of mass-movements in the struggle for Democracy. They need to develop their political understanding in the Red Sunday schools which are now being organised. They need to think about spreading the struggle to the trade union movement and the lower ranks of the army. Strikes are an important weapon against military repression. Democracy and Social Justice in Thailand will only be won

through such revolutionary struggles.

Some sections of the Red Shirts who call themselves “Red Siam” are playing at revolution. They talk about building an armed struggle without learning from the past mistakes of the Communist Party. They wear green army hats with red stars and feel tough. But they have turned their backs on the mass struggle. They criticised the original Red Shirt leadership while the mass movement was facing down the army. Some of them now want reconciliation. They know deep-down that armed struggle is only a pipe-dream.

Some Red Shirt leaders who are in exile abroad are out of touch with the movement on the ground. They talk about “armed struggle”, but they are demoralised. Their demoralisation means that they will capitulate.

The organisation which calls itself “The UDD in the USA” and their guru Chupong, continuously pump out anti-Monarchy propaganda. This propaganda now cuts with the flow as millions of Red Shirts have changed to republicans. Their exaggerated claims that King Pumi-pon is the arch-manipulator of all events and lord of the entire Ruling Class, mean that they totally overlook the power of the Military. This top down view is shared by academics, both foreign and Thai. The view does not fit with history. The Military took power soon after the 1932 revolution. It has never been overthrown by the Monarchy. Its power has only been dented by mass uprisings from below. Those who make claims about an all-powerful King have nothing to say about the struggle for Democracy in practice. They are paralysed and demoralised in the face of the King’s “absolute power”. They bang away at attacking the Monarchy and have nothing to say about social welfare, gender rights, trade union rights, or how to solve the civil war in the South. All that they do is to protect the Military from blame.

Any “reconciliation” which does not result in the immediate release of all Red Shirt political prisoners (include lese majeste prisoners) and the end of censorship and the emergency laws will be meaningless. “Reconciliation” must also include the scrapping of the military security command, which is running the country, the resignation of the Government, immediate free and fair elections supervised by a new Election Committee made up of representatives of both sides, the promise of a new Constitution to be drafted by mass participation, and the setting up of an investigation into the state crimes which resulted in over 90 deaths earlier this year.

Red Shirts need to combine such short-term demands with long term aims. The two cannot be separated. Long term Red Shirt aims are vital in continuing to win the hearts and minds of the population. Such long term aims should include the building of a Welfare State, the total overhaul of the Military and Judiciary and the abolition of the Monarchy. Left-wing Red Shirts like myself will also be arguing for Socialism.

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