

A new 'settlement' between Yingluck Shinawatra's government and the elites?

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We are starting to see the results of a “new settlement” between the Pheu Thai party [led by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra] and the elites, in order to “resolve” the Thai crisis in the interests of the latter. This may or may not be a formal agreement, but we are already seeing the effects.

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Following the last crisis during the Cold War conflict with the Communist Party of Thailand, the elites crafted a settlement in which parliamentary democracy was tolerated so long as elections could be dominated by money politics and there was no challenge to the ruling class. Today's “settlement” is designed to allow the Pheu Thai party to form a government and to bring its leaders, including deposed PM Thaksin Shinawatra, back into the elite's exclusive club. We must remember that previous to the 2006 crisis, Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party were a recognised part of the ruling elites.

The anti-Thaksin elites could not crudely and directly prevent the formation of the Pheu Thai government because the election result was so clear. But at the same time Pheu Thai was prepared to enter into a process of compromise, under the banner of “reconciliation”, by promising not to touch the military or any interests of the royalist elites. In the past we saw the 19th September military coup, followed by the judicial coup against the Palang Prachachon government. Now we are seeing a silent coup resulting from pressure being applied behind the scenes in order to achieve the new settlement, which betrays the aspirations of most Red Shirts.

Let us look at a number of important issues.

Lèse majesté

On August 5, Norwet Yotpiyasatien, a recent graduate from Kasetsart University in Bangkok, was arrested and jailed under the draconian lèse majesté law for copying an article on to his PC from the internet. He has now been released on bail. It was the deputy rector of Kasetsart University, Nipon Limlantong, who filed charges against the student with the police. Nipon has special responsibility for student activities. In other words he is there to enforce censorship and prevent academic freedom in the university.

On August 13, group captain Anudit Nakornatp, the new information and communications technology minister, declared that the Yingluck government would be even more repressive in the use of lèse majesté and the computer crimes law. Clearly, nothing has changed on the issue of lèse majesté.

Lèse majesté prisoners such as Somyot Prueksakasemsuk, Surachai Danwattananusorn, Da Torpedo (Daranee Chanchongsilpakul) and many others are still in jail. Some are awaiting trial and others have been found guilty by kangaroo courts.

The lèse majesté law is vitally important to the military's influence on Thai politics because the military uses the monarchy for its legitimacy and then uses lèse majesté against those who oppose it. Pheu Thai's defence of lèse majesté shows that it is prepared to accept the continuing influence of the military in politics and hopes that the military and royalists will stop accusing Thaksin and Pheu Thai of being against the monarchy.

Civil war in the south

The Phua Thai party promised before the elections to resolve the conflict in Thailand's south peacefully and by political means instead of using repression. A limited degree of autonomy and self-government was proposed. This was an important step forward, given the history of violent repression against Malay Muslims by the Thai Rak Thai government in 2004.

But on August 10, Sudeereuman Mala was sentenced by a court to two years in prison. He was accused by Pol. Maj. Gen. Jaktip Chaijinda of a "giving a false statement" about being tortured by police in the 2004 case of gun theft from an army barracks. Yet, there is ample evidence that defendants were tortured into providing false confessions by the police. Defence lawyer Somchai Neelapaichit, who helped these victims of torture, was murdered by police during the Thaksin government. So the gross injustice in the south continues.

On August 11, in the southern province of Naratiwat, police raided the local prison looking for drugs. This caused a riot and the authorities then brought in military snipers to crush it. Luckily, no one was killed. This is just typical of the Thai state, which continues to use violence against unarmed civilians.

There are a number of important questions. 1. Since everyone knows that the prison guards are the people who bring drugs into prisons, why crack down on the prisoners? 2. When will the authorities use political and social methods to solve problems instead of armed snipers? 3. How can this possibly help bring peace to the south? 4. Even if the Yingluck government did not directly order the prison crackdown, which is debatable, the government could make a statement criticising the methods used. Why has it not done so?

It is clear from pre-election statements made by the army chief Prayut that the military do not favour any autonomy or political solution to the southern conflict. The military wants a military solution, which can never be successful. This means that these recent events raise questions about the new government's sincerity about building peace in the south if it means going against the military.

Red Shirt political prisoners

There are still many Red Shirt political prisoners held in Thai jails on charges resulting from last year's pro-democracy protests. People are still being arrested. Most Red Shirts have not received

bail. It seems like nothing has changed and there has been no announcement that there will be a thorough investigation into the killing of unarmed civilians by the military last year.

The new cabinet is in mourning for a minor royal and has agreed with the spending of millions in public money on an elaborate funeral. But these politicians have never worn black for those who were killed by the military while trying to defend democracy. The head of the Department of Special Investigation, which has covered up the killings and which has initiated trumped up charges against Red Shirts is still in post.

The “settlement” with the elites means that it will be harder to bring to justice those who were responsible for ordering the killings of civilians last year.

The military

The “settlement” with the elites is more than anything a settlement with the military. The appointment of a military officer, with a dubious background in human rights, to the post of defence minister, shows that this government has no intention of creating a culture where elected civilians control the military. The head of the army General Prayut, who showed such contempt for the Red Shirts, and who opposed Pheu Thai during the election campaign, has yet to be sacked.

Red Shirts

Red Shirts must organise a thorough debate within the movement in order to determine their strategy to counter the settlement with the elites that betrays everything for which they have been fighting and all their dreams and aspirations. This government should be pressured into making real democratic reforms, and if it will not listen, it must be vigorously opposed. The election was important in that it showed that most Thais opposed the military dictatorship and the Democrat Party. But the election only marks the next round of the struggle.

P.S.

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