

Thailand: 4 years after the Coup d'état - September 19, 2006

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September 19th, 2010 marks the 4th Anniversary of the last coup d'état in Thailand which has led to the worst socio-political crisis in Thailand's history. To understand the coup d'état against Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government one must understand that he is widely considered the most popular Prime Minister in Thailand's political history. His Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) came to power in 2001. It was the first time in Thailand's history that one political party won more than 50% of the house, enabling it to set up a majority government. This party won the election partly because of its aggressive election campaign which focused on issues such as low cost universal health care and low cost loan. These issues were and are of great importance to the rural citizens of Thailand which overwhelmingly voted for the Thai Rak Thai party.

Again, because of the aggressiveness of the TRT, it started to effectively manage its policies, thus infringing on the traditional bureaucratic domain. It was the first time these bureaucrats were forced to follow instructions and policies initiated by elected officials. Former Prime Minister Thaksin's management helped to strengthen the people's belief in possibility of good governance which in turn strengthened their own socio-political beliefs.

The people of Thailand have been encouraged by Thaksin's 5 years in power, that under a democratic system, a citizen can present his or her demands to the government and be heard. Thaksin's policies required that civil servants are there to serve the public, not the other way round. If the traditional bureaucrats had let Thaksin and the ideals he represents persist, the strength of the old bureaucratic institutions would have been drastically weakened. Clearly, Thaksin's policy to strengthen the political base of the rural people was perceived as a threat to the traditional bureaucrats and other "elite" interests.

The policies that Thai Rak Thai campaigned on had for the first time given Thailand a strong centralized government willing to push aggressively for change. The overwhelming popularity of Thai Rak Thai created a political vacuum as the political opposition, Democrat Party, was weak and ineffective at countering Thaksin's surge. There was no legitimate entity or power to balance the political spectrum. At this point, after 4 years the NGOs as well as academics who, by nature, oppose strong government, found Dr. Thaksin's government to be more and more unbearable. Not only the bureaucrats, "elite" interests but also the army grew wary of the Thaksin's governmental policies.

Prime Minister Thaksin kept his campaign pledge to his rural constituents and his placed priorities on development and social welfare much to the chagrin of the Military which traditionally received a large portion of the government budget. The evidence was clear that military spending was no way near the top of the priority list. With no other avenues to maneuver, the stage was set for the military to build alliances with other interests and begin the process of flexing its political will.

The army waited until the anti-Thaksin's movement built their stronghold among intellectuals, monarchists, social workers of non-governmental organization (NGOs), petite bourgeois, and media publications. It wasn't until these separate interests coalesced into a unified movement that the Military stepped in to take over power.

General Sonthi Boonyaratakin staged the coup d'état on September 19th, 2006. The coup had special characteristics distinct from previous coup d'états. The first being that it was supported by intellectuals, the middle class citizenry and most major Thai media outlets.

The second characteristic being that a specific "social movement", the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), spearheaded the ideological conceit that justified the coup. Sonthi Limthongkul lead the PAD and its ideology of "New Politics" which was based on "elite" elements of society, supposedly incorruptible, holding sway over much of the Thai political and governmental landscape.

The third characteristic and most alarming is the intervention of the Royal Privy Council in Thai politics. They escorted the Military leaders of the coup to an audience with the King at midnight and get his consent to legitimize the coup.

The junta promulgated a temporary constitution setting up the Government and National Legislative Assembly claiming to be democratic, but those people represented no one but the junta, the elite and the anti-Thaksin movement. When the constitution was drafted, the junta's government conducted, controlled and intervened by the military on August 19, 2007. and promulgated into law.

Meanwhile, the Junta engineered the dissolution of TRT party with the objective of th of weakening the power of politicians elected by the people and strenghten the power of the bureaucrats. Thailand had now turned into an aristocrat dominated country and not a true democracy. It will take so many years to undo the damage to the principle of rule of law.

Based upon this new 2007 Constitution, an election was held and it was one of the most corrupted and fraud election ever. National Election Commission (NEC) who supposed to supervise this election but did perform its duty since they were themselves appointed by the Junta. Nevertheless, People Power Party (PPP), won and Samak Sunthornvej became the Prime Minister.

Within 3 months, PAD, the group that supported the coup, began to protest and seized NBT (National Broadcasting Television), Prime Minister's office and later Suwannaphum Airport. And at the same time, the Courtiers disqualified two Prime Ministers and People Power Party which will bring about dramatic change in which the political Party who they support, the Democrats, would become the government after 5 years absent from power with the Army appointed Abhisit Vejjajiva from the barracks.

This time, the Red shirt objected to the illegitimacy of Abhisit Government and mounted 6 rallies and the last one from March 12 - May 19, 2010 which was crushed by the Army resulted in 91 death and 2000 injured. Even though the Red shirts protest were brought under control. However, serious questions remain about Thailand's political future.

In conclusion, 2006 Coup brought Thailand back 50 years. First, it did not only stop the democratization which went rather well during the 74 years of democracy in Thailand, but also multiplied the existing political crisis. Second, it provided the Army to return in to politics again. The present government in reality is a civil-military one. Lastly, the coup widened and deepened the division of Thai society in to Yellows and Reds. Until now this division appears everywhere and cut across every organization from the national to families which never happened in Thailand before.

The last point I would like to remind that since the Democratic revolution 1932 which ended the absolute Monarchy to the present, there were 10 successful coups. Even today, the existing political environment is always ripe for another coup to take place. To prevent it from happening again should be the cornerstone for all Thais and citizens of the world who love freedom and Democracy. I demand to international communities to pay more attention to political situation in Thailand.

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P.S.

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