

The Battle for Thailand

Thursday 27 May 2010, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 26 May 2010).

Contents

- [Epic Tragedy](#)
- [Class War](#)
- [Who Ordered Whom?](#)
- [Democracy and its Discontents](#)
- [The IMF and the Democratic \(...\)](#)
- [The Two Faces of Thaksin](#)
- [Coups and Continuing Crisis](#)
- [Within an Inch of Victory?](#)

Nearly a week after the event, Thailand is still stunned by the military assault on the Red-shirt encampment in the tourist center of the capital city of Bangkok on May 19. Captured Red-shirt leaders and militants are treated like POWs and the lower class Red-shirt mass base like an occupied country. No doubt about it, a state of civil war exists in this country, and civil wars are never pretty.

The last few weeks have hardened the Bangkok middle class in their view that the Red Shirts are “terrorists” in the pocket of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, at the same time convincing the lower classes that their electoral majority counts for nothing. “Pro-Thaksin” versus “Anti-Thaksin”: this simplified discourse actually veils what is—to borrow Mao’s words—a class war with Thai characteristics.

Epic Tragedy

No doubt there will be stories told about the eight weeks of the ‘Bangkok Commune.’ As in all epic tragedies, truth will be entangled with myth. But of one thing there will be no doubt: that the government’s decision to order the Thai military against civilian protesters can never be justified.

The casualties of the last week are still being counted. Government sources say some 52 people were killed in the week of clashes that climaxed on May 19. Bodies are, however, still turning up, including about nine that rescue workers discovered on Friday at the massive Central World shopping mall at the Rajprasong Intersection, which was torched by protesters. The final count is likely to be much higher. One soldier, for instance, claims to have counted 25 dead bodies on May 20 as he went with his unit on a room-to-room operation to flush out suspected Red-shirt protesters in the Siam Square area.

Red-shirt sympathizers accuse the military of indiscriminate shooting, pointing to six people, including two medical personnel, who were shot by high-powered rifles outside the temple Wat Pathum Wanaram, where thousands of Red-shirt supporters took refuge. A report by Thai academic Pipob Udomittipong documented in painstaking detail a military unit’s unprovoked firing at a medic’s van near the Red-shirt stronghold at Lumpini Park a few days before the May 19 assault.

While the Red Shirts count their dead, the Bangkok middle classes dwell on the 39 establishments and buildings that were burned down on May 19. The *Bangkok Post* editorialized: “City residents

will rebuild and prove that the collective good is a force greater than the terrorists who laid waste to our homes and businesses.”

Class War

The local and domestic media have portrayed the Red Shirts as a lower class peasant rabble from the country's impoverished Northeast invading Bangkok. This is a distortion, claim many Red Shirts. Some estimate that the masses that made up the Red-shirt demonstrators and sympathizers during the two-month long mobilization were 70 per cent from Bangkok and its surrounding provinces, and 30 per cent from the Northeast, North, and other rural areas. Those who resisted the armed assaults at the key Red-shirt fortifications and refused the Red-shirt leadership's advice to disperse peacefully before the military operation were mainly young people from Bangkok's lower class districts such as Klong Toey. One cannot deny that while it may not be the classic class war that is probably only found in Marxist theoretical writings, there is a strong class element in the struggle between the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts that are the government's mass base.

Taxi drivers are mainly a Red-shirt lot, and in the aftermath of May 19, they are eager to blast the government and the Bangkok rich and middle classes to anyone willing to listen. Given the way that the Red Shirts and hundreds of their lower-class sympathizers not only in Bangkok but throughout Thailand have been attacked, arrested, and imprisoned in the last week, there is no reason to doubt the words of one driver that, “When the curfew is lifted, Thailand will witness deeds that have not been seen before in this country.”

Who Ordered Whom?

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva ordered the assault, but the question for many is who gave Abhisit, whom they see as responding to powerful figures within the Thai elite, the green light? The army command apparently did not favor an assault on civilians, and neither did the police, who largely favored the Red Shirts. “Prem,” say many Red Shirt partisans, referring to Gen. Prem Tinsulanonda, the most influential figure in the Royal Privy Council. Some Red Shirts may well believe that Prem, whom they see as a master of intrigue, is the villain of the piece, but, according to some Thai analysts, what other Red Shirts mean by “Prem” includes others in positions of great authority.

Any suggestion that the aging King, who is reported to be ailing, had anything to do with the crackdown would be vehemently disputed by Anand Panyarachun, a highly respected political figure. Anand said that in his experience as prime minister twice, the King always observed the constitutional rules of the game. He only provided advice “on request” and left it up to the political players to decide what to do. “This is what happened in May 1992, when he brought Chamlong and Suchinda [the warring leaders] together and said it would be desirable for them to do what was in the best interest of the people. He never specifies what is to be done.”

Whatever was the role of the King in the recent tragedy—if indeed he had any role at all—there is now more explicit, critical discussion of the role of the monarchy, something that used to be shrouded with vague allusions.

How did it all come to this?

Democracy and its Discontents

Perhaps a good starting point is May 1992, when the dictatorship of General Suchinda Kraprayoon gave way to a new era of democratic governance. Between 1992 and 1997, elections produced three coalitions, but these were parliamentary formations dominated by traditional party bosses and elites who delivered command votes, particularly in the rural areas, owing to their control of economic and bureaucratic sources of wealth. Little was done to address the social grievances of the urban and rural poor.

As parliamentary democracy lost its luster, the economy barreled along, with the Bangkok metropolitan area rapidly integrated into the global economy via financial and production networks. The 10 per cent GDP growth rate between 1985 and 1995—the highest in the world, according to the World Bank—seemed impressive, until one discovered that it masked deepening inequalities, between Bangkok and the rest of the country, between the city and the countryside, among social classes. Between 1988 and 1994—the height of the boom that made Thailand Asia’s “fifth tiger”—the portion of household income going to the top 20 per cent of the population rose from 54 per cent to 57.5 per cent while that going to the lowest 20 per cent fell from 4.6 per cent to 4 per cent. Whereas in the 1960’s, the income of the agricultural worker was one sixth that of workers in other sectors, by the early 1990’s, it was down to one twelfth. Poverty became, as one economist said, “almost entirely a rural phenomenon.”

The IMF and the Democratic Crisis

However, the rural poor were suddenly joined in the ranks of the marginalized by almost one million Thais, a great many of them members of the urban working classes, when the bottom fell off the Thai economy during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98. And as globalization went awry, parliamentary democracy fell into severe disrepute as Thai governments seemed powerless to protect the people they were elected to serve from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In return for providing a \$72 billion fund to pay off the country’s foreign creditors, the IMF imposed a very severe “reform” program that consisted of radically cutting expenditures, decreeing many corporations bankrupt, liberalizing foreign investment laws, and privatizing state enterprises.

When the government of Chaivalit Yongchaiyudh hesitated to adopt these measures, the IMF pressed for a change in government. The second Chuan Leekpai government complied fully with the Fund, and for the next three years Thailand had a government accountable not to the people but to a foreign institution. Not surprisingly, the government lost much of its credibility as the IMF demand-reducing measures plunged the country into recession and stagnation.

The Two Faces of Thaksin

It was at in these circumstances that Thaksin Shinawatra, a talented manager, adept political entrepreneur and an extremely effective communicator, achieved ascendancy. Though Thaksin as a businessman had benefited from globalization owing to his firm’s monopolistic position in private telecommunications, one of the economy’s most globalized sectors, he sensed that the financial crisis catalyzed popular fears about free-market globalization, smoldering resentment at the urban and rural elites that seemed to be cornering the country’s wealth, and anger at the international financial institutions. Upon becoming prime minister in 2001, Thaksin made a number of dazzling moves. He paid off the country’s IMF loan and kicked the Fund out of Thailand, initiated a universal health care system that allowed people to be treated for the equivalent of a dollar, imposed a

moratorium on the payment of farmers' debts, and created a one-million baht fund for each village that villagers could invest in whichever way they wanted.

That was the side of Thaksin that won him a mass following among the country's poor, marginalized, and economically precarious sectors. But there was another side to Thaksin, the side that most of his urban and rural poor followers chose to ignore. A billionaire, Thaksin literally bought his political allies, constructing in the process a potent but subservient parliamentary coalition. He used his office to enhance his wealth and that of his cronies, seeming to lack an ability to distinguish the public interest from private gain.

Just as Thaksin appeared to have created the formula for a long stay in power supported by an electoral majority, he overreached. In January 2006, his family sold their controlling stake in telecoms conglomerate Shin Corporation for \$1.87 billion to a Singapore government front called Temasek Holdings. Before the sale, Thaksin had made sure the Revenue Department would interpret or modify the rules to exempt him from paying taxes. This brought the enraged Bangkok middle class to the streets to demand his ouster. Feeling mortally threatened by Thaksin's effort to redraw the landscape of Thai politics, the Thai establishment jumped onto the anti-corruption bandwagon. Unable to break Thaksin's parliamentary majority or to achieve a critical mass on the streets to sweep him from power, the establishment pushed the military to oust Thaksin in September 2006.

Coup and Continuing Crisis

Thaksin's recalcitrant mass base, along with its own mistakes, prevented the military from restabilizing the country, causing it to sour on direct rule. When the post-coup military-sponsored regime exited, elections brought two pro-Thaksin parliamentary coalitions to power. Frustrated at the polls, the elite-middle class alliance resorted to direct action, the most infamous of which was the anti-Thaksin's Yellow Shirts' seizure of the new Suvarnabhumi International Airport in December 2008. At the same time, judicial measures were used to dissolve the dominant pro-Thaksin party and coercion was used to detach some of its members and get them to join a new coalition centered around the minority Democrats headed by Abhisit.

At that point Thaksin's followers realized that only by mounting a show of force on the streets like the Yellow Shirts did could they restore their political position as the country's majority force. Street warfare in the spring of 2009, which resulted in the embarrassing cancellation of the ASEAN Summit in Pattaya, during which some heads of state had to be evacuated by helicopter, failed to dislodge Abhisit, but it proved to be a valuable dress rehearsal of the massive Red-shirt push that began the middle of March this year.

Within an Inch of Victory?

To many observers, the Red Shirts were within an inch of victory two weeks ago, when they managed to elicit a five-point reconciliation plan from Abhisit that included the promise of a dissolution of Parliament in September and elections in November. The government says hardliners among the Reds sabotaged the agreement by demanding new conditions aimed at making key government leaders accountable for 20 plus deaths in an earlier clash that took place on April 10. The Red-shirt leadership, on the other hand, claimed that the haste with which the government took back its offer and ended negotiations showed it had been merely using the negotiations to buy time for the military crackdown, which came on May 19.

What is certain is that the surrender of the Red-shirt leadership and the repatriation of thousands of rural folk to their provinces will not end the Red-shirt challenge. According to one pro-Red-shirt academic, the disaffected military, police, and government personnel that played a prominent role in the recent mobilizations will create a potent underground network that will provide the leadership for the next phase of the struggle.

But the main push will come from the people themselves. Thailand, it is clear, will never be the same. A taxi driver summed up where things stand at this point: "The Bangkok rich think we are stupid people, who can't be trusted with democratic choice. We know what we're doing. So yes, they say Thaksin is corrupt. But he's for us and he's proven it. The Bangkok rich and middle classes see us as their enemy. If they think we're finished, they should think again. This is not the end but the end of the beginning."

Walden Bello

P.S.

* From INQUIRER.net. First Posted 06:56:00 05/26/2010:

<http://opinion.inquirer.net/viewpoints/columns/view/20100526-272123/The-Battle-for-Thailand>

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