

Thailand: hundreds of thousands take to the streets to demand Democracy

Monday 15 March 2010, by [UNGPAKORN Giles Ji](#) (Date first published: 15 March 2010).

Hundreds of thousands of Thai Redshirt pro-Democracy demonstrators took to the streets of Bangkok and other cities over the weekend. This was a show of force to prove the strength of the movement and to dispel any lies by the royalist Government and the media that the Redshirts are not representative of the majority. The stated aims of the movement are to force the Military-installed Government of Abhisit Vejjajiva to dissolve parliament and hold fresh elections. However, it is difficult to see how the Redshirt leadership is going to turn this massive show of popular anger into a force which can confront and overcome the army, which staged a coup back in 2006. This is because the Redshirt leaders are not yet prepared to launch an all out ideological attack on the Military and the Monarchy. Calling fresh elections will not solve this problem. However, the massive turn out of Redshirts from Bangkok and the provinces is an important step forward. The vast majority of Redshirts are poor people, both urban and rural, and the Redshirt leaders are at last talking openly about a “class struggle” between the people and the elites. They need to go further and agitate among the urban working class and the lower ranks of the army in order to build up the momentum for revolutionary change. Any compromise will retain the power of the royalist elites who have constantly frustrated Democracy.

The political crisis and unrest which we have seen in Thailand since the 19th September 2006 military coup against the elected Taksin Government, represents a serious class war between the rich conservative and the urban and rural poor. It is not a pure class war and those taking part have different aims and different concepts of Democracy. Due to a vacuum on the Left since the collapse of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), millionaire and populist politician, Taksin Shinawatt and his Thai Rak Thai Party, managed to inspire millions of ordinary Thais.

Despite the fact that many commentators try to explain the present conflict as only an elite dispute between Taksin and the conservatives and that it is a dispute between “the old feudal order” fighting back against “the modern capitalist class”, this is not what the conflict is really about. The missing element in most analyses is the actions of millions of ordinary people. Taksin built an alliance with workers and peasants through his pro-poor policies such as the first ever Universal Health Care Scheme and local village funds to develop rural areas. The Redshirts like Taksin, but they are not just being used by him or fighting only for his return. They want real Democracy and social justice. Both Taksin and his conservative opponents are both royalists in modern terms, in that both sides seek to use the institution of the Monarchy in order to help support capitalist class rule. Feudalism was abolished in Thailand in the 1870s.

What gradually turned the conservatives against Taksin was their fear that they would lose their privileges in the face of Taksin’s widespread modernisation programme which had mass popular support. In the past the elites had used a combination of military power, royalist ideology and money politics in order to ignore the wishes of the population.

Neither Taksin nor the conservative royalists intended their dispute to turn into a class war. But the mass pro-Democracy movement is starting to question the entire elite structure, including the Monarchy. This is because of the arrogant attitude of the conservative royalists and the prolonged

nature of the crisis, plus the self organisation and self-funding of millions of Red Shirts at grass roots level. This class war is bringing about changes in political attitudes and putting all sections of society to the test. But the real question facing the movement is how to seize state power.

Giles Ji Ungpakorn

P.S.

* Giles Ji Ungpakorn is a Thai socialist, currently in exile in the U.K. His latest book "Thailand's Crisis and the Fight for Democracy" will be published in April 2010.