

The Continuing Crisis in Thailand

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Democracy and social justice get lost in the shuffle between the royalists and the pro-Thaksin forces.

For the past two or more years, especially since the September 2006 coup, Thai society has been hypnotized into forgetting about the real social and political issues. Instead, the whole of society and most tragically, the social movements have been entranced by a fight between two factions of the Thai ruling class.

On the one side are the deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his disbanded Thai Rak Thai Party, its successor, the Peoples Power Party and the government. Opposing them are a loose collection of authoritarian royalists comprising the People's Alliance for Democracy, the pro-coup royalist military, the pro-coup judiciary and the Democrat Party. The authoritarian royalists are not a unified body. They only share a collective interest in wiping out Thaksin's party.

The two sides mirror each other. Both are firmly in the camp of the Thai capitalist elite. They both are nationalistic and are prepared to abuse human rights. While the Thaksin government and Samak's Peoples Power government support extrajudicial killings and a hard-line murderous position on the Muslim insurrection in the south, the opposing side cares little about such killings and counts the former Thai commando and assassin who took part in several coups and is called the butcher of Krue Sae Mosque, where Muslims were massacred, among its leadership.

Both factions are associated with people who have a record of corruption. It is common knowledge that all Thai politicians are engaged in corrupt practices, whether legal or illegal. The military have a long record of corruption and the 2006 junta were no exception. After the illegal coup in 2006, they appointed themselves to boards of state enterprises and forced through increased military spending.

Yet the courts have clearly been used to single out Thaksin's faction on corruption and "abuse of power" charges. While Thaksin was still in power, the courts bent to his wishes. There is no justice in Thailand. The judiciary are not accountable to the electorate and always support the rich and powerful. In labour courts they always rule against trade unions. No jury system exists in Thailand.

The differences between the two factions are there too. While the Thaksin faction are committed to their strategy of winning power by elections, parliamentary democracy and money politics, the PAD and their friends are in favour of military coups, reducing the number of elected parliamentarians and senators and increasing the power of unelected bureaucrats and the army. The justification for this is the belief that the poor majority in the country are too stupid to be given the vote.

The PAD faction are also fanatical royalists. They want a new coup and were happy to whip up hatred of Cambodia and risk a war over an ancient Khmer temple. The PAD strategy, as outlined by Pipop Thongchai, a core leader of the party, is to create enough political chaos that institutions and parties are destroyed and a "new order" arises from the ashes. Needless to say, this new order will not be democratic nor committed to social justice and equality.

In terms of economic policy, the Thaksin faction try to use a dual-track strategy of mixing neo-liberalism with grassroots Keynesianism. They believe that the poor must not be left out and have a record of real pro-poor policies such as the Health Care Scheme. However, they are not remotely socialist and are against taxing the rich and building a Welfare State.

The PAD/Democrats/royalists are hard-line monetarists. They propose interest rate hikes to cut down spending on the poor and to squeeze wages. The king is one of the richest monarchs in the world and he supports this economic policy and has also advocated the “sufficiency economy” where everyone needs to curb their spending according to their means. Income re-distribution is ruled out. That is why the poor have consistently voted for the Thaksin faction.

The major reason why democracy and social justice have fallen off the political agenda into the stinking canals of Bangkok is the total disarray of the social movements, NGO networks and trade unions. After the collapse of the Communist Party in the mid 1980s, the new slogan of the Peoples Movements was “the answer is in the villages”.

This was an NGO strategy to turn to rural development along single-issue lines. The slogan reflected a respect for villagers which contrasted greatly with the attitude of the government. Now the slogan of those People’s Movement networks supporting the PAD has changed to “the villagers are stupid and don’t deserve the vote!”, “the answer is with the military, courts and the king”.

Sections of the NGO-Coordinating Committee, some Thai staff in Focus on Global South, HIV+ networks, Friends of the People and some farmer groups have lined up to support the PAD and the demand to decrease democracy. The Railway Workers Union and the Thai Airways union have also shown support. The Rail union leaders have never campaigned for hundreds of rail employees who have been on temporary contracts without welfare for decades. The Thai Airways union has ignored military corruption in the airline and in the Airports Authority. Both unions have turned their backs on serious attacks on trade unions in the private sector and are only prepared to take action when people in high places give them the green light.

Other activists who cannot stand the PAD have allowed themselves to be pulled into supporting the government. This is just as bad as those supporting the PAD. Some have even cheered when the police tried to break up PAD protests.

The lack of independent class politics in the Thai Peoples’ Movement is a result of years of rejecting overall “politics” and “political organisation”. It is a result of the anarchistic ideas that were popular after the collapse of the Communist Party, a reaction to the party’s Stalinist authoritarianism. The problem is also a result of the “lobby politics” of NGOs. Neither strategy leads to building an independent position for the trade unions and social movements. They reject “representative democracy” but have no concrete democratic proposals to put in its place.

Even today, at this late hour, we can still build political independence. We must campaign for more democracy and more control of institutions from below. We must advocate a root and branch reform of the justice system, a reduction in the role of the military and the building of a welfare state through cuts in the military budget and progressive taxation of the rich.

Yet there are still those who say that we must take sides in the current elite dispute and leave such reforms until later. The problem with that is that the dispute will not be quickly settled and if it is settled on the terms of one or other elite grouping it will result in a smaller democratic space and less bargaining power for social movements.

P.S.

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