

Thailand: Red Shirt democratic movement faces armed might of the ruling elites

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April 13, 2009 — For the fourth time in forty years, troops have opened fire on pro-democracy demonstrators in Bangkok. Each time, the aim has been the same: to protect the interests of the conservative elites who have run Thailand for the past 70 years.

For those watching the cold-blooded murder by soldiers on the streets of Bangkok, it may be tempting just to assume that the present chaos is merely about different coloured T-shirts and supporters of different political parties, as though they were mirror images of each other. This is not the case.

What we have been seeing in Thailand since late 2005 is a growing class war between the poor majority and the old elites. It is of course not a pure class war. Due to a vacuum on the left in the past, millionaire and populist politicians like Thaksin Shinawatra have managed to provide leadership to the poor. The urban and rural poor, who form the majority of the electorate, are the Red Shirts''. They want the right to choose their own democratically elected government. They started out as passive supporters of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai government. But they have now formed a brand new citizens' movement, for what they call "real democracy". For them, "real democracy" means an end to the long-accepted "quiet dictatorship" of the army generals and the royal palace. This situation allowed the generals, the king's advisors in the Privy Council and the conservative elites to act as though they were above the constitution. Les majeste (which outlawinsulting" — criticism of — the monarchy) laws and intermittent repression have been used to silence opposition. Ever since 2006, these elites have blatantly acted against election results by staging a military coup, using the courts to twice dissolve Taksin's party and by backing mob violence by the anti-democratic royalist Yellow Shirts''. The present misnamed Democrat Party government led by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva was manœuvred into place by the army. Most of those in the Red Shirt movement support Taksin for good reasons. His government put in place many pro-poor policies, including Thailand's first ever universal health-care system. Yet the Red Shirts are not merely Taksin puppets. There is a dialectical relationship between Taksin and the Red Shirts. His leadership provides encouragement and confidence to fight. Yet the Red Shirts are self-organised in community groups and some are showing frustration with Taksin's lack of progressive leadership, especially over his insistence that they continue to be "loyal" to the crown. Over the past few days, the Red Shirts have shown signs of self-leadership to such an extent that the old Red Shirt politicians are running to keep up. A republican movement is growing. Many left-leaning Thais like myself are not Taksin supporters. We opposed his human rights abuses. But we are the left wing of the citizens' movement for real democracy. The Yellow Shirts are conservative royalists. Some have fascist tendencies. Their guards carry and use firearms. They supported the 2006 coup, wrecked Government House and blocked the international airport last year. Behind them were the Thai army. That is why troops never shot at

the Yellow Shirts. That is why the present, Oxford- and Eton-educated Thai Prime Minister has done nothing to punish the Yellow Shirts. After all, he appointed some to his cabinet. The aims of the Yellow Shirts are to reduce the voting power of the electorate in order to protect the conservative elites and the "bad old ways" of running Thailand. They see increased citizen empowerment as a threat and propose a "New Order" dictatorship, where people are allowed to vote, but most MPs and public positions are not up for election. They are supported by the mainstream Thai media, most middle-class academics and even NGO leaders. The NGOs have disgraced themselves over the last few years by siding with the Yellows or remaining silent in the face of the general attack on democracy. Despite being well meaning, their lack of politics has let them down and they have been increasingly drawn to the right. When we talk about the "palace" we have to make a distinction between the king and all those who surround him. The king has always been weak and lacking in any democratic principles. The palace has been used to legitimise past and present dictatorships. As a "stabilising force", the monarchy has only helped to stabilise the interests of the elite. The immensely wealthy king is also opposed to any wealth redistribution. The queen is an extreme reactionary. However the real people with power among the Thai elites are the army and high-ranking state officials. If one is to understand and judge the violent acts which have been taking place in Thailand, we need a sense of history and perspective. Perspective is needed to distinguish between damaging property and injuring or killing people. With this perspective, it is clear that the Yellow Shirts and the army are the violent ones. A sense of history helps to explain why Red Shirt citizens are now exploding in anger. They have had to endure the military jackboot, the repeated theft of their democratic rights, continued acts of violence against them and general abuse from the mainstream media and academia. If they continue to resist, cracks may appear in the army. During the past four years Thai citizens have become highly politicised. Ordinary soldiers, recruited from poor families, support the Red Shirts. The stakes are very high. Any compromise has the risk of instability because it will satisfy almost no one. The old elites might want to do a deal with Taksin to stop the Red Shirts from becoming totally republican. But whatever happens, Thai society cannot go back to the old days. The Red Shirts represent millions of Thais who are sick and tired of military and palace intervention in politics. At the very least they will want a non-political constitutional monarchy. It is hoped that the Red Shirts will continue to move to the left during this round of struggle. -----

----- {{{Looking at Thailand's crisis: some basics}}} April 13, 2008 -- When watching and commenting on the recent events in Thailand, observers need to hold on to some basic principles. These are: 1. No government anywhere in the world has the right to use troops to gun down protesters in the streets, especially when they are not carrying firearms. The Abhisit government's use of the army to kill people in cold blood is an outrage. It is not "restraint" nor "the application of the Rule of Law". It puts the Thai government on the same level as the Burmese junta and its aims are the same too ... to hang on to illegitimate power and protect the interests of the privileged. 2. If observers want to pontificate about the "Rule of Law", then they must first denounce the illegal military coup of 2006, the lack of partiality and accountability among the judiciary in dissolving the elected parties of government, the illegal seizure of

Government House and the airports by the misnamed royalist Peoples' Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the use of firearms and bombs by the PAD, the illegal bribes and threats to manoeuvre the Democrat Party into power, the illegal government-backed Blue Shirt gangs, who carried firearms and the illegal and extra-constitutional role of the palace and the king's advisors in frustrating the functioning of democracy. None of the above cases have been punished. 3. There is a clear line between democracy and dictatorship. "Thai-style democracy" is an elite myth. The Yellow Shirts have repeatedly failed to respect the democratic wishes of the majority of the population. They want more appointed public positions and less power to the electorate. They want a "New Order". They want censorship. They back the draconian lese majeste law which stifles the basic right to freedom of speech. The Red Shirts may not be angels, but they want a genuine democratic process without interference from the military, the king's advisors or the palace. They would prefer to use the more democratic constitution of 1997, rather than the present one drafted by the military. 4. The anger of the Red Shirts over the past few days did not come out of nowhere. Since 2006 the majority of Thais have continually been abused politically by the elite Yellow Shirts, the mainstream media and middle-class academics. When pictures of Red Shirts smashing the PM's car are shown, it is dishonest and bad journalism not to explain this. 5. The majority of Red Shirts support Taksin, not because they like to "hero worship", but because his government brought in a universal health-care system and other pro-poor measures. The Democrat Party and the Yellow Shirts opposed these policies all along and knew that they couldn't win popular elections as a result. This is why they wanted a coup. 6. Most of the Thai elite are corrupt, especially army generals and politicians. Why single out just Taksin? We need to punish them all or none at all. 7. The entire Thai elite support the use of state violence, whether it be in the [mainly Muslim] south of Thailand, in the war on drugs or against unarmed protesters. Taksin has to take responsibility for gross human rights abuses while he was prime minister. So does the rest of the elite, including Abhisit and the generals. There is a long history of Thai state crimes and we need to challenge this. We can start with denouncing the cold-blooded murder by troops on the streets of Bangkok this April.

P.S.

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