

Interview

Thailand's military sends troops against thousands of Red Shirt protesters

A fight against an entrenched elite

Tuesday 8 June 2010, by [SUSTAR Lee](#), [UNGPAKORN Giles Ji](#) (Date first published: 8 June 2010).

A military crackdown against pro-democracy demonstrators took place in the streets of Bangkok after the regime of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva rejected proposals for negotiations and a ceasefire. The demonstrators, known as Red Shirts because of their clothing, have been mobilized, thousands strong, in the center of Bangkok for two months, demanding immediate elections. Leaders of the Red Shirts in the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship had offered to participate in talks mediated by the United Nations.

But the military-backed Abhisit government chose repression. Dozens of protesters and bystanders were killed by soldiers opening fire on crowds, with army snipers picking people off. The crackdown took an ominous turn on the morning of May 19 as armored personnel carriers massed outside the protesters' encampments. In response, protesters moved children and vulnerable people to a nearby temple.

Predictably, the Western media repeated the claims of the regime that protesters were to blame for the violence. But the protesters were comprised mainly of the rural poor who oppose the Thai government, which came to power in a military coup.

On May 21, Thai armed forces and police used tanks and live ammunition to finally clear the encampment of pro-democracy demonstrators.

GILES JI UNGPAKORN is a Thai dissident who was accused of "lese majesty"—essentially, not being loyal to Thailand's king—and forced to flee the

country last year. He has continued to provide a left-wing analysis of events in Bangkok. He spoke to LEE SUSTAR in the aftermath of the crackdown.

LEE SUSTAR - WHAT IS the level of repression in Thailand?

GILES JI UNGPAKORN - WE HAVE curfews in a number of areas.

I'm not sure if they actually declared martial law. But for some days now they have areas that were free-fire zones. But since the demonstrations ended under such pressure, people have been setting fire to buildings in many places in Bangkok and the provinces and so on. They have been very carefully targeted, really. There have been government buildings, provincial headquarters in the north and the northeast provinces. They set fire to the stock exchange, luxury shopping malls, and so on. The death toll is now eighty-plus since April 10. But I'm sure they haven't accounted for all of those killed. Soldiers have the tendency to drag bodies away and try to hide them.

WAS THE government's offer of early elections sincere?

I THINK it was a ploy to give themselves some breathing space. They weren't really sincere about coming to a compromise. At the same time as they offered elections, they still had charges of terrorism and of trying to overthrow the monarchy leveled at the Red Shirt leaders.

The relatives of those killed on April 10 had pressed charges against the prime minister and deputy prime minister for murder. The government side was brushing aside those charges. This was quite significant, because in the last two years, there has been a complete double standard in the use of the law.

Demonstrators have closed down airports—the Yellow Shirt fascists did that in 2008 [when they functioned as a street force that helped the military oust a democratically elected government].

None of the Yellow Shirts have been punished at all. But now, there are lots of Red Shirts in jail.

YOU'VE DESCRIBED the Red Shirts as a class movement rooted in the countryside. Can you tell us how the movement evolved during the demonstrations?

THE MOVEMENT was started off by the leaders from the old party of Thaksin Shinawatra [the prime minister who was ousted in a 2006 military coup].

They had a TV program called Truth Today. Later, the program got banned from mainstream TV, so they decided to try to have a TV program in a football stadium, and about 100,000 people turned up. It really grew from there. People went back to their communities and to Bangkok as well, and started to build connections and organization.

These groups help each other. They raise money for traveling to protests. They have ways that some people can access the Internet and get through the censorship through various computer programs. They spread the news that way. In many cases, they run community radio stations.

It's a very grassroots movement. As Marxists, we can understand that things can be contradictory. The Red Shirts can be very supportive of Thaksin because he provided health care to the entire population and pursued pro-poor policies. But at the same time, they are not being manipulated and used by him. They have genuine grievances. Their democratic rights have been stolen, and this is very much related to class issues.

Because the people who stole their democratic rights have insulted ordinary people, saying that they're not fit to vote—that they're too stupid, too poor and uneducated. Democratic rights went hand-in-hand with the benefits they got from the elected governments. The struggles for democracy and class social justice are completely tied up.

In the beginning of March, the Red Shirt leadership started to use the language of class struggle. They said that they were all serfs. Lots of people made numerous speeches saying that they were the ordinary people, fighting against the entrenched elite, the rich, people who are bloodsuckers and so on.

Because of all the bloodshed and brutality, and the fact that the king has remained completely silent, and the queen has supported the Yellow Shirts, it is quite likely that the vast majority of the Red Shirts now completely hate the monarchy. That is many millions of people. It's a new phenomenon.

WHAT WILL become of the movement now?

QUITE A few of the high-profile leaders are in prison. And the authorities are trying to capture some of the lower-profile ones. Also, they're going for provincial leaders and so on. The movement will have to throw up new leadership. If it is to remain strong, the way it was built in communities has to be strengthened.

And the groups have to coordinate with each other. If it is to be strong, that leadership has to represent the different communities. That's something I've been arguing for. But whether or not that will happen is another matter.

WHAT ARE the links between the Red Shirt movement and the left and trade unions?

THE EXISTING left is really small, and those who were serious about building a left-wing movement formed a united front and became Red Shirts. There were some who want to remain pure and didn't engage in the struggle, but in my opinion, they are quite irrelevant.

Trade union activists were on the Red Shirt protests. But they didn't come in union contingents. They didn't call for strikes. There was discussion toward the end about the possibility of strike action, but it never happened.

The bus workers' unions did come on

stage during the protests and gave donations. The local electricity distribution workers came on stage. There were areas in Bangkok where roadblocks were set up by Red Shirts—places where there are factories. So there's potential there. But the Red Shirt leadership, because they're not from the left—and they're not used to the kind of activism the left would do—ignored this.

YOU WROTE over the past few months about some of the NGOs that were blaming the Red Shirts equally with the government for the violence.

AT THE beginning, some would say that this was a dispute between Thaksin and the conservative elite. They didn't understand the dynamics of the Red Shirt movement, and therefore they remained aloof. Later, they became semi-sympathetic, but still wouldn't go in with the Red Shirts, so they remained irrelevant. But the NGO movement had already disgraced itself during the military coup of 2006. They supported the coup. They supported the Yellow Shirt fascists.

When they talked about the need to avoid bloodshed in recent weeks and months, they were saying that both sides need to avoid it. But on the one side, we have a heavily armed repressive state, using tanks and armed troops against unarmed, peaceful demonstrators. And they're still saying that both sides need to take responsibility?

THIS ISN'T the first time that troops have cracked down on demonstrators in Thai history. What's distinctive about this period?

WHAT'S HISTORIC is the Red Shirt movement—that it's so large, and made up of ordinary workers and small farmers. It's a mass movement that has been mobilized and active since late 2008, and it's growing. Also, the protests were prolonged, and so was the bloodshed. I think the body count was also unprecedented as well.

THE OFFICIAL spin in the media about the 2006 coup against Thaksin was

that it was a “relief” for Thailand.

IT WAS a relief for the middle class, the right wing, and the NGO types who were reactionary. It was a shock and horror to millions of Thai people who voted for the government. The journalists who talk about it being a relief were only talking to the middle class.

The middle class throughout this event took a very reactionary position—anti-democratic and sometimes semi-fascist—in the same way that the middle class took an extremely reactionary position in the military coup of 1976. But there have been other cases where the middle class has gone along with the democracy movement. It vacillates all the time.

WHAT HAS changed in the social base of the regime?

IF YOU look at 1970s, when the Communist Party (CP) was strong, there were serious splits in Thai society, and the monarchy was not that popular. I think the monarchy reached its pinnacle in terms of gaining hegemony when the CP was crushed in the mid-1980s.

This crisis has its roots in the 1997 economic crisis, when the Thai economy collapsed and a lot of Asian economies went with it. The response of the ruling class to the crisis of 1997 was to make the poor pay for it. It didn't provide anything to the poor. People who became unemployed were told to go back to their villages.

Along came Thaksin Shinawatra, a fairly modernist capitalist, if you like. He saw that if Thailand was to become competitive in the world market and climb out of the crisis, he had to bring the majority of the population on board and make them what he called stakeholders. He saw that if there were a decent health care system, education and all that, the capitalist system would be more efficient.

But this really rocked the boat. Because it meant that the old ways in which the elite had ruled—by offering the poor virtually nothing—could no longer be used. Plus, Thaksin became immensely popular.

The Thai ruling elite has traditionally used the monarchy to legitimize everything it does. So if the army stages a coup, it claims legitimacy from the monarchy, and the monarchy is happy to go along with this. The monarchy itself is quite weak, but it's given the appearance of strength. It's used in an ideological way to back up everything the elites do, including the 2006 military coup against Thaksin.

Because of the coup, the use of the monarchy, and the way that the monarchy has been seen to be on the side of the military and the conservative elite, there's now a deep crisis once again, like there was in the 1970s and the 1930s. The popularity of the monarchy has gone up and down. What we see now in Thailand is the division between the two sides: a conservative elite that uses brute force, allows democracy at certain times, and uses the monarchy to legitimize itself—versus Thaksin, who uses pro-poor policies to gain a mass base through democratic means.

Between those two choices, the people have chosen democracy. That means in trying to struggle for democracy after the coup, they have come up against the ideology of the monarchy that is being used against them. That is bringing the monarchy into crisis.

WHAT IS the potential to organize openly now?

THE CENSORSHIP is very severe at the moment. People are still playing cat-and-mouse games—opening new Web sites, having them closed down, and moving them.

WHAT KIND of factor will the economy be in the months ahead?

REGIMES CAN benefit if they can cling to power and the economy starts to grow. But it's much too early to say, since we still have the world economic crisis—although the expansion of the economy in China is probably helping the Thai economy. On the other hand, the social unrest will have a negative effect. It's difficult to tell.

ARE THERE splits in the ruling class that could give the popular movement room to come back?

THEY WANTED to delay the elections so that the Red Shirts would demobilize. They were trying to buy time, and maybe hope that the longer they postpone elections, the more they could find ways to boost their popularity. But the killings must have had an impact on the way people view the government.

There are splits in the ruling elite all the time. But they are still united in their opposition to the Red Shirts. They have a relationship with the movements from below. If you have a lot of pressure from below, certain elements in the ruling class will say, "Right, we're going to sacrifice the prime minister to save our own skins." But if the Red Shirts don't mobilize, I'm not sure we can rely on splits in the ruling class.

WHAT CAN people outside Thailand do to support the pro-democracy movement?

ONE ISSUE that's very important is that of political prisoners. That's something people in the U.S. and Europe can help campaign around.

It is very important to see that all the prisoners are political prisoners, whatever the charges that they may face. Some may face charges of terrorism or trying to overthrow the monarchy, some of blocking roads. But all of these things have to be seen as political charges, and they all need to be opposed. We need to pressure human rights groups, the Obama administration, and other governments.

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P.S.

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