

Thai Politics at a Glance - An Analysis of Thai Crisis

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Thailand is once more in a serious political crisis, with the legitimacy of the government being challenged. There are two sources of government legitimacy, the means and the end. Means refers to how the government gets the power to govern the nation and its citizens while the end is the government's performance. The 'whistle group' (the large numbers of protestors occupying key areas of Bangkok under the leadership of Mr. Suthep Thaugsuban) is based on the claim that the current Pheu Thai government under Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, a younger sister of the ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (now living in self-exile and facing corruption charges), is illegitimate in both aspects. The primary allegations are widespread vote buying of the rural people in the provinces - who are viewed by whistle group members as poor, uneducated and backward. Although Yingluck's Pheu Thai party won the last elections in 2011, the whistle group claim she is not representing the people's interests, but only her brother and the Shinawatra clan.

The 'whistle mob' and Suthep Thaugsuban

What is often called the 'whistle mob' is a group of people, constituted mainly of the middle and upper class residents of Bangkok and the Democrat Party's supporters from the upper South. According to the Asia Foundation [1], one third of the whole whistle mob's population's average monthly income is 60,000 baht (approximately US\$2,000). They are also the financial supporters of the mob which is characterized as a people's movement. This is one of the explanations of how this movement has been sustained during the costly mobilizations over the past three months. Their common goal is the abolishment of the so-called Thaksin regime or Thaksinocracy. However, the definition of Thaksin regime remains vague and greatly varying even among its proponents including the intellectuals. They believe Thaksin is the most corrupt and therefore the most dangerous threat to Thai society and needs to be uprooted and eradicated. The anti-Thaksin sentiment is further fueled by the allegation (which he denies) of his attempt to orient the country towards a republic, thus detrimental to the monarchy, which is regarded as the most important institution of the kingdom.

The movement is led by Mr. Suthep Thaugsuban, the former secretary general of the Democrat Party and the former deputy Prime Minister during the military-formed government of Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva. He is said to be the most influential politician in the Democrat Party. Mr. Suthep is also

well known for a land reform corruption scandal, in which hundreds of plots of land ended up in the hand of a few influential families instead of poor farmers which led to the dissolution of the parliament under his party at that time. Thousands of people from the South, particularly his home town in Surattanee province, marched to Bangkok in support of him. Despite this track record, he has emerged as the leader of the anti-Thaksin movement as a bold and risk-taking personality. Some said they will later get rid of him after Thaksin is removed. Nonetheless, he is very influential in the movement as everyone listens to his instructions, even though his plan is obscure and no one seems to know what exactly is in his mind. His control over Democrat supporters, anti-Thaksin groups and his connection with entities in the old power camp – including the military, Privy Council and the Democrats who see the rise of Thaksin as a threat to the status quo – are his primary leverage in this struggle. It is clear that the Democrat Party, who has never won any election during the past 20 years, is the key actor of this movement. However, Mr. Suthep's resignation from Parliament to embrace street politics is an attempt to shield his party from any negative legal consequences. His intervention was at an opportune time, when people who share common sentiments were looking for a legitimate reason to rise up against Thaksin.

Amnesty Bill, the Trigger

The initial demand of the whistle group was the withdrawal of the blanket Amnesty Bill which was passed by the parliament at 4:00 am on November 1, 2013. This was the trigger of the mass mobilization. In fact amnesty is a conventional Thai way of reconciliation. However, such an act was viewed as an insincere push and manipulation of the parliamentary process with a hidden agenda. It has been heavily criticized by people of all political camps, including the UDD or Red Shirts, who are the main supporters of the ruling Pheu Thai Party that form the majority in the north and north east of the country. While many perceive this controversial bill as an attempt to whitewash Thaksin Shinnawatra, the bill would also grant the impunity to all perpetrators of the 2010 political violence which killed 92 people and left 2,000 injured. The Red Shirts have been working hard to pursue legal procedures and therefore see the amnesty bill as an obstacle to bring perpetrators to justice. Many felt the government betrayed the Red Shirts who had sacrificed their lives to call for the election and formed the electoral base of Pheu Thai.

Reform before Election

The Amnesty bill was finally withdrawn but this failed to stop the mass protests, which further demanded that Prime Minister dissolve Parliament and resign as the caretaker government respectively with no room for dialogue. The current demand is reform before elections. There has been a consensus that the reform is necessary, particularly constitutional reform. The questions are what kind of reform? Through which process? By and for whom? It is clear the current constitution has failed to address, and even reinforced, challenges in Thai society such as socioeconomic disparities, protracted violent conflict in southern frontier provinces, land tenure and dispossession, weak governance and politicized judicial, legislative and state independent institutions. This is because many of its provisions are undemocratic, particularly the selection process of key independent institutions such as senators, National Human Rights Commission and Constitutional Court. Many of the members of these entities were part of the military-sponsored constitutional assembly and got their positions through military support. This brings to question their accountability to the people. Their actions have repeatedly affirmed bias in favor of the military - an institution seen by others as a main hindrance to democracy and peace, being responsible for many corruption cases and human rights violations. Genuine reform requires a genuine social contract which means the constitution, an agreement of how to govern and be governed, must be based on a

collective ownership and participation in a horizontal spirit. The 2006 coup was the start of the deepest societal polarization and upheaval in Thai political history.

Is Reform the Real Intent?

The Democrat Party, the whistle group and their key leaders are widely questioned for their actual goals. The Democrat Party, when they were put in power by the military coup, had a chance to pursue reform. The Government formed several reform committees with enormous budgets injected into the process, but delivered no concrete outcomes. This reflects the absence of political will and raises questions of genuine intent and the true agendas of the current political struggle. What would be the assurance of successful reform under an undemocratic, Suthep-appointed People's Council who claims to protect rule of law with contradictory acts? The fear is that Thai society would end up under an oppressive and ruthless regime. There will be no space for anybody, as individuals or groups to question the government's performance. In fact, many see a connection between the whistle movement and the military, given the intimate relationships between the heads of these two entities who are allegedly responsible for the 2010 political violence. During the past few days, the army chief, General Prayuth Chanocha, mentioned in several interviews that a military coup is not ruled out and the government will have to be held responsible for the bloodshed. Society will have to keep vigilant on the military role and response to Mr. Suthep's current tactic to shut down Bangkok to paralyze government structures and operations.

Nonetheless, despite the provocation for the military to step in, it would not be easy as the international community has been closely observing the political development in Thailand with clear messages in support of elections and reform by democratic means. The military must have learnt from the past and been aware that the likely outcome of a coup is a political setback and international boycott which might not bring down the Thaksin regime but enhance it.

Thai society is left with two options, either elections before reforms or the reverse. However, elections do not rule out or in any way undermine national reform. Instead, it assures respect for the rule of law and disallows the law of rulers. It maintains Thai state legitimacy in the international arena. Any attempt to undermine the election would in turn engender a new standard, excuse and justification for anyone to employ unlawful and violent means to oust the new government. There will be widespread protracted violence since many people will feel their electoral and other fundamental human rights were hijacked by an illegitimate group. They have been very tolerant for so long, particularly when the government has been very compromising. This does not reflect people's support for the current caretaker government but they feel Thailand is now in a situation of a failed or fragile state and the government cannot protect civilians from harassment.

The reform proposed by Mr. Suthep himself is vague. The means employed have also been undemocratic, such as the exclusion and dehumanization of people who hold different views. The rural poor are perceived as backward and inferior to the urban middle and upper classes, thus subject to vote buying and not capable of being equal members of the electoral democratic society. Let alone, the hijack of electoral rights from the majority of Thai citizens. Such an insult upon the poor can also signify the upper middle class and elites' fear of the poor and their voting power. These are all fatally adverse to the democratic principles and suggest that perhaps it is the Democrat Party who should begin to reform itself. The only way to get rid of the Thaksin regime is to introduce the political alternatives to Pheu Thai or future parties under Thaksin with competent or better political innovations which effectively address people's aspirations.

Backward or Enlightened?

Given the economic improvement in Thailand, the pattern of needs has changed which encompasses fulfillment of civil and political rights along with social and economic rights. There has been a significant rise of the political consciousness among the poor during the past few years whose electoral decisions are based on the policies of political parties. According to research by Dr. Parinya Thewanarumitkul of Thammasart University, vote buying plays an insignificant role in the decisions of rural voters. The Thai Rak Thai Party, which was the first party formed by Thaksin, introduced popular policies which delivered tangible outcomes to the poor. The turning point was when people began to realize their electoral power, could result from decentralization, allows them to have certain degree of rights to determine their fate. There has been significant change in terms of funds channeled to the provinces, along with many tangible deliveries such as a 30 baht health care scheme and one million baht village fund which led to the visibly measurable betterment of their quality of lives. However such populist policies without proper sustainable means to generate state revenues have resulted in a financial crisis for the government.

Democratic Means to Achieve Democratic Ends

On a practical matter, it is unconstitutional for the Prime Minister to resign since abandoning the duty is a violation of Penal Code Article 157 and subject to punishment. Nonetheless, there have been little attempts at dialogue between the two key parties. The Prime Minister herself does not seem to have a clear plan to handle the protesters. She has been very responsive to all demands but taken no proactive steps. This is largely because she has no control over the military and other institutions, except the police which is seen as toothless. Nonetheless, she has done well in avoiding violence. It is important that the government, together with those from the general public who disagree with Suthep, transcend the imagery of enemies to understand the plight of the protestors and legitimate underlying factors of the outrage and dissatisfaction. The process of dialogue needs to be fostered in a way to ensure the plights, interests and concerns of every stakeholder. An outlet for Suthep to step down in a face-saving manner which allows his companions to address their concerns needs to be sought. It should also be a lesson learnt for the government in power to take into consideration the sentiment of minority voices and be sincere in the democratic process. It is unfortunate that civil society and NGOs are equally polarized and driven by political interests. It is imperative to find a common platform where a third space or alternatives can emerge to foster real reform by the people and civil society. To achieve genuine reform stakeholders must feel the sense of ownership and shared power. They must be respected and seen as equal. The reform process has to be collective and horizontal, not coercive and top down.

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P.S.

* <http://focusweb.org/content/thai-politics-glance>

Footnotes

[1] Asia Foundation, "Profile of the Protestors: a Survey of Pro and Anti- Government Demonstrators in Bangkok on November 30,2013" (January 19,2013) Available at: <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/FinalSurveyReportDecember20.pdf>