

# **Thailand: The 19<sup>th</sup> September coup, four years on... The blood bath at Rajprasong, four months later...**

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Over this weekend protests are taking place in many parts of Thailand and in many cities around the world. We are Red Shirts and we shall be remembering those who were killed by the Military and those who are in prison. We shall demand Democracy and Human Rights and an end to this brutal dictatorship. The Military Government of Prime Minister Abhisit hoped that by sending snipers to deliberately kill unarmed civilians, they would break the democratic spirit of the Red Shirts. They are mistaken. Their dreams of “stability” and a long secure future for the conservative elites are built on sand.

Yet the Military and the Government talk now about “reconciliation”. But this is no reconciliation. They offer nothing except talks with some politicians from Puea Thai Party without any Red Shirt leaders present. What the junta is really saying is that the Red Shirts must quit their activities. The conservatives have stolen Democracy, they have overthrown elected governments, they have censored all opposition media, they have killed almost 90 unarmed civilians and they have locked up hundreds of political prisoners... and now they say “let bygones be bygones”. The scandal is that some Puea Thai Party leaders are willing to accept this in order to protect their political professions.

Let us not forget that on the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006, the Thai Army staged a coup toppling the elected Government of Taksin Shinawat. 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 they were claiming legitimacy from the King. Over the past 40 years, the Military have repeatedly destroyed Democracy and shot down unarmed pro-democracy civilians in the streets 6 times. Each time they claimed legitimacy from the King. No military officer has ever been punished for these crimes. At the same time as the Military were destroying Democracy, the yellow-shirted fascist PAD used violence on the streets of Bangkok, including the seizure of Government House and the two international airports. They were supported in all these actions by the Military and politicians who later joined Abhisit’s unelected Government in 2008. Not one PAD member is in jail.

The present crisis has shattered many old illusions in public institutions, including the Monarchy. Yet many foreign journalists, who want to remain in Thailand, continue to trot out the line that “the King is highly revered”. In Thailand, people go to prison for 18 years for discussing the King. Since the coup, and the continuous destruction of democratic rights and the rule of law by the Military and the Judiciary, a gigantic pro-democracy social movement has been built at grass roots level. We are the Red Shirts. It is the largest social movement in Thai history and it has branches in communities throughout the country. This is why it was so brutally suppressed by the Abhisit Government and the Army 4 months ago.

In many ways Thailand has moved back to the dark ages of the military dictatorships. Yet history never repeats itself in exactly the same manner. Today we have the Red Shirts as a mass movement of the people. Most Red Shirts now hate the Monarchy. That is a lot of people! The old Peoples

Movement which was inspired by the NGOs has withered and become a right-wing pro-dictatorship support group. Even the Army has changed. It feels the need to have a puppet civilian Government, headed by a fresh-faced tyrant who graduated from Oxford University. Military juntas made up of corrupt generals are unpopular. But the conservative elites have a huge problem. They know that if they don't "fix things" they can never win a democratic election. They don't represent the majority. They also know that the King, their only source of legitimacy, will die soon.

Taksin's Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) was modernising and it captured the imagination of millions of citizens. 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. "Populist" policies, such as universal health care, 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. The TRT Government also believed in using a "firm hand". This resulted in thousands of deaths in "the war on drugs" and the war in the Muslim Malay South. That is why I never voted for or supported TRT. Never the less, I was totally opposed to the coup and the PAD.

The conservative elites, middle classes, academics and NGO activists believe that Thailand is divided between the "enlightened middle-classes who understand democracy" and the "ignorant rural and urban poor" who are trapped in a "patron-client system". There was a mistaken belief that Taksin cheated in elections by "tricking or buying the ignorant rural poor". This was a convenient justification for ignoring the wishes of 16 million people. They also accused Taksin of corruption, while ignoring the corruption of the Military, the Palace and politicians from the present Government. These people must bear a responsibility for the killings that took place at the hands of the Military earlier this year and the fact that Thai jails are over-flowing with political prisoners. Many NGO professionals and academics have now joined Government sponsored reform or reconciliation committees. They are totally unqualified to talk about reconciliation or reform. But they are certainly aware of their own self-importance.

Any genuine reconciliation would require the following first steps:

1. Release of all Red Shirt political prisoners, including those jailed for lese majeste.
2. An immediate end to the Emergency Decree and an end to censorship so that Red Shirt media can function on an equal basis to the royalist media.
3. The setting up of a genuine public enquiry into the 2006 coup, the actions of the judiciary and the April/May 2010 blood bath. The enquiry needs to be staffed by Red Shirts and conservatives in equal proportions. The Prime Minister, deputy Prime Minister and Head of the Army need to stand down while the enquiry takes place, so that they cannot influence its findings.
4. A fixed date for a general election by 2011 must be announced. A new Electoral Commission must be appointed, made up of commissioners nominated by Red Shirts and conservatives in equal proportions.
5. All negotiations must involve all parties, especially the Red Shirt activists.

Red Shirts must tell Puea Thai Party in no uncertain terms that they cannot take the votes of Red Shirts for granted. If they want to be the party of Red Shirts they must fight for the kind of Democracy and Social Justice that Red Shirts want. If Puea Thai Party refuses to listen, then an alternative Red Shirt Party must be established.

Thai society cannot be reformed and the divisions cannot be healed until we have a return to Democracy. All political prisoners must be released, the generals, politicians and judges who are responsible for the destruction of Human Rights must be punished, and the power of the Military must be completely dismantled. Some might say that to do this, Thailand needs a social revolution and it also needs to be a Republic so that the Military cannot claim legitimacy from the discredited and unprincipled Monarchy. They would be right.

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