

# Thailand: Class war for democracy

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## Contents

- [The assault on democracy](#)
- [Newly ordered constitution](#)
- [Use of lese majeste law](#)
- [Class war for democracy](#)

March 21, 2009 — The current dispensation in Thailand is based on a political reaction to stem and reverse some of the populist measures of the deposed prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, who himself was a neoliberal with a few pro-poor schemes. Even this was unacceptable to the elites who used the courts, the military and the monarchy to depose him and institute an anti-democratic constitution which protects their privileges. But now that Thaksin is gone, a grassroots movement of the poor is emerging to challenge the hold of the elites, the military and the monarchy over Thailand.

Today, the Thai government, and its elite supporters, are once again using the language of the Cold War and the era of military dictatorships in order to throttle free speech and democracy. Everything in Thailand is not as it seems. The so-called Democrat Party is in government, but not because of support from the majority of the electorate. In fact, the Democrat Party has never won anything approaching a majority and this is why the party welcomed the military coup in 2006. The Peoples' Alliance for Democracy (PAD), those yellow-shirted royalists who seized the two international airports last year, are neither an alliance of the people nor are they for democracy.

Its membership base is among the extremist middle classes who believe that the Thaksin Shinawatra government spent "too much" money on welfare and populist policies for the poor. The PAD believes that only it is true guardian of the monarchy and that the majority of the Thai electorate, who are poor, should not have the right to vote. The PAD has an armed "guard" and has used violent tactics on the streets of Bangkok to destabilise elected governments. It proposes a "New Order" in Thai politics where only 30% of the parliament is elected. It wants members of parliament to be elected by "professional groups" rather than through a one-person one-vote system. This would ensure that doctors and professionals have much more voting power than poor agriculturalists or factory workers. Tragically, most so-called "liberal" academics supported the 2006 coup and the PAD. Amazingly, so did half the Thai non-governmental organisation (NGO) movement. The PAD works hand in glove with the army and it has received endorsement from the queen.

## The assault on democracy

Five years ago, under the elected Thaksin government, Thailand had a thriving and developing democracy with freedom of expression, a relatively free press and an active civil society where social movements campaigned to protect the interests of the poor. This was not, however, the work of the Thaksin administration, since there were serious problems of human rights abuses. Thaksin's government used murderous repression in the predominantly Muslim southern provinces of Malay

and killed more than 3000 people in the so-called “war on drugs”. The situation, though, has become much worse since the 2006 coup which overthrew his government. Today, the country is creeping towards totalitarianism. The present government, led by the Democrat Party, is only in power because of the military which staged a coup in 2006. Despite the grave economic crisis, its priority is just to crack down on free speech and dissent, claiming the need to protect “national security”.

The Thai political crisis started with mass demonstrations led by the PAD in early 2005. The PAD began as an “alliance from hell” between disgruntled royalist media tycoon Sonti Limtongkul and a handful of NGO and social movement leaders.

They attacked Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai government for corruption. Interestingly, they never showed any interest in criticising his human rights abuses. Thaksin responded to the growing crisis by dissolving parliament and calling fresh elections. The opposition boycotted these elections and “liberal” academics “explained” that calling fresh elections was “undemocratic”. The courts then annulled the election. The anti-democratic forces knew that Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party was immensely popular and would win any vote. Rather than accepting that the electoral support for Thaksin was because of the government’s first-ever universal healthcare scheme and many other pro-poor measures, they claimed that the poor did not understand democracy and were just “bought” by Thaksin. The Democrat Party spent most of its time attacking these pro-poor policies as being a waste of money and against “fiscal discipline”. Little wonder then that ordinary Thais would not want to vote for them!

The NGO and social movement leaders of the PAD moved sharply to the right, becoming fanatical royalists and calling on the monarch to sack Thaksin’s elected government. This the king refused to do, but the PAD’s demands were seen as a green light for a military coup and the military obliged in September 2006. PAD leaders and military junta leaders were seen celebrating their victory at a New Year’s party in 2007. At that time, the Democrat Party also welcomed the coup.

### **Newly ordered constitution**

The army ripped up the best constitution Thailand has ever had and replaced it with one of its own. A referendum was held to approve the military constitution. Many provinces were under martial law, campaigning for a “no” vote in the referendum was deemed illegal and full-page advertisements in the press urged people to vote “yes”. The referendum result was extremely close, a small majority being in favour. Half the NGOs, the PAD, most academics, the mainstream media and the Democrat Party all supported the new constitution. The military constitution allowed for half the senate to be appointed by the military, rather than elected. It decreased the role of political parties and installed a crony system where members of the elite appointed themselves to the senate, the judiciary and to so-called “independent bodies”.

The constitution laid down that neoliberal free market policies must be used in the interests of fiscal discipline, but also imposed a huge increase in the military budget. The final clause in the constitution, which previously gave citizens the right to oppose military coups, was changed to legitimise the 2006 coup and any future seizures of power. The courts in Thailand have never been truly independent or just. The military used the courts to dissolve the Thai Rak Thai party and then held the elections. Despite this, Thaksin’s party won a majority. So the courts were used for a second time to dissolve the new party which had evolved from Thai Rak Thai. It is clear that the aim was to cripple the most popular party and not allow it to form a stable government.

At the same time the PAD launched its deliberate “campaign of chaos” in order to achieve its “New Order”. It used violence to take over Government House, wrecking the interior. It staged violent

actions to try and prevent the elected parliament from convening and subsequently it seized the two international airports in 2008 with the support of the military and the Democrat Party. The PAD cared little about the damage to the country's economy and jobs, on the assumption that it, as the elites, would not be hurt and the poor could just suffer. No one from the PAD has been punished for these violent actions.

After the 2006 coup, the PAD descended into a fascist-type of organisation. It took on ultra-royalist and ultra-nationalist politics. Its supporters wore royal yellow shirts. It nearly caused a war with Cambodia over an ancient hilltop ruin. It built up its own armed guard which openly carried and used weapons on the streets of Bangkok. The present Thai foreign minister is a PAD supporter who took part in the illegal occupation of the airports. The PAD's media outlet, Manager Group, have started witch-hunts against academics and social activists who question the deterioration of democracy and question the use of the lese majeste law. It encourages people to commit acts of violence against those who think differently or oppose them.

Finally, at the end of 2008, the army bullied and bribed some of the most corrupt elements in Thaksin's party to change sides and support the Democrat Party. So Eaton- and Oxford-educated Abhisit is now the prime minister. His name sums it all up. It means "privilege". It is the privileged of Thai society that united against the modernising policies of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party. For the first time in decades, a party was gaining mass support from the poor because it believed that the poor were not a burden. They argued that the poor should be "stakeholders" rather than serfs. The Thai Rak Thai was no socialist party, but a party of big business committed to free-market policies at a macro and global level and Keynesian policies at the village level.

### **Use of lese majeste law**

The present government appears vicious and paranoid. Its priority seems to be to stifle dissent by using the lese majeste law. Anyone who criticises the government or the army is deemed to have "insulted the king". They are censoring the electronic media and community radio stations and encouraging citizens to inform on each other. People are being arrested for posting comments on the internet by tracing their computer IP numbers and they are thrown in jail, even before a trial. Recently, the manager of Prachatai, a respected independent online newspaper, was arrested. The mainstream TV and print media are already working hand in glove with the military. The courts have been used as an instrument of dictatorship. Judges protect themselves by threatening anyone who dares to criticise them with a jail sentence for "contempt of court". They claim that anyone who criticises the courts is criticising the monarch. Lese majeste trials are given little publicity and people cannot find out what actions are deemed to have insulted the monarch. There is no transparency and accountability, no justice, no freedom of speech and no academic freedom.

One worrying question is why most academics support the military and the PAD. Equally worrying is the question why decent NGO activists and some trade unionists did so too. As far as the academics are concerned, even those claiming to be "liberal" were always elitist. Most believed that the problem of Thai democracy was that the poor lacked education. But the education system that these academics have promoted is one where students learn everything by rote. The idea that an essay in politics might discuss arguments, rather than be merely descriptive, is met with surprise. The NGO movement has a different problem. It is a movement which turned its back on politics and concentrated on single issues and on lobbying governments of any shade and colour. It swung from admiration of the Thaksin government to supporting the military coup. In a nutshell then, the old groups in civil society have helped to create the monster of the "New Order" that is now strangling Thai democracy.

In early 2007, I published a book called *A Coup for the Rich*.<sup>[1]</sup> This short academic book was written as a protest against the shrinking democratic space in Thailand. I tried to analyse what exactly was happening to Thai democracy. I criticised the gross human rights abuses of the democratically elected Thaksin government. But I also argued that a military coup was not the answer to this.

Because my book opposed the military coup “solution”, I was charged with lese majeste or insulting the monarch. How can there be academic freedom when my own university, Chulalongkorn University, gave my book to the police? How can there be academic standards if political scientists like myself are not allowed to discuss what the monarch, the army and the elites do? And through all this, most Thai academics remained silent, some supporting the destruction of democracy, others censoring themselves because of fear.

### **Class war for democracy**

The civil war which is developing in Thailand is a class war between the rich and the poor. But it expresses itself in a very distorted and complicated manner. Those yellow shirts who backed the coup and the subsequent undemocratic measures hate the fact that Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai government won huge support for providing universal healthcare and public projects to lift people out of poverty. Since the overthrow of the Thaksin government and as a result of the prolonged crisis, a grassroots “red shirt” movement has developed. It is being built up by ordinary citizens who want democracy and freedom. They are moving beyond Thaksin. What is also amazing is that this is becoming a republican movement because of the dragging of the monarchy into politics by the military and the PAD.

The monarch has never once spoken out against the destruction of democratic rights and allows people to crawl on the ground in front of him. Traffic is stopped in the streets of Bangkok for the royal family to pass, yet emergency ambulances never get the same treatment. The conservative elites want us to believe that the monarch loves and cares for the people and that they love him back.

But the Thai population are quite capable of looking after themselves. All that is beautiful and honourable about Thai society has been created by its working people. The current monarch grew in stature under the corrupt military dictators: Sarit Dhanarajata, Tanom and Prapass. He allowed executions of people who were accused of killing his elder brother, when there were strong reasons to doubt the truth of these accusations. He supported the bloodbath at Thammasart University on October 6, 1976, where scores of students were tortured and killed, because he felt that Thailand had “too much democracy”. At the time he was also the patron of the violent gang that was collectively called the “village scouts”.

The monarch allowed the army to stage a coup in September 2006. Furthermore he allowed his name to be used by the army, the PAD protesters and the Democrat Party, in the destruction of democracy. He has been an advocate of economic views which reveal his opposition to state-sponsored social welfare for the poor and to income redistribution. But what is worse, as one of the richest men in the world, the king has the arrogance to lecture the poor to be sufficient in their poverty through the notion of “sufficiency economy”. This is nothing more than a reactionary ideology which argues that the poor must know their place. Finally, this king allows his supporters to proclaim that he is “the father of the nation”, and yet his own son is not respected by anyone in Thai society! For the millions of Thais who know all this to be true, it is only fear and intimidation that prevents speaking this truth about the monarchy.

The anti-democracy elites in Thailand, who claim legitimacy from the monarch, only do so because they have no other legitimacy. The monarch is weak, but these powerful elites create an illusion of his power to frighten people. The army, the conservative elites and the Democrat Party are scared that this royal legitimacy is rapidly evaporating, specially at a time when the monarch is getting very old. His son is held in contempt by the population because he is known as a thug who parades his wife naked for video snap shots. Most Thais have seen these videos and photographs and it does nothing for their respect for the institution of monarchy.

A new civil society is emerging from the “red shirt” movement. Many will feel uncomfortable that this is a movement of ordinary citizens and not the educated middle class. But this is what is surely required to build a democratic society based on social justice. The need is to cut down the military’s influence in society, reform the judiciary and the police and to expand freedom and democracy through this grassroots movement.

And it is necessary to abolish the monarchy too for it has now become an obstacle to freedom and human dignity. Thais need to create a culture of citizenship rather than being merely “royal subjects”.

#### *Note*

1 Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2007), *A Coup for the Rich* (London: WD Press). This book can be downloaded free at: <http://wdpress.blog.co.uk/>

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