

# Thailand: After a temporary truce, Bangkok elite pushes for the Yingluk government to dissolve the parliament

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## Contents

- [Round One to Yingluk's governm](#)
- [Reactionary instincts of \(...\)](#)

### Round One to Yingluk's government

There is still a real danger that over the next few days influential members of the elite and military will pressurise the Government to make way for a "government of national unity"..... but a semblance of calm has returned to Bangkok as the royalist anti-democratic protesters were allowed to symbolically occupy Government House. They took pictures and then left.

A temporary truce has occurred around the king's birthday, since the royalists did not want to appear disrespectful to their "dear leader". The Government also wants to show its loyalty by staging the usual ceremonies in a calm atmosphere. Taksin, after all, is a royalist too. But don't be fooled. The aged king has no real power and he has never been brave enough to stick his neck out and do anything under his own initiative. He is the tool of the military and the elites. The real power is with the army.

So what is the score so far in the battle between the royalist conservatives and the elected Government?

On the Government's side, the fact that it refrained from using violence against the unruly mob of royalists is very much to its credit and it has strengthened its position on the moral high ground. Its legitimacy far outweighed the royalist thugs already because the Government was clearly democratically elected, while the royalists called for a dictatorship. So far the Government has refused to resign or dissolve parliament. But we do not know what will happen in the days and months ahead. There was much pressure on the government from reactionary academics and NGOs who called for parliament to be dissolved. The Thai University Rectors' conference even added the view that a future Prime Minister need not be elected.

These people's political position is not a surprise. They all supported the 2006 coup, accused the majority of the population of lacking intelligence and cheered the military crack-down on pro-democracy protests in 2010. What was more surprising was that a few naïve academics, with good democratic credentials, also called for the dissolution of parliament. This was a mistake. Back in 2006 Taksin dissolved parliament and called fresh elections. But the opposition then refused to stand in the elections because they knew that they would lose. Sutep's royalist mobs have said they would reject an election anyway. One way out would be a referendum, perhaps on the need to abolish the

military constitution. If the Government won, it would be a vote of confidence. If they lost, they would have to resign. But it is unlikely that Pua Thai are progressive enough to want such a referendum in the first place.

On Sutep's side, his proposals for an unelected assembly, appointed by himself and his friends, and a Peoples' Government of "good" dictators did not win him any extra friends. He hoped to spur the military into staging a coup, but so far the military don't want such a coup. The military did a deal with Taksin and Pua Thai back in 2011. Even if they military stepped in once again, they would hardly put Sutep's agenda into practice. Why give power to a monkey when the organ-grinder makes the key moves? The Thai ruling class know from bitter experience that they need some kind of democratic processes and that they cannot just brush aside the red shirts and government supporters. Sutep has led his troops up to the top of the hill and down again and that has not increased his credibility. His mate Abhisit had to come out with a string of pathetic lies in a CNN interview in order to justify their position. That hardly bolstered their legitimacy.

Of course there is still a real danger that over the next few days influential members of the elite and military will pressurise the Government to make way for a "government of national unity". This would almost be the same as a coup and it should be opposed. It may not happen. Most red shirts and probably the majority of the electorate would be against this. But the government and the red shirt UDD leadership might try to sell it to the red shirts by saying that there was "no alternative". There is an alternative. The democratic space can be expanded through the actions of pro-democracy movements including pro-democracy trade unionists. The various reform proposals by the Nitirat Group should be placed at the top of the agenda and the lèse majesté law should be abolished. These would just be first steps in the right direction.

**Giles Ji Ungpakorn**

Tuesday, 03 December 2013

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### **Reactionary instincts of Thai middle class prolong the crisis**

The so-called "Democrat Party" has announced that all its MPs will resign from the Thai parliament. They hope this will push the Yingluck government into dissolving parliament. But their aim is not to have fresh elections and a democratically elected government with a mandate from the majority of the population. Abhisit and Sutep's Democrat Party have never won an absolute majority in any elections. They approved of and benefitted from the 2006 military coup which overthrew the democratically elected Thai Rak Thai government headed by Taksin. They were part of the protesters who shut down the international airport. They formed a government under military control in late 2008 after the reactionary judiciary decapitated Taksin's party after it won the post-coup elections. Abhisit, Sutep and the military generals then shot down nearly 90 unarmed Red Shirts protesters who were demanding genuine elections in 2010. They were roundly defeated in 2011 when elections were eventually held. Yingluck, Taksin's sister, won an overall majority for the new Pua Thai Party in these elections. Sutep kicked off the latest round of the crisis last month by organising protests which took over government buildings.

In 2006, after Yellow Shirt protests against the Taksin government, Taksin dissolved parliament and offered the Thai people a free electoral choice. He easily won the elections, but the Democrat Party boycotted them. They knew that they would lose. The boycott spurred a constitutional crisis which

then led to the military coup. That is what the Democrats hope to achieve again today. But so far the military have refused to cooperate with them. This is partly because a deal was struck between Taksin and the military. But it is also because the more intelligent members of the Thai ruling class know that they cannot just do away with democracy and shun the views of the majority who are Red Shirts and who support the government.

Paul Handley, author of the famous book “The King Never Smiles”, which is banned in Thailand, wrote in a recent article in *Foreign Policy*, that: “The unending fight between pro-and anti-government forces, the so-called Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts, reflects (King Pumipon’s) fundamental failing to prepare a future for Thailand as a stable, mature democracy after he passes..... At every step, and in every political crisis, Pumipon has fallen back on the Army to help repress the power of elected politicians and restrain the development of parliamentary democracy.” [1]

It is true that King Pumipon has never defended democracy or any democratic constitution and that he has always been happy to co-exist with military dictatorships. He is also happy for people to be locked up in jail for 20 years for supposedly criticising him under the draconian lèse majesté law [2]. But Handley exaggerates the power of the king. Pumipon has always been weak and cowardly, a creature of the military. Other elites, including Taksin, have also sought to use Pumipon to reinforce hierarchy in society, much as conservative elite forces in Europe use their monarchies.

Handley states at the top of his article: “Why is Thailand’s democracy so dysfunctional? Blame the king.” But much as I abhor monarchies, I must blame the Thai middle classes instead. The difference between Europe and Thailand is the crude anti-democratic attitude of the Thai middle classes and the political weakness of workers and small farmers since the collapse of the Communist Party in the 1980s.

In the early days of the Taksin government, the middle classes and most of the elites rushed to support him. They hoped that he would make them rich and he did. But then many of the elites became worried by his electoral success and huge following among workers and farmers. Taksin was moving Thai society in the direction of a modern parliamentary democracy. His party had real policies which were put to the electorate and won huge approval. The old elites were used to just assuming that they could win elections without policies and by buying votes. They expected to carry on sharing the feeding trough while the poor stayed in their place. These elites persuaded the middle classes to turn against Taksin. The fact that the middle classes despised the majority of workers and poor farmers, who Taksin was helping with a new universal health care system and support for rural jobs, made the middle classes even more anti-Taksin. These middle classes are the kind of people who call their servants “children” and force them to kneel on the floor when serving their masters.

Taksin’s use of grass-roots Keynesianism together with the free market, upset the traditionally neo-liberal middle classes as well. Government welfare and health policies also upset the middle class NGOs who felt that they might lose the reason for their existence. Thai NGOs have mainly supported the idea of a neo-liberal “small state” as well. All these middle class forces joined the Yellow Shirts and cheered the 2006 military coup. A handful of state enterprise trade union bureaucrats also joined the Yellow Shirts. They felt more comfortable sitting with top bosses than organising grass-roots strikes [3]. Most of their members did not join the yellow shirts and in the private sector, union members were solidly behind the Red Shirts. The middle classes are now part of Sutep’s reactionary protest to destroy parliament and replace it with a more powerful monarchy and appointed legislators.

The middle class academics paved the way for the 2006 coup and the subsequent under-

development of democracy, by talking nonsense about the “dictatorship of parliament”. This referred to a parliament where one party had an overall majority. It was an excuse to brush aside majority votes. Added to this was the outrageous statement that all those who voted for Taksin were “stupid and uneducated” and therefore did not deserve the right to vote. These people, including the Democrat Party, are still saying the same things. They claim that they wish to defend minority views. It is a lie. They have never defended the rights of various ethnic minorities, the rights of the Malay Muslims, the rights of GLBT people, the rights of foreign workers or the rights of poor slum-dwellers or people who do not agree with having a monarchy. The middle class reactionaries merely defend the so-called rights of the 1% who have lorded it over the population for far too long. They even have the audacity to wear Guy Fawkes masks like the Occupy Movement!

The middle class academics and their fellow-travellers talked about “Taksinomics” and the “Taksin-System”. Sutep has vowed to abolish the “Taksin-System”. But there is no such thing. Taksin’s economic policy was to combine grass-roots Keynesianism and neoliberalism. He believed that improving living standards and infrastructure through government spending would increase the competitiveness of the Thai economy. Hardly a unique theory put forward by a power crazy despot!

The middle class say they are opposed to corruption. But this is a vague statement and charges of corruption and abuse of power can be legitimately levied at all Thai political and military leaders, members of the royal family and the judiciary.

The middle class have paved the way to prevent democracy in Thailand by systematically ignoring abuses of human rights in the *lèse majesté* cases and especially the extra-judicial killings of Malay Muslims, poor people accused of selling drugs and Red Shirt pro-democracy protesters in 2010. These abuses were carried out by all governments, including Thai Rak Thai, the Democrats and the military juntas. The middle classes were also heavily involved in supporting the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 massacre of students and socialists. Today the middle class staff the National Human Rights Commission which stridently defends the elites.

Of course we cannot ignore the other side of the coin; the political weakness of workers and small farmers since the collapse of the Communist Party in the 1980s. The lack of a workers’ party means that Red Shirts are forced to rely on Taksin and Yingluk’s Pua Thai Party which is a party of big business. Yingluk is quite prepared to compromise with the reactionaries in this latest episode of the long-running crisis. An example is the government’s recent withdrawal of the bill to make sure that all senators are elected rather than having half appointed. Such dirty compromises will put back democratic development even further.

**Giles Ji Ungpakorn**

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## Footnotes

[1] Paul Handley (2013) “Royal Meddler” Foreign Policy, 6<sup>th</sup> December 2013.  
[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/06/thailand\\_dysfunctional\\_democracy\\_king\\_bhumi\\_bol?page=0%2C0](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/12/06/thailand_dysfunctional_democracy_king_bhumi_bol?page=0%2C0)

[2] Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2011) “*Lèse Majesté*, the Monarchy, and the Military in Thailand”. Paper given at the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies (Pax et Bellum), University of Uppsala,

Sweden, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2011.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/54529804/Lese-majeste-the-Monarchy-and-the-Military-in-Thailand>

[3] Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2007) "A Coup for the Rich". WDPRESS, Bangkok.

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/41173616/Coup-For-the-Rich-by-Giles-Ji-Ungpakorn>

Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2010) "Thailand's Crisis and the Struggle for Democracy". WD Press, U.K.

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