

Thailand: The 19th September coup, three years on

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On the 19th September 2006, the Thai army staged a coup toppling the elected government of Taksin Shinawatt. Soldiers sported yellow royal ribbons and the military junta claimed that they were staging the coup to protect “Democracy with the King as the Head of State”. They certainly were not protecting Democracy, but most Thais believed that this was indeed a “Royal Coup”. The coup came after mass street demonstrations against the elected government by the royalist and conservative “Peoples Alliance for Democracy” (PAD), where many PAD members and leaders of the so-called Democrat Party had called for the King to sack the elected Prime Minister and appoint another one. Later, the yellow-shirted PAD took on a semi-fascist nature, using extreme nationalism and having its own armed guard. They used violence on the streets of Bangkok.

It was always an exaggeration to claim that *“all Thais revere the King”* or that *“the Monarchy has held the country together for decades”*. Statements like that glossed over the level of coercion surrounding public attitudes to the Monarchy, the real deep tensions in society and the serious lack of power, courage and character shown by this King throughout his reign. Never the less, there was a short period of 20 years after the mid 1980s when the Monarchy was very popular. This was more to do with the weakness of any opposition and the level of promotion that the institution received, rather than any “ancient or natural” love for the King among Thais. Yet, it was enough to convince most Thais that Monarchism was deeply embedded in society. The present crisis has shattered all these illusions. Since the coup, the royalists have been promoting the King’s “Sufficiency Economy” ideology, which argues against redistribution of wealth. At the same time, Budget Bureau documents, show that the public purse spent more than 6 billion baht on the Monarchy in 2008, mainly for the Royal Household Bureau (more than 2 billion), royal overseas visits (500 million), Royal Thai Aid-De-Camp Department (over 400 million) and the rest being for security by the police and army. This figure did not include the cost of the new royal plane fleet, which amounted to 3.65 billion baht.

Some commentators, who ought to know better, however, go to great lengths in supporting illusions about the Monarchy. Benjamin Zawacki, South-east Asia researcher for Amnesty International, making a disgraceful comment on an 18 year jail sentence given to a Red Shirt activist for making a speech against the Monarchy, said that *“you have an institution here (the Monarchy) that has played an important role in the protection of human rights in Thailand. We can see why the monarchy needs to be protected”* (by *lese majeste* laws). There is absolutely no evidence that the King has ever protected human rights. In fact, the opposite is true. Just look at what happened on 6th October 1976. The statement is not surprising, however, since the Amnesty International office in Thailand is closely associated with the semi-fascist PAD.

Immediately after the coup in 2006, there was no mass response by the millions of citizens who had repeatedly voted for Taksin’s Thai Rak Thai (TRT) government. But a small group of activists, who called themselves “the 19th September Network Against the Coup” did stage a protest and continued to organise repeated protests. I was one of those people who protested against the coup. But we were not supporters of Taksin’s TRT and were critical of his gross human rights abuses in the South and in the War on Drugs. Since then, the destruction of democracy by the conservative elites has

continued relentlessly and has stimulated the growth of a grass-roots pro-democracy movement called the “Red Shirts”. It has long become necessary to take sides. That is why I joined the Red Shirts in November 2008.

After writing a new pro-military Constitution and using the courts to dissolve Taksin’s TRT party, the military junta who staged the 2006 coup, held fresh elections in 2007. This was won by the Peoples’ Power Party (PPP), a new party set up by TRT politicians. Again the election results were ignored. The conservative courts, violent protests by the PAD, including the shutting down of the international airports, plus the behind scenes activity of the army, eventually resulted in an undemocratic government with Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva as the Prime Minister in December 2009. Thailand took further steps backwards with the introduction of draconian censorship, the use of *lese majeste* laws against pro-democracy activists, and the creation by the government, of the armed paramilitary gang called the “Blue Shirts”. The Blue Shirts are thought to be soldiers out of uniform. They are controlled by government politicians such as Newin Chitchorp and Sutep Teuksuban. The reason for the creation of the Blue Shirts is that PAD is beyond control of the government and hence there are attempts to limit its power. Never the less, the Foreign Minister is a PAD supporter and he took part in the illegal airport occupation.

The Red Shirts have continued to evolve. Mass meetings of ordinary people, numbering hundreds of thousands, were held in sports stadiums in Bangkok. The movement was initially built by former TRT politicians, but it quickly evolved into a grass-roots movement with branches in most communities throughout the country and even abroad. There are local educational groups, community radio stations and websites.

In April 2009, for the fourth time in forty years, troops opened fire on pro-democracy demonstrators in Bangkok. Some months later, a tape recording of a cabinet meeting was leaked to the public. Prime Minister Abhisit was caught on tape urging the military to create a situation in which they could shoot the Red Shirt protestors. Each time the army have shot unarmed protestors in Thailand, the aim has been the same: to protect the interests of the conservative elites who have run the country for the past 70 years. This time, the protestors were Red Shirts, and at least two people died and hundreds more were injured, some seriously. Since then, Abhisit’s military backed government has repeatedly used “internal security” as an excuse to prevent legitimate street protests. They have declared what amounts to “Martial Law” in Bangkok over the next few days.

Taksin’s Thai Rak Thai Party was modernising and this is why the conservatives hated it. For the first time in decades, a party gained mass support from the poor because it believed that the poor were not a burden. They argued that the poor should be “stake-holders” rather than surfs. These “populist” policies were developed after the 1997 Asian economic crisis and were a result of widespread consultations in society. This 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 village or grass-roots level. When the party came to power in 2001, the banks had stopped lending and there was an urgent need to stimulate the economy. It represented the modernising interests of an important faction of the capitalist class.

The major forces behind the 19th September coup were anti-democratic groups in the military and civilian elite, disgruntled business leaders, middle class reactionaries and neo-liberal intellectuals and politicians. The coup was also supported by the Monarchy and the majority of the NGO movement. What all these groups had in common was contempt for the poor. For the neo-liberals, “too much democracy” gave “too much” power to the poor electorate and encouraged governments to “over-spend” on welfare. The intellectuals and NGO activists believed that Thailand was divided between the “enlightened middle-classes who understood democracy” and the “ignorant rural and urban poor” who were trapped in a “patron-client system”. There was a belief that Taksin cheated in

elections, mainly by “tricking or buying the ignorant rural poor”. This was a convenient justification for ignoring the wishes of 16 million people. There was no evidence for any serious electoral fraud which would have changed the clear majority which TRT gained in many elections.

Taksin has often been wrongly accused of being against the Monarchy. In fact he is a royalist. He opposes people like myself who are republicans. His government promoted the King’s 60 anniversary celebrations and started the North Korean-style “Yellow Shirt Mania”. But Taksin lost out to the conservatives in his attempt to use the Monarchy for his own legitimacy.

Taksin is also accused of corruption. His sale of Shin Corp shares, without paying tax, was certainly “moral corruption”, but quite legal. The military and the courts have had 3 years to come up with evidence of his corruption, but have only managed to convict him on a technicality in one instance. Perhaps a thorough-going anti-corruption campaign might unearth widespread corruption among all the elites, especially the military and the conservatives and even those involved in the King’s “Sufficiency Economy” programme?

Much damage has been done to Thai society by the conservative elites and the coup. They may manage to cling on to their power and wealth for some time, but millions of pro-democracy Thais are no longer willing to compromise and accept anything less than real democracy where the army and the monarchy are kept out of politics. Many, like myself, would now like to see a republic and a whole-sale dismissal of the top generals and judges. The King will die soon and his son is universally hated and despised. But the elites, whose real power lies in the hands of the army, will still try desperately to promote and use the Monarchy for their own ends. We can only hope that their dreams will soon crumble to dust.

P.S.

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