

# Election marred by violence - The roots of the Thai crisis

Tuesday 4 February 2014, by [UNGPAKORN Giles Ji](#) (Date first published: 3 February 2014).

## Contents

- [The 2<sup>nd</sup> February election \(...\)](#)
- [Why does Yingluk's government](#)
- [Sutep's mob starts to lose \(...\)](#)
- [Thailand's Election Commission](#)
- [The roots of the Thai crisis](#)

## **The 2<sup>nd</sup> February election in Thailand has solved nothing**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> February election cannot solve the Thai political crisis because those lined up against the government and the holding of democratic elections, are fundamentally opposed to democracy.

The election was marred by violence from Democrat Party thugs who were determined to prevent the election taking place. Armed thugs fired automatic weapons into crowds of people who were expressing their wish to vote. These thugs have been enjoying total impunity for over a month while intimidating voters and candidates.

Democrat Party leaders such as Sutep, Satit and Abhisit want the electoral process to be changed so that the middle class and the elites can have an absolute veto over the views of the majority of the electorate. Democracy doesn't work for them because they only have support from less than 30% of the population. They are supported in their thuggery by the Constitutional Court, the top civil service, the mainstream media, sections of the Electoral Commission and the NGOs. The military is happy to stand by and watch Yingluk and Pua Thai's discomfort. They may not want to stage a coup right now, but they will not lift a finger to defend democracy and the election. They want Yingluk to make more concessions to those who are opposed to democracy.

Despite the violence and intimidation, voting took place in most provinces and 20.4 million people cast their votes. This compares to 35 million in 2011. Given that the Democrat Party has in the past won no more than 14 million votes, and that in this election they called for a boycott, the turn-out was not too bad. It can be assumed that more than 20 million people wish to preserve democracy and many of those support Pua Thai.

No amount of compromise or negotiations with the anti-democratic thugs will solve the crisis. The only short-term result would be shrinkage of the democratic space and the further empowerment of those who view the majority of the electorate with contempt.

No amount of outrage at the violence and impunity of the thugs will push Yingluk or Pua Thai or the authorities into a crackdown on those committing criminal acts. As I mentioned in a previous article on "permanent Revolution" in Thailand, Yingluk would rather do a dirty deal with Sutep than to mobilise the Red Shirts and the general population to fight for democracy.

This means that pro-democracy activists, whether they be progressive Red Shirts, pro-democracy trade unionists, White Shirts, Nitirat supporters, socialists, or members of the Forum for the Defence of Democracy, all have to work together to prevent the destruction of the democratic space. They should also push forward with real reform proposals which will increase rights and the empowerment of the majority. The future of Thai democracy lies in their hands.

**Giles Ji Ungpakorn**, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014

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## **Why does Yingluk's government do nothing? Permanent Revolution in the Thai context**

Many people might be wondering why Yingluk's government seems to be paralysed in the face of violent and criminal actions by Suteb's Democrat Party mob. The answer is not that there are "invisible hands" from the throne or that there is covert military support for Suteb. In fact, the top elites regard Suteb and his acolytes as lowly street gangsters. They also regard former Democrat Party PM Abhisit as a weak creature to be used and then ignored. But these disturbances are useful to the military and the conservatives because they can push Pua Thai and Taksin into further compromises. That is why the military is sitting on its hands with a smug smile. Naturally, Suteb is getting support from the backwoodsmen in the Constitutional Court and the Election Commission, but the street mobs are doing all the work. They are also supported by the reactionary doctors, vice chancellors and NGOs who represent the middle class.

The real reason why Pua Thai appears to be paralysed is that they face a choice. Either they order the sacking of the top generals and reactionary judges and the arrest of the violent protest leaders, using the police and the support of millions of Red Shirts, mobilised on the streets, or they go for a grubby compromise with the conservatives.

To put it more bluntly, either Pua Thai mobilise their supporters and the Red Shirts to tear down the old order, or they make peace with their conservative elite rivals. Given that Taksin, Yingluk and Pua Thai are basically "big business politicians", they naturally choose the latter option. This is not to avoid civil war, but to avoid revolution from below.

When I refer to Thailand's "old order" I am not talking about some semi-feudal state structure. I am talking about a modern capitalist semi-dictatorship controlled by the military, the business class and the top civil servants. They are all united in their royalism, but Thailand is not an absolute monarchy either.

Until the election victory of Taksin's Thai Rak Thai Party in 2001, the old way of conducting politics was for the different elite parties to compete on the basis of personalities and patronage. Taksin introduced the central importance of policies to the electoral process. Before this, and before the 1997 economic crisis, the laissez-faire policies of successive Thai governments resulted in unplanned and chaotic public infrastructure and total lack of welfare. The elites and the middle class enriched themselves on the backs of the poor.

On an economic and social level, the rapid growth that the Thai economy experienced through the 1980s and early 1990s meant that more and more ordinary people were becoming urbanised, educated and more self-confident. People wanted to see change and they wanted a share in the fruits

of development.

Growing conflict was emerging between the realities on the ground and the old political structures that had a stranglehold on society. Taksin and Thai Rak Thai played a part in increasing this conflict by proposing modernisation. Yet Taksin's aim was not to pull down the old order, but merely to gently modernise it. Today, Yingluk, Pua Thai and Taksin are still determined to protect the main pillars of the old order. They fear revolt from below more than competition from the conservatives.

Thailand today is not the Europe of 1848, but there are some aspects of Europe in 1848, as explained by Karl Marx, which can help us understand the Thai situation. Marx wrote that the rising capitalist class in Europe were too cowardly to finish off the old order by leading a revolutionary movement of workers. The capitalist class preferred a compromise with the old feudalists rather than mobilising movements from below which might come to challenge the capitalists themselves. Marx announced that from then on, workers needed to lead an independent "Permanent Revolution" which would sweep away the old rulers and go on to challenge the capitalist class. Leon Trotsky developed this idea further by arguing that in under-developed countries workers should lead movements of workers and peasants to sweep away colonialism or feudalism and not merely stop at modern capitalism, but move on towards socialism. This happened in Russia in 1917 until the revolution was drowned in blood by Stalin.

What this means for Thailand is that we should not raise false hopes that Yingluk, Pua Thai or Taksin will carry out the necessary mobilisations to get rid of the old order. That task must be led by a movement from below whose aims should be to go further than just establishing capitalist parliamentary democracy as seen in the West.

In practice, given the weak state of independent red shirt and left-wing organisation on the ground, the best we can hope for right now is to build a movement from below which continues to push against the boundaries of authoritarianism and to continually criticise any nasty compromises which Pua Thai will want to make. But ultimately, in the long term, this movement will have to rise up and pull down the structures dominated by the military, big business and conservative officials.

**Giles Ji Ungpakorn**, 27 January 2014

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## **Sutep's mob starts to lose momentum. But what about political reform?**

Sutep's mob starts to lose momentum. But what about political reform?

For months now Sutep's violent and anti-democratic mobs have tried their best to frustrate the functioning of the democratically elected government and prevent a general election from taking place. They surrounded offices where election candidates were trying to register, occupied government ministries, attacked police with guns and tried to "shut down Bangkok". Recently they tried to occupy the government printing press which was printing ballot papers. But so far they have failed in their aims. The military has not obliged the protesters by staging a coup, Yingluk is still the care-taker Prime Minister and the election seems set to take place on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, at least in most provinces, including Bangkok. The hands-off approach of the government seems to be paying off in this war of attrition.

Sutep and his gang are not without powerful supporters. Many big business owners, including those

from S&P and Sing Beer, have been seen supporting the protesters and one of the princesses has even worn the red white and blue colours associated with them. Rectors of all the universities, top civil servants and some sections of the electoral commission have given them support too. But the military is still sitting on its hands, refusing to stage a coup or to help the government by making sure that the election takes place.

What makes it different from the situation in 2006, and when Yellow Shirt protesters occupied the airports in 2008, having previously helped pave the way for the military coup 2 years earlier, is that some military leaders know that a coup will achieve nothing to their benefit. It would only work if a long-lasting and brutal dictatorship was installed. More importantly, unlike 2006, there is a Red Shirt mass movement which is determined to defend democracy and even the academics and NGO activists who welcomed the 2006 coup are now wary of appearing to support the destruction of democracy. This is because the 2006 coup and the shooting of nearly 90 pro-democracy demonstrators in 2010 did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the electorate for Taksin's Pua Thai Party and it was obvious to anyone who cared to look at the facts that people were voting for pro-poor policies.

Pro-democracy candle-light protests have now been taking place throughout the country. On these protests people are demanding that their vote be respected. They are also calling for an end to the violence. The significance is that large gatherings of these people, equalling those of Sutep's mob, have taken place in Bangkok in recent days. Most residents of the capital city are sick and tired of what is going on.

Sutep's mob have been suffering sporadic and isolated gun and grenade attacks by unknown assailants. The only thing we can say for certain is that this will act as a disincentive to middle class people to attend his protests. Many of the hard-core protesters are southerners, part of the Democrat Party's patron-client network. Sutep seems to be redirecting his efforts to his southern home base, calling for people to occupy government offices in his fiefdom provinces while his "Shut Down Bangkok" strategy falls apart.

It should be noted that in the deep-south Muslim Malay provinces, the locals are not supporting Sutep.

It would be mere rumour-mongering to try to indicate who is behind the attacks on Sutep's mob. There are many possibilities. It might be frustrated Red Shirts. It might be elements in the military who want to trigger a coup. Or it might be rogue Sutep supporters who want to rejuvenate the anger of their movement and also trigger a coup. But as yet there is not a shred of evidence to back any one of these possibilities.

It would be wrong to believe that we are seeing the beginning of the end to the crisis. If the election takes place in all provinces, except in the Democrat's southern back yard, there will not be enough MPs, according to election law, to be able to open parliament and elect a government. The stale-mate will continue and any political accident can occur.

## **Political Reform**

Much is being said about the need for political reform. Those who want reform to take place before an election are merely calling for the rules to be changed so that a conservative minority can dominate politics instead of Pua Thai. Their so-called reforms would shrink the democratic space.

But it is worrying that the government and many people who support democratic elections are just happy to have elite-driven "reforms" which merely scratch the surface.

For political reform to mean anything other than the partial destruction of democracy, it must be a process involving the majority of the population, not just elite experts and those in high places. It must aim to increase elections, not just for all senators, but also for those in charge of public enterprises, security forces, the judiciary, local schools and local hospitals. It must include the abolition of the lèse majesté law, the contempt of court law and the computer crimes law. These are all laws which censor dissenting voices. Reform should also tackle the problems of so-called “independent bodies”, such as the electoral commission, the human rights commission and the anti-corruption commission, which are stacked with right-wing conservatives. The whole concept of needing “independent bodies” to restrict the democratic wishes of the majority needs to be challenged.

Political reform should also aim to reduce inequality by building a welfare state and it should encourage the development of efficient infrastructure which does not harm the environment. High-speed trains and electricity generation from sunlight and wind would be important components of this. Such projects would also create jobs. We need education reform to move away from authoritarian teaching and learning by rote. We need to humanise the prison system and reduce the prison population.

Political reform will be meaningless without reducing the power and influence of the military, both in politics, the media and in state enterprises. Soldiers who stage coups and kill protesters should be brought to justice. A jury system should be introduced to democratise the courts. The military constitution of 2007 needs to be abolished and we need to make sure that a future constitution does not enforce free-market neo-liberal economic policies or the Sufficiency Economy, as the 2007 constitution does.

But you would be hard-pressed to hear any of these proposals among the present chatter about political reform in Thailand.

**Giles Ji Ungpakorn**, 19 January 2014

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## **Thailand's Election Commission allows the electoral process to become Sutep's hostage**

Thailand's election commission is sitting on its hands and refusing to organise a democratic election for early February. Its actions are tantamount to support for Sutep's anti-democratic movement.

In 28 constituencies, located in some of the southern provinces control by the Democrat Party's patron-client machine, candidates wishing to register for the election have been blocked by violent mobs. Yet the election commission is refusing to organise registrations in police or military barracks or to extend the time for registration and make alternative arrangements.

Pua Thai is preparing to take the election commission to court, but this is unlikely to solve the crisis.

The actions of the election commission mirror those of other institutions where the conservative elite have influence. The courts have blocked the right of an elected parliament to amend the military constitution and they are refusing to issue sanctions against Sutep and his gang for using violence to frustrate the democratic process. One policeman was shot dead in Bangkok while this mob tried unsuccessfully to prevent candidate registrations.

The military are also refusing to guarantee a smooth election. But it would be wrong to believe that

they are secretly backing Sutep. Unlike politicians like Sutep, the military do not depend on elections for their power and influence. What they want is for the government to give them a huge budget, let them off scot-free when they killed demonstrators or staged coups in the past, allow the military to control their own appointments, let them carry on making huge profits from the military controlled media and allow them to rake in huge salaries from the state enterprises. Yingluk's government gave them all this and more. When there is talk of political reform, they want to be in the centre of the process in order to protect their interests. So the military don't need to back Sutep's mob. That doesn't mean however, that they will lift a finger to defend Pua Thai or the election process. They can just sit back with a smug smile on their faces and see what happens, ready at any time to defend their golden goose or to defend "state stability" and act like "heroes".

For an authoritarian regime to be installed in Thailand for any length of time, it would require severe repression and a police state. Democrat Party leaders Sutep and Abhisit may not care about the long-term consequences of restricting democracy in order that they have more immediate political influence, but the military top brass and the intelligent sections of the conservative elite know that they cannot just ride rough-shod over the wishes of the majority of the electorate by abolishing democracy. That is the logic of the situation. But in politics we must always allow for accidents and illogical decisions by any number of actors.

It will take the mobilisation of a mass pro-democracy movement to make it less likely that Sutep will be successful in his quest. The Red Shirts can perform this function, but there are many who are not prepared to just be pawns in Pua Thai's political strategy. There are others who wish to close their eyes and mistakenly hope that the bad dream will just go away. They argue that a Red Shirt mobilisation would just lead to a military coup. But without such a mobilisation, the elites cannot be reminded that the majority will not tolerate a dictatorship. Without such a mobilisation a military coup would be more likely.

**Giles Ji Ungpakorn**, 04 January 201

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## **The roots of the Thai crisis**

It is insulting and patronising to see the present crisis as merely a dispute between two factions of the elite, just like a fight between supporters of two football teams, lacking any reasoned political arguments [1]. This is the point of view of some NGO activists who half supported the 2006 military coup and have said in the past that villagers who voted for Taksin's party "lacked information"; a euphemism for "stupidity".

It is also a lazy generalisation to argue that the Red Shirts are rural villagers from the north and north-east and that Sutep's Yellow Shirt supporters are Bangkok residents. [2] 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 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. Many Red Shirt protests in the past have been made up of Bangkok residents.

The real division between the “Reds” and the “Yellows” in the current crisis is CLASS. There is a clear tendency for workers 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. Back in 1976 in Thailand, the middle class supported repression and dictatorship to destroy the Left. In the 1930s, the middle class were the back-bone of fascism in Europe.

But this is not just a simple class struggle. In fact, class struggle in the real world is seldom simple or pure. One way of understanding the “dialectical” relationship between Taksin and the Red Shirts is to see a kind of “parallel war” in the Red Shirt/UDD struggles against the conservative elites, where thousands of ordinary Red Shirts struggle for democracy, dignity and social justice, while Taksin and his political allies wage a very different campaign to regain the political influence that they had enjoyed before the 2006 coup d’état. However, at the same time, Taksin remains very popular with most Red Shirts.

Class is also very much connected to the roots of the long running Thai crisis. This political crisis is a result of an unintentional clash between the conservative way of operating in a parliamentary democracy and a more modern one. It came to a head with attempts by Taksin and his party to modernise Thai society so that the economy could become more competitive on a global level, especially after the 1996 Asian economic crisis.

Thai political leaders since the early 1970s had always adopted a laissez faire attitude to development, with minimal government planning, low wages, few trade union rights and an abdication of responsibility by governments to improve infrastructure. This strategy worked in the early years, but by the time of the 1996 Asian economic crisis it was becoming obvious that it was seriously failing.

In the first general election since the 1996 crisis, Taksin’s party put forward a raft of modernising and pro-poor policies, including the first ever universal health care scheme. Because the Democrat Party had told the unemployed to “go back to their villages and depend on their families, while spending state finances in securing the savings for the rich in failed banks, Taksin was able to say that his government would benefit everyone, not just the rich. Taksin’s Thai Rak Thai Party won the elections. The government was unique in being both popular and dynamic, with real policies, which were used to win the election and were then implemented afterwards. Previously, the old parties had just bought votes without any policies.

Taksin’s policies and his overwhelming electoral base came to challenge many elements of the old elite order, although this was not Taksin’s conscious aim at all. The Democrats lost the election. The military could not compete in terms of democratic legitimacy and support. The middle class started to resent the fact that the government was helping to raise the standard of living of workers and poor farmers.

Another military coup, or a rolling back of democracy by other means, will not make it easier to rule over the majority of the electorate who have been politicised and mobilised by the Red Shirt movement. A “compromise” between Sutep and the Pua Thai care-taker government would not be a step forward either. It would result in reducing the democratic space and reducing the power of the electorate.

**Giles Ji Ungpakorn**, Tuesday, 07 January 2014

[This article should be read in conjunction with my articles: There is no “crisis of succession” in Thailand – also available on ESSF (article 30605), [There is no “crisis of succession” in Thailand – The role of the monarchy in an historical perspective](#) – and “Thai Spring?” Paper given at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Nordic NIAS Council Conference, November 2011, Stockholm University, Sweden.  
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/73908759/Thai-Spring>]

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**P.S.**

\* <http://redthaisocialist.com/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] Jon Ungpakorn “What is the real nature of hatred in Thai society” Prachatai 5<sup>th</sup> January 2014.  
<http://www.prachatai.com/journal/2014/01/50958>

[2] Duncan McCargo “The Last Gasp of Thai Paternalism”. New York Times, 19<sup>th</sup> December 2013.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/20/opinion/the-last-gasp-of-thai-paternalism.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/20/opinion/the-last-gasp-of-thai-paternalism.html?_r=0)