

Thailand: Back to the dark ages?

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On the evening of 19th September a military junta calling itself "The reform committee in the democratic system with a monarchy as head of state" staged a coup and overthrew the democratically elected, but controversial, Prime Minister Taksin Shinawat. The official name of the junta, which must be read out in full every single time it is referred to by the media, reminds us of George Orwell's 1984. "Democracy" now means military dictatorship and "reform" means tearing up the 1997 constitution, abolishing parliament, independent bodies and declaring martial law. Taksin's picture is banned from the TV and when it is shown by the BBC World Service, mysterious advertisements suddenly appear on screen.

Taksin Shinawat, a mobile phone and media tycoon, founded the Thai Rak Thai party after the economic crisis of 1997. The party was unique in recent Thai politics in that it actually spent considerable time developing policies. They held meetings with different social groups and came up with real policies at the time of their first election victory in 2001. Thai Rak Thai was a "populist" party which offered pro-poor policies and village level Keynesian economic stimuli by pumping state money into local projects. At the same time this party of big business also pursued neo-liberal policies such as privatization and the support for free trade agreements (F.T.A.s). The poor, who form the vast majority of the Thai electorate, voted enthusiastically for the two flagship policies of the party. These were a universal health care scheme (the first ever in Thailand) and a 1 million baht fund loaned to each village to encourage small businesses. Thai Rak Thai won a second term of office with an overall majority in parliament in 2005. It is easy to see why. The main opposition party, the Democrats, spent the whole four years attacking the health care system and other social benefits. They said that it contravened "fiscal discipline" and created a "climate of dependency". Previously the Democrat government, which came to power immediately after the economic crisis, had used taxes paid by the poor to prop up the financial system. The banks were in crisis due to wild speculation by the rich. The Democrats have supported the coup.

There was a darker side to the Taksin government. During their first term of office they waged a so-called "war on drugs" in which over 3000 people were shot without ever coming to trial. In the three southern-most provinces they waged a campaign of violence against the Muslim Malay-speaking population. Ninety young men who had attended a peaceful demonstration were deliberately murdered at Takbai by tying their hands behind their backs and piling them into army trucks, one on top of the other. After many hours of transportation they were dead on arrival at an army camp. The government was also responsible for the murder, by the police, of defence lawyer Somchai Nilapaichit, who was defending people from the south. In addition to this Taksin and his cronies avoided paying tax. Together they netted 70 billion baht from the sale of their mobile phone company and did not pay a single baht in tax. The government was also just as corrupt as many previous governments.

The Peoples Movement has not been dormant. The largest movement mounted by the working class against the Taksin government was the action against electricity privatization by 200,000 workers in 2004. It has helped to delay privatization plans. Despite protests against the government's human rights abuses, privatization and another huge rally against F.T.A. policies by people in the social movements, the government retained strong support among the poor because there is no credible Left party that can mount a challenge. The right-wing mainstream parties have no appeal to the

poor.

Towards the end of last year a large protest movement against the government arose. But it was a Right-wing movement lead by rival media tycoon Sondhi Limthongkul (not to be confused with General Sondhi who is now the junta head). It criticized government corruption and called for "power to be returned to the King", urging the King to appoint a new government. Unfortunately, the more conservative sections of the Peoples Movement decided to joint this protest movement, creating the "Peoples Alliance for Democracy" (P.A.D.). They saw Sondhi's protests as a way to oust Taksin because they believed that the Peoples Movement was too weak to act independently. They joined this cross-class alliance without any pre-conditions. Thus corruption remained the main criticism of the government. while human rights abuses, the South and neo-liberalism were largely ignored. The protesters also wore yellow "Royal" shirts. Many progressive sections of the Peoples movement were very unhappy about this position and refused to take part. The problem is that the Peoples Movement would be stronger if it were not so dominated by single-issuism, autonomism and N.G.O. 'third-way' politics. There is a refusal to build a political party of the movement, which is a serious weakness.

Taksin dissolved parliament and called an election in April 2006. The election was boycotted by the opposition and became a referendum on the government. In the event, 16 million people voted for Thai Rak Thai and 10 million voted abstention.

There is a fundamental political argument at the centre of the current political crisis. On the Right, and this includes some in the Peoples Movement and many so-called progressive academics, they believe that Taksin cheated in the election, mainly by "tricking the ignorant rural poor". This is a convenient justification for ignoring the wishes of 16 million people. Together with earlier calls for the King to appoint a new government, this position leads to one which supports the military coup.

On the Left, we believe that the poor had good reasons to vote for Thai Rak Thai, given that there were no better alternatives on offer. We have always opposed Taksin, especially for his human rights abuses, but a military coup, tearing up the Constitution and trampling on basic democratic rights is not the answer. The answer is to build an alternative party which campaigns for a welfare state, progressive taxation and opposition to neo-liberalism. The Southern problem should be solved through peaceful political means, including the right to self-determination by the local population. However, in the immediate future, there is a pressing need for the defence of democracy.