

Thailand's Democrat Putsch

The royalist coup installs a Quisling party

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The appointment Monday of “Democrat” Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva as the new Thai prime minister is the final stage of the second coup against an elected government.

After the deliberate chaos created by the PAD's seizure of the airports, the courts stepped in to dissolve the hugely popular governing party for the second time. The Army chief then called a meeting of Democrat Party parliamentarians along with some of the most corrupt elements of the governing coalition parties. It is widely believed that the Army chief and others, threatened and bribed MPs to change sides. Chief among them is “Newin Chitchorp”, who was named by his father after the infamous Burmese dictator.

The Democrat Party is known among the cyber community as the “Cockroach Party”. This is because cockroaches live in filthy places and can survive even nuclear holocausts. The party has survived for many years, forming governments after various crises. These so-called Democrats have systematically backed anti-democratic measures. They supported the 2006 coup, the military constitution and the PAD. One Democrat Party MP was the leader of the mob that took over the international airport.

Over the last 30 years, the Democrat party has never won an overall majority in parliament. It does not represent the people. During the Thaksin years it spent the whole time criticising the universal health care scheme and other pro-poor policies. After the 1997 economic crisis it used state money to prop up the banks and guarantee the savings of the rich, while telling the poor to fend for themselves and depend on their families. Even Abhisit's name in Thai means “privilege”. He is an Oxford graduate from a wealthy family.

The first coup, on 19th September 2006, was a straightforward military coup, using tanks and soldiers wearing Royal yellow ribbons. The military junta tore up the democratic constitution and replaced it with an authoritarian one. Half the Senate was appointed by the military and many so-called independent bodies were staffed by junta supporters. The military appointed themselves to lucrative state enterprise positions. Then they got the courts to dissolve the Thai Rak Thai Party despite the fact that it had won repeated elections.

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party was and remains hugely popular among the majority of Thais. This party introduced the first universal health care scheme and projects to stimulate village economies. The aim was to develop Thailand as a whole, increasing the education and health status of the general population, thus turning them into “stake-holders”. This was a winning formula, an alliance between a pro-poor capitalist party and the poor, both urban and rural.

But Thaksin's modernization plans, which also included major infrastructure development such as public transport projects for Bangkok, upset the Old Order. This “Old Order” is not headed by the King, as many commentators think. The Old Order is made up of local political mafias, the army, conservative judges and the Democrat Party. They were joined by businessmen like Sondhi

Limtongkul, who initially supported Thaksin, but fell out over personal interests. The People's Alliance for Democracy mobilised a fascist-style middle class mob to cause chaos. They seized Government House, destroyed offices, stole weapons and then tried to close parliament. Their final act was the takeover of the two international airports with the open support of the military. The PAD and the old order want to reduce democracy further. They want to reduce the number of elected members of parliament, stiffen lese majeste laws and destroy the alliance between the poor and Thaksin. They are angry that the poor have become politicised. They hate the fact that state budgets were spent on healthcare, rural development and education.

Instead they want to cling to their old privileges, espouse strict "Monetarism" (except for elite and military spending) and advocate that the poor should be "sufficient" in their poverty. These people use neo-liberal free-market ideas in association with the king's "sufficiency economy" ideology. Their excuse for opposing democracy is their belief that the poor are too stupid to deserve the right to vote.

The Thai King has always been weak. His status has been systematically promoted by military juntas and the elite in general. We are all socialised to think that the king is an "ancient absolute monarchy," while at the same time being within the constitution. This picture of power creates a shell to protect the entire ruling class and the status quo under a climate of fear. The army especially needs such a legitimising shell because it is no longer okay for the military hold political power, unless it can claim to protect the monarchy.

In previous political crises, such as in 1973 and 1992, the king only intervened late in the day after it was clear who had won. In the present crisis the king has remained silent and has not made any attempts to resolve the crisis. He missed his annual birthday speech on 4th December this year, claiming a sore throat.

The royal dimension to this crisis is that it is a struggle between two elite groups. One side has been much more successful in claiming royal legitimacy. But ironically this claim by the anti-Thaksin lot is causing a crisis for the monarchy because it associates PAD violence and law-breaking with the monarchy and the actions by the military have created an image that the monarchy is against the majority of the population. The support shown by the Queen for the PAD has also angered or disappointed many Thais.

The new government will be made up of a coalition of corrupt and unprincipled politicians. This shows that the elites' opposition to Thaksin was never really about preventing corruption or vote buying, despite the fact that many ordinary middle-class people might have felt that it was. Even the Democrat Party has a history of vote buying and corruption. The Democrat governor of Bangkok had to resign recently under a corruption cloud. Yet the party was not dissolved by the courts.

So far, Thaksin and his fellow politicians have only been found guilty of technicalities. No serious corruption charges have been proven. No evidence of real election fraud has ever been unearthed. In fact, Thaksin's party was reducing the importance of vote-buying through pro-poor policies. This is what angered the old order. It meant that they could only overthrow his government by promising more to the poor or by using various means to organise coups.

There are a number of questions which need to be put to the new government:

1.

Will the government punish PAD leaders for breaking the law, including the Democrat MP who took over the airport? Will the PAD be made to answer for the damage at Government House? Will the

Democrats expel their MP who lead the airport occupation?

2.

Will the military chiefs be sacked for breaking the law and intervening in politics? Will they be sacked for giving the green light to the takeover of the airports and thus compromising airport security?

3.

Will the government defend the undemocratic constitution or will it amend the constitution to increase democracy?

4.

Will elections be held as soon as possible to allow the Thai population to have a say?

5.

What serious measures will the government take in order to protect the poor from the economic crisis. What job creating policies do they have? How can they stop workers being sacked from factories. Will they increase wages and cut VAT in order to stimulate the economy? Will they increase taxation on the rich in order to help the poor?

6.

Will the government punish state officials who murdered unarmed demonstrators in the south at Takbai during the Thaksin government? Will they withdraw troops and police so that a peaceful political solution can be achieved?

7.

Will the government ensure a balanced media by allowing significant space for Red Shirt anti-government critics? Or will the government increase censorship and media bias? Will they repeal the les majesty law and allow public scrutiny and criticism of the courts?

Many of us can guess what the answers will be....

P.S.

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