

# Thailand: Anger and Confusion in the Anti-government movement

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In the past few weeks over a hundred thousand people have demonstrated in the streets of Bangkok and in other provincial cities, calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The issue which unites this opposition to the government, is a disgust against the vast wealth of the Prime Minister and the fact that this wealth fuels the system of “money politics” in Thailand. Thaksin recently sold his shares in Shin Corporation, a vast telecom company, for 70,000 million baht. He did not pay a single baht in tax. This is probably legal. But this has caused immense anger among many who rightly see “corruption” as a moral issue rather than a legal one.

The anti-government movement was initially sparked by a fall out within the business class. Sondhi Limthongkul, a media tycoon, was once a friend of Thaksin. After the fall out he found that some of his programmes were blocked by the government. He then started a conservative royalist campaign to oust Thaksin and to “return power to the King”. Sondhi’s supporters attended rallies in yellow T-shirts, waving yellow monarchist flags. Thailand has had a constitutional monarchy since the 1932 revolution and considering the events in Nepal, the demand to return power to the King is obviously extremely reactionary. Yet Sondhi was able to tap into the anger against the government among people who might not share such conservative views.

The weakness of the Peoples Movement in Thailand has meant that many sections of the trade union movement and democracy campaigns attached themselves to this conservative royalist movement. The principle reason for this was that they have no faith in the independent strength of the Peoples Movement. As far back as a year ago, just before Thaksin’s landslide victory in the February 2005 General Election, leaders of the Peoples Movement were calling for a united front with conservative royalists. Those still under the influence of Stalinist and Maoist ideas of the now defunct Communist Party are also happy to form cross-class Popular Fronts with business leaders. In the past the Communist Party sought unsuccessfully to form alliances with military dictatorships.

The Thaksin government and the Thai Rak Thai Party enjoy significant support from the urban and rural poor. This is because it is the first government in decades which seeks to improve welfare and the incomes of the poor. The government introduced a universal health care system and other measures to stimulate the economy at grass roots level, all of which were attacked by neo-liberal academics and opposition parties. Of course, these “populist” policies were not paid for by progressive taxation of the rich. The government also pushed ahead with privatisation and neo-liberal Free-trade agreements. This government has also committed gross human rights abuses in the Muslim South and in its “war on drugs”.

Rather than calling for an anti-government movement which goes beyond Thaksin’s populism in order to create real income equality and a welfare state, the conservative section of the anti-government movement sees ordinary people who support Thaksin as ignorant, stupid and easily bought by the government. Thaksin has thrown down the gauntlet by dissolving parliament and calling a snap election in early April. He calls this “returning power to the people” in marked contrast to the royalists. The opposition parties have announced a boycott of the election because they know they will lose. Thaksin has responded to this by saying that if more than 50% of those who

vote, register an abstention (which is possible on Thai ballot papers), he will step down. But the conservative opposition has dismissed this, claiming that much of the electorate are badly educated.

These events have split the Peoples Movement right down the middle. The more progressive sections of the Peoples Movement are unhappy with the close association with Sondhi and the conservatives. Some have reluctantly joined the demonstrations, while others have stayed at home. We in the Peoples Coalition Party are pushing for a progressive political reform agenda among anti-government forces, both in the demonstrations and in other circles. We are trying to build a new student movement following years of decline. We need for progressive taxation of the rich in order to fund social welfare and health. State violence and repression is a real issue, which needs to be addressed. The Free Market in all its forms, whether it be Free Trade Agreements, Patent laws on drugs, or Privatisation of public utilities and universities, must be vigorously opposed. We also need to link all these issues with the international situation. In October this year a South-east and East Asian World Social Forum will be held in Bangkok and we shall be looking for dialogue between the Thai social movements and movements in neighbouring countries, especially the Philippines and South Korea.

The mainstream in the Peoples Movement has long taken the Autonomist view that we don't need our own political representation or theory and that loose networks of social movements are enough. Events are proving this to be a mistaken strategy.

Peoples Coalition Party:

[www.pcpthai.org](http://www.pcpthai.org)

Bangkok World Social Forum 2006:

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