

Time to abolish Thailand's lèse majesté law

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Right-wing forces use the lèse majesté laws to stifle dissent, not preserve loyalty to the king

Once again we are seeing the extreme right in Thailand using lèse majesté, or the crime of injury to the royalty, as an excuse to encourage acts of violence against those who stand up for freedom and justice.

Thirty years ago, agitation by the extreme right through such media outlets as the Tank Corps radio station and Dao Sayam newspaper, resulted in the utmost barbarism at Thammasat University on October 6, 1976, when right-wing forces and the military set on students, hanging them, setting them afire and committing other acts of savagery. Therefore the recent swearing of an oath of allegiance to "Nation Religion and King" by the so-called People's Alliance for Democracy at Thammasat is tantamount to spitting on the memories of those who died and suffered in the bloody events.

Most recently we have seen Manager, the media outlet of big businessman Sondhi Limtongkul, opening its web pages to right-wing thugs who want to encourage violence against Chotisak Onsoong, a young man who chose to think differently and not stand for the King's song in the cinema. Following this there have been threats of violence, also posted on Manager's website, against Jittra Kotchadej, chairwoman of the Triumph textile workers union. Jittra's supposed "crime" was to wear a T-shirt supporting Chotisak's freedom of expression.

In both cases, their addresses have been published by Manager, an action that is not only illegal in that it encourages violence against others, but is also a serious obstacle to basic rights and democracy. I call on everyone in the Peoples' Movement to condemn this despicable media outlet and its right-wing owner.

We should not be surprised at Manager's behavior. After all they supported the September 19, 2006 coup that destroyed democracy and removed legitimacy from the Thai state. Sondhi Limtongkul has never been on the side of freedom, democracy or the Peoples' Movement. But the important question to ask is: will Somsak Kosaisuk, Pipop Tongchai, Somkiat Pongpaiboon and Suriyasai Takasila have enough basic democratic principles to come out and condemn Manager? Given their close alliance with Sondhi and his media empire, staying quiet would be the same as condoning these actions. I still hope that they will have some principles left, but my hopes are rapidly fading.

On May Day this year, Somsak Kosaisuk, who used to be someone I admired, made a statement on behalf of the Workers Solidarity Committee that workers should unite to fight the capitalists. I agree with his statement. But does Somsak oppose all capitalists? Or will he still build alliances with non-Thaksin ones? And in his so-called struggle against capitalism will he defend "Nation Religion and King," the slogan of the extreme right who are the sworn enemies and murderers of students, workers and farmers?

Pipop Tongchai had the unfortunate experience of seeing his bookshop burnt by right-wing thugs

during the violence of 1976. Will he still maintain, as he did a few years ago at Chula, that he must continue to build an alliance with conservative monarchists?

Lèse majesté is an excuse to silence and use violence against those who think differently. But that is merely one of many reasons why the law should be abolished. The second reason arguing for abolition, as a matter of urgency, is that it is an authoritarian law of the type found in countries with absolute monarchies. No modern civilized and democratic nation in the world maintains such a law. If we are to have democracy we must have the right to express ourselves. There must be the right to criticise the monarchy.

Otherwise the monarch or members of the royal family can behave as they like without any accountability or transparency. Lèse majesté laws actually indicate that conservatives are afraid that if they allow criticism we shall see that many Thais have different opinions. The carefully constructed image of the monarchy will also face serious scrutiny. In other words, the conservatives are afraid of the truth.

If not, why not abolish lèse majesté? I am not afraid myself to face the fact that most Thais at present love and respect the King. Why are the ruling class so afraid? Or is it really about the need by factions of the elite, whether the military or the capitalists, to use lèse majesté to attack their opponents for their own narrow personal gain?

This is an important question that we must all ask. The 19th September coup claimed royal legitimacy, but did this coup take place in order to strengthen the monarchy or to allow one faction of the ruling elite could beat Thaksin? No one can really deny that lèse majesté is a political tool in numerous faction fights between those who all claim to support the monarchy. This is another reason to abolish the law.

Apart from the right to criticise the monarchy, in a democratic society we must have the right to propose new forms of society. It must not be a "crime" to advocate a republic in Thailand. Republics exist in most modern and civilised nations of the world. But whether or not to have a republic must be the decision of the Thai people after free debate.

Thailand actually has a long tradition of differing views concerning the monarchy. Under feudalism the surfs made great efforts to avoid royal conscripted labor and the ruling elites would often kill kings in order to take power themselves. Under the absolute monarchies of Rama 5-7, nobles, civil servants, workers and farmers often showed their displeasure at the centralisation of power or the inefficiency of the king's rule. This ended with the 1932 revolution. In the period when the Communist Party of Thailand had much influence, many Thais wanted a republic. These are historical facts. So let us not believe the rubbish that all Thais have been royalists throughout history.

Whether a Thai citizen uses scientific or Buddhist philosophy, the common factor here is that respect and admiration should come from reason. We must be free to think for ourselves. It is not possible to force someone to respect anything sincerely.

Therefore Chotisak's and many other people's decisions not to stand in the cinema are perfectly natural and legitimate. But if the Thai elite need to use a law to enforce respect that means that they are afraid that Thais can actually think for themselves! Lèse majesté is an obstacle to reasoned free-thinking among Thais. It is high time it was abolished.

P.S.

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