

# The Reds' fight for Real Democracy

Wednesday 15 April 2009, by [UNGPAKORN Giles Ji](#) (Date first published: 13 April 2009).

**Thailand's conflict is no game of simple political allegiances: it is a growing class war between the country's poor and the old elites.**

For those watching the violence this week 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 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 a democratically elected government. They started out as passive supporters of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai government, but have since formed a new citizens' movement they call Real Democracy.

For them, Real Democracy means an end to the long-accepted quiet dictatorship of the army generals and the palace. This situation allowed the generals, the king's advisors in the privy council and the conservative elites to behave as though they were above the constitution. Since 2006, these elites have blatantly acted against election results by staging a military coup, using the courts to twice dissolve Thaksin's party and by backing Yellow Shirt royalist mob violence on the streets.

The present Democrat party government was manoeuvred into place by the army. Most of those in the Red Shirt movement support Thaksin, and with good reason. His government put in place many modern pro-poor policies, including Thailand's first universal healthcare system.

Yet the Red Shirts are not merely Thaksin puppets. They are self-organised in community groups, and some are showing frustration with Thaksin's lack of progressive leadership, especially over his insistence that they be "loyal" to the crown.

A republican movement is growing. Many left-leaning Thais, like myself, are not Thaksin supporters. We opposed his human rights abuses. But we are with 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 airports last year. Behind them were the army. That is why troops never shot at the Yellow Shirts. That is why the present, Oxford-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 propose a "new order" dictatorship where people can 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.

If one is to understand and judge the violent acts 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.

A sense of history helps to explain why Red Shirt citizens are now exploding in anger. They have had to endure the military jackboot, repeated theft of their democratic rights, continued acts of violence against them and general abuse from the mainstream media and academia.

The stakes are very high. Any compromise has the risk of instability. The old elites might want to do a deal with Thaksin 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.

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**P.S.**

\* From the Guardian.co.uk, Monday 13 April 2009 15.41 BST:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentis...>

\* Giles Ji Ungpakorn is a Thai academic and author who in February fled to the UK after being charged under lese-majesty laws, which forbid criticism of the king

<http://wdpress.blog.co.uk>