

## **A view from inside: Are Thailand's Red Shirts ready for the "Revolution"?**

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As heard among many red shirts: "We are ready and waiting for the word", ready for bringing about regime change through a democracy "revolution" (ปฏิวัติ), inspired by the recent events in Tunisia. The problem to most red shirts is that there are few real options remaining in the current repressive situation created by the governing regime. A "democratic revolution" is a mass movement which wishes to replace undemocratic and unelected regime with a democratic system of governance. In the Thai sense, whereby "sovereignty" (อำนาจอธิปไตย) actually is supposed to "belong to the people" (ของประชาชน) as it appeared in the first draft of the 1932 Constitution but then amended by reactionaries to elevate the monarch as having the direct exerciser of that power, rather than the elected government. Ever since then it seems like a dog chasing its tail, going nowhere; not much has changed as the ancien régime has continued to muscle its way into dominance and power unsettled and ruffled albeit briefly by ex-PM Thaksin's grassroots policies of empowerment and inclusion, talked about as an "awakening" (การตื่นตัว) of the masses. Interestingly, the "democracy process" is something that I found from five years of ethnographic research that most rural based red shirts seem to understand from their own experience far better than many so-called educated elite urban people.

Among the red shirt movement many people seem irritated at the seemingly vacillating and indecisive UDD leadership. Indeed, it seems that the rank and file are moving in their thinking at a somewhat different pace to the leadership. This should concern the UDD leadership under its acting Chairperson Dr Tida Tawornsud. But in all fairness Tida has a massive and complex task ahead especially in unravelling connections to political representation. In an interview, while Tida supports a "parliamentary mode of fighting" with the UDD masses she does not support political parties. This is the problem for UDD and Phue Thai relations because in the countryside red supporters in fact see these factors as sometimes inseparable. Phue Thai are divided among progressives seeking meaningful structural changes and opportunists or career politicians. As Tida says, "UDD see Party as the tool for the people, but Political Parties see people as tools of the Party; politics is not the business of UDD, [we are] only a mass [social] movement". This shows a likely divergence between the command centre mentality and that of the masses. Just who should represent the people in a new political democracy was never made clear, but at least she concludes that within UDD both pro-Thaksin and an increasing minority of anti-Thaksinites should all work together. As long as the Thaksin issue has not been resolved, then nothing much will change. People will certainly not leave him behind.

In regard to "democracy", Tida said that this is not the immediate objective for UDD but instead a focus firstly on "justice"/accountability (for the massacres last year), and secondly on the dissolution of Parliament and the current regime. It is a mix of strategy (ยุทธศาสตร์) and immediate problem. Although the priority is the release of political prisoners, it is clear that the core leaders still in prison will not be readily granted freedom as Surachai Sae Dan (Daeng Siam, or Red Siam) said, at least until there is a democratic regime change. Surachai, who was shafted by UDD core leaders on stage during the last crackdown, says we only have to look into post-war history; it was only when regimes' changed that 2 political prisoners were released usually under the "compassion" of the monarch (with the same "Director" [ผู้อำนวยการ]; in this, nothing has really changed).

Dispelling a continuing myth even among some academics, according to Tida, Thaksin has not been paying people to go to the protests; as she says: look at April and May last year, “what price on human life? It is nonsense that people would risk their lives for a little money”. Finance is a huge burden on any social movement which is always looking for creative ways to raise funds where it can. Thaksin’s support, and not just financial, is needed for all red groups. This is a sore point for the more pragmatic and action-oriented Red Siam who feel they have been marginalised by UDD who they see are intent more on “appeasement” and, some say, even possible back door deals. Indeed, Thaksin remains critical to the identity of the mass movement. This is Sombat’s bourgeois problem (and to some extent even that of Dr Tida): the need to listen and reflect on the voices of the masses. All new social movements, and this includes UDD, must be able to respond rhythmically (Henri Lefebvre’s term) to the changing aspirations, feelings and needs of the grassroots/ local constituencies; otherwise, without an effective feedback mechanism, they will become little more than an elite driven anti-statist movement. A colearning program can dispel any lingering doubts among the classes.

### Forthcoming elections

In regard to the proposed forthcoming elections, red shirts around the country say that they won’t be duped or “tricked” (โดนหลอก) any longer by the Democrat Party and its alliance as they were at two previous elections. Not even Prem’s political machinations and overt support for the Democrat Party will suffice this time as people may rise up in the provinces. But all factors have to be in place. This means that all red groups have to start talking to each other again and finding some common platform for collective action. There is nothing wrong with disagreement, and to “agree to disagree”, as long as differences can be resolved. A likely scenario in coming months, given pressure on the governing regime by a handful of ultra-nationalists could be the dissolution of Parliament and manipulation of the electoral process with a reaffirmation of amaath (อำมาตยาธิปไตย)-military control. A coup is not out of the question. Reds must look at all possible scenarios and take the offensive if necessary sometimes, rather than simply having to react every time to whatever the regime says or does.

### Moving to the Democratic Revolution: Understanding Red Siam

There are many discontented red shirts who want incisive action, or at least a vision of bringing about change and have turned to Daeng Siam (Red Siam) rather than bike rides because its leader, Surachai Sae Dan, talks with integrity, honesty and directness to issues that many people feel from the heart (even if they don’t want to speak it out). Meanwhile, it may be recalled that the late fated Saedaeng’s (Khattiya) own dedicated red group remain hostile to UDD core leaders for removing him (as also Surachai Sae Dan) from the protest stage before the crackdown. Time, as they say, is supposed to heal all wounds especially among friends but conversations among mutual interests would be better. In Surachai’s case he would always “touch” on summit matters which UDD avoided in conciliation to the mainstream (?) in the hope that events would swing around and save them. We now know this did not happen. In a miscalculation core leaders gave themselves up thinking that they would be soon released or even “pardoned” by a summit that most people are no longer zealous about.

The 72 year old Surachai has a lèse majesté case in Chiangmai hanging over him which has now been referred to DSI (Department of Special Investigation). He told me he will not resist if sent to prison. He has already spent some sixteen years in prison as a political prisoner since 1976 and for a crime he did not commit; he has nothing to lose. He is a true “hardcore” though with a soft centre. He pulls no punches, speaking fluidly about systemic injustices that he has experienced firsthand all his life and the need in particular for summit institutional changes. He is accused of trying to “overthrow the monarchy” (โค่นล้มระบอบกษัตริย์), but in fact he never talks about this in such terms; only the

need for societal “revolution” in a situation where “reform” (การปฏิรูป) is now no longer possible.

Interestingly, Surachai with his radical revolutionary credentials remains a Phue Thai member and has considerable respect for Thaksin’s progressive reforms and policies. He recognises that Thaksin brought prosperity and development to the country and worked in good faith for the masses. As he says, Thaksin wanted to see social improvement of the people (through his program of “Populism” (ประชานิยม)). At this stage where all classes join together, Neoliberal “capitalism” is not the problem as such, as long as people are able to share in the benefits; on the other hand “feudalism” (ศักดินา) and entrenched monopoly capitalism under the amaats/aristocratic oligopolists is no longer acceptable.

Surachai said he fought against capitalism in the 1970s but is clearly pragmatic and says we need to reach out to the new “democratic capitalists”; though we cannot wait for Thaksin to “lead” the revolution. Hopefully he will realise what needs to take place. Anyone listening to his “phone-in” in Japan recently will be surprised at Thaksin’s new frank critique of certain institutions and may be a turning point. Many believe that it is only Thaksin who has the ability to mobilise all forces and change the archaic amaats system because he was close to doing this before he was dumped; but people have been influenced for so long by an elite (reverberations of nai [นาย]-phrai [ไพร่]) structural system and its hegemony that they fail to see how it has produced what sociologists would call “habitas” (“systems of durable, transposable dispositions”, or “structuring structures” – from the late Pierre Bourdieu). The attitude is a problematic of Thai society located in a formal education system which teaches people how to work under the regime and its dominant cultural value system. Neither is there anything in education which teaches people how to work in the interests of the people; only for self-interests and a “study to become Master/boss” (as in the Thai saying: เรียนเพื่อเป็นนาย). Who do Government Officials/Civil Servants (ข้าราชการ) actually work for? It is certainly not the people.

Neither do the amaats work for the nation, but in their own interests; they have not yet “awoken”; while the masses have moved beyond ritual beneficence and summit handouts being kept down in a “continuing cycle of poverty – ignorance – sickness”. Getting rid of Thaksin was thus a means of keeping the people down. The amaats underestimated the people; they want them to stay devoted and blind to their hegemony, maintaining the myth of a higher sacred beneficence – as in the past. Now, because the people are starting to “awaken”, the amaats need to impose more and more repressive instruments to control society through politics: People/masses at the base are in fact no longer ignorant as Surachai knows only too well from his extensive conversations around the country. This point is sadly missed by a reactionary civil society (NGOs and media) which maintains its patronage and benefits under the ancien regime in the public face of the Democrat Party. In a future democratic revolution forget Thai civil society.

Surachai comes from the south (as with most of the red core leaders) and lives on the move all the time going from invitation to invitation around the country. He sees UDD more as a democratic “capitalist” based social movement; while his Daeng Siam a “movement of the grassroots” seeking a “democratic revolution” (he uses the term “การปฏิวัติ”). There is nothing ipso facto “violent” about Surachai’s thinking; but he fears that violence may arise from a situation where no public space is allowed for peaceful change. Meanwhile underground resistance forces make their preparation some place. The village is certainly no longer a safe place as security agents have infiltrated at all levels and even the periphery, the maquis, is non-existent.

Surachai and supporters consider international comparisons, such as the reasons for the failed Maoist revolt in Nepal which failed to uproot the regime only the government, or lessons from the Kwangju student uprising, or the recent Tunisian revolution. He says we need to firstly clearly define “the enemy” starting with theories of Thai “Imperialism” (ลัทธิจักรวรรดินิยม) and summit forces of

feudalism (ศักดินา). The amaat network is embedded everywhere; it has global outreach. Surachai hope's that soon all people will be "awakened" (conscientized) and, although critical of the ability of UDD current leadership to bring all reds together, he explains the difference in a somewhat awkward analogy with European history: UDD = English Cromwellian revolution - which did not replace the monarchical system (the royalty even came back to conduct a posthumous execution!); while Daeng Siam more akin to the eighteen century French Revolution (for democracy; a peasant movement which displaced the summit). The current situation is dire and therefore realistically we must talk of revolutionary mode of "setting up" (จัดตั้ง) the masses through informed "democracy" networks. Thus, when conscientized, people will know what to do.

To the summit-state, those who control ritual knowledge have power; similarly those who control war weapons also traditionally have power over determining people's place in society and history. Thaksin had tried to break the systemic and entrenched amaat network which uses bourgeois academics, civil society and media as its tools leaning heavily on the summit. As Surachai noted, it is not hard to see why for instance Thaksin, although engendered in an elite system, continues to be seen as so important to the grassroots-focused red groups, both left and right, seeking societal change. But, with all the current talk of Tunisia in the streets (and now Egypt) many feel that firstly all red groups must come together with both a short and long term vision if there is to be a successful change and a new democratic future.

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**P.S.**

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