

Thailand: Democrat Party, Pua Thai, Democracy and social classes

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The Democrat Party is a party of old-style “local boss patronage”

For the majority of the Thai population it is quite obvious why the Democrat Party and their middle class-led street mob want to destroy the current parliamentary system. They hate democracy because democracy gives them the wrong result. The Democrats have never won more than a third of the national vote in the last 20 years and this was the situation before Taksin's Thai Rak Thai ever existed. The Democrats' reliance on old-style localised political bosses in the south can go some way to explaining this.

Yet many outside commentators still swallow the various myths fed to them by their middle-class Thai contacts. They repeat that Thailand needs political reform “because of vote-buying by Thai Rak Thai and Pua Thai”. The nonsense about vote-buying exists on many levels.

On one level, people are talking about the giving out of money to voters by party agents in various localities. It cannot be denied that this takes place. But it is more of an election ritual than a real buying of people's allegiances. Siripan Nogsuan's research on the 2011 election shows that the vast majority of people voted for parties and their policies. Vote buying was only significant to the result of the election in a few marginal seats. Politicians who threw large amounts of money around often lost. In most constituencies the two main parties won by huge majorities which could not be accounted for by vote buying. Andrew Walker's research from northern villages, published in 2008, also confirms the fact that people spent time considering policies, irrespective of any money handed out to them.

Now, “considering party policies” could mean a variety of things. In the majority of constituencies, the national policies of Thai Rak Thai, such as universal health care and job creation, won the party huge majorities. Pua Thai inherited this support.

But “considering party policies” could also mean appreciating the patronage system run by local political bosses. These can result in real benefits to people in local areas. Those who follow Thai politics will know the names of many local political bosses such as Banharn, Sanoh, Chalerm and Sutep. Some are associated with Thai Rak Thai / Pua Thai and some with the Democrat Party. However, the important thing about patronage politics is that it is a local phenomenon and mainly associated with a lack of political policies. This means that the role of those local political bosses in

Thai Rak Thai and Pua Thai was greatly over-shadowed by Taksin's national policies. The same cannot be said of the Democrat Party patronage system in Sutep's Surat-tani province.

Sutep Tuaksuban has two other brothers who were Democrat Party members of parliament for Surat-tani in this out-going parliament. His family have been local bosses for generations and apart from their numerous and lucrative local business interests, they also try to control local councils. The irony is that those academics and reporters who talk about "Bangkok vs the rural villages" fail to recognise that a good proportion of Sutep's demonstrators are brought to Bangkok from villages in the south where Sutep's family control politics through their system of patronage.

Apart from the Democrats support among sections of the middle class in Bangkok, their only other area of significant support is in the south. The main explanation lies with the local patronage system controlled by the Democrats. Historically the communists helped build support for the Democrats in the south and more recently Taksin lost many votes in this area after massacring Muslim Malays at Takbai, Naratiwat in 2004.

The significance of this is that the Democrat Party cannot hope to win on a national level until they propose serious policies which would benefit the majority of the electorate. But they have consistently opposed the universal health care system, the job creation policies, the rice support scheme and any infrastructural development projects. They reject state spending on the population and instead favour local patronage. They are clearly a party of the "old politics". Even Abhisit Vejjajiva, with his posh English public school accent, and attempts to have a "modern image" cannot get away from the fact that he has long been in the same political bed as the military and the arch conservatives.

Finally, there are those idiots who write articles for The Guardian in Britain or appear on Aljazeera TV, who claim that Taksin's universal health care system was "vote-buying" or just a "give-away" for the rural poor. This kind of attitude shows a complete contempt for democratic principles. There would be outrage in Western Europe if foreign commentators claimed that the introduction of the National Health Service or the Welfare States were just corrupt attempts to buy votes from the ignorant poor!

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In Thailand, lazy foreign journalist repeat myths and clichés picked up in bars

In its latest article, *The Guardian* in Britain claims that Taksin's universal health care policy was a "give away" for the rural poor. I suppose they believe that the British National Health Service was just a Labour Party "give away" to bribe the British working class in 1945?

There was more nonsense in *The Guardian* about the crisis being a conflict between rural Thailand vs Bangkok... This is a nice titillating and exotic tale which academics love to repeat in order to avoid talking about "class". Yet, hard facts reveal that the results from the 2011 general election showed that in the 33 Bangkok constituencies, the Democrat Party won 44.34% of the vote, while the Pua Thai Party won 40.72%. This shows that the Bangkok population is evenly split between Pua Thai and the Democrats and this is based on those who have house registrations in Bangkok. Thousands of rural workers who work and reside permanently in Bangkok are registered to vote in

their family villages. If they were registered where they actually live and work, Pua Thai might have achieved an overall majority in Bangkok.

Another myth that gets journalists salivating with excitement, is the conspiracy theory that the crisis is all about the succession, since king Pumipon is old and sick. Yet, throughout his reign, the weak and cowardly Pumipon has swayed like a leaf, bending in the wind and serving as a willing tool of those who happened to be in power, especially the military. Why do the elites make the king into a deity and constantly reproduce this myth which is lapped up by so many journalists? The answer is that the more Thai society develops into a modern capitalist one, the more difficult it has become for the elites to rule over the population using crude authoritarian means.

The Thai military can only justify its anti-democratic political meddling by promoting the monarch into a deity and then claiming to follow his "orders". The right-wing middle-class protesters who are now demanding an end to parliamentary democracy are also frenzied about the king. Sutep, their Democrat Party leader, wants to return to an Absolute Monarchy.

Journalists also love to trot out statements about Taksin's "corruption". Taksin's wife bought land off the government at a time when Taksin was Prime Minister. He was found guilty of corruption, although it was established that his wife paid the market rate for the land. Democrat Party strongman Sutep was embroiled in a land corruption scandal, the military has its corrupt tentacles wrapped round the lucrative media and state enterprises, and the king has become the richest man in Thailand through the hard work of millions of poor Thais. But all this is never discussed.

Taksin is guilty of ordering extra-judicial killings in the war on drugs and in the South. But the Democrat Party, and mainstream media, remain quiet about this because the Democrats themselves ordered the shooting of 90 unarmed protesters in 2010. Sutep and Abhisit were directly responsible, along with the military.

Taksin also avoided paying tax. But then all the elites, the generals, the judges, the Democrats, and especially the royal family, all avoid paying tax. The main tax burden falls on the poor.

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Yingluk sleep-walks into the trap set by elite anti-democratic forces

Yingluk and her Pua Thai government were pressurised into dissolving parliament by a nasty coalition of Sutep Tuaksuban's Democrats, middle-class protesters, pro-military academics, conservative civil servants and NGO groups. This is the same coalition which supported the 2006 military coup.

Having now tasted blood, they want more.....



They are demanding that Yingluck resigns her position as caretaker Prime Minister, a role stipulated by the Constitution. They want the election to be boycotted by opposition parties. They also want to postpone the general election, which is due in early February. They are justifying this by their dishonest claim to want to “reform” Thai politics before any new election. But what they are really seeking is to change the election rules so that the Democrat Party can win more parliamentary seats. The Democrats have never won more than a third of the national vote over the last 20 years. This is because the party is a conservative party of the elites and big business which is against using public funds to provide jobs, welfare and decent health care. In addition to the vote-fixing which they seek, they want to reduce the role of elected politicians and increase the role and power, even further, of elite-appointed conservatives. Already the military appointed Constitutional Judges have ruled that they can prevent an elected parliament from changing the Constitution.

Disgracefully, the Electoral Commission, which is supposed to over-see free and fair democratic elections, is also putting pressure on the government to postpone the election and compromise with those who wish to reduce the democratic space. The Pua Thai Party and their supporters in the UDD Red Shirt leadership have failed to counter these attacks on democracy. Yingluck is sleep-walking into a trap set by elite anti-democratic forces. Earlier, her party made a dirty deal with the military, promising to give amnesty to the generals and the Democrat politicians who murdered protesters in 2010. Pua Thai hoped then to be able to bring Taksin home. Another part of that deal was to assure the military that it would retain all its power and privileges and also defend the continued use of *lèse majesté*. So far the military has been sitting on the fence in the confrontation between Sutep and Yingluck.

Real democratic reforms would involve a complete overhaul of the judiciary, the introduction of a jury system, the withdrawal of the military from politics and the media, the scrapping of the *lèse majesté law* and the end to impunity for state murderers and coup makers. However, this is very far from the minds of those who now bleat out the call for “political reform”.

It's class, not geography, stupid!

Many commentators on the Thai political crisis continue to trot out nonsense about the Red Shirts being rural villagers or migrant workers to the city and Sutep's Yellow Shirt supporters being Bangkok residents. Yet the results from the 2011 general election showed that in the 33 Bangkok constituencies, the Democrat Party won 44.34% of the vote, while the Pua Thai Party won 40.72%. Pua Thai even won 2 seats from the Democrats. Overall, Pua Thai managed to increase their Bangkok seats by a total of 4. The Democrats still had more seats, but lost 7.

This shows that the Bangkok population is evenly split between Pua Thai and the Democrats and this is based on those who have house registrations in Bangkok. Thousands of rural migrant workers who

work and reside permanently in Bangkok are registered to vote in their family villages. If they were registered where they actually live and work, Pua Thai might have achieved an overall majority in Bangkok.

The only area of the country where the Democrats have some strength, are some areas of the south where Sutep Tueksuban's family dynasty control politics through a system of patronage. Some members of his family are also MPs. Other areas of the south are also controlled by long-standing Democrat Party patronage, such as Chuan Leekpai's constituency. Such patronage makes a mockery of Sutep's avowed aims to "reform" politics. The Democrat Party patronage predates Taksin and Thai Rak Thai and one factor which helped create it was the support given to the Democrats by ex-Communists in the region. Apart from these historical aspects, the South is also the most prosperous part of Thailand, with the exception of Bangkok. Much income is generated from tourism and higher value agriculture. The irony is that those academics and reporters who talk about "Bangkok vs the rural villages" fail to recognise that many of Sutep's protesters in Bangkok are transported in from southern villages.

The real division between the "Reds" and the "Yellows" in the current crisis, which dates back to 2005, is CLASS. There is a clear tendency for worker and poor to middle income farmers to support Pua Thai and the Red Shirts, irrespective of geographical location. This is because of Thai Rak Thai's pro-poor policies of universal health care, job creation and support for rice farmers. In the provinces and in Bangkok, the middle classes and the elites tend to vote for the Democrats and want to reduce the democratic space and turn the clock back to pre-Thai Rak Thai times.

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Giles Ji Ungpakorn

P.S.

* <http://redthaisocialist.com/>