

Thailand: Against the coup

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Many urban people welcomed the 19 September coup. As the 6-month anniversary approaches, more and more are having second thoughts. The government is stuttering, news from the charter drafters is depressing, southern violence gets worse, and Thailand's stock in the world sinks ever lower. On current trend, it's not long before Surayud's falling ratings meet Thaksin's rising ones. Some blame this on Surayud personally. But others are asking the bigger questions. Why didn't the coup work? Was it a good idea to have a coup in the first place? And if not, why did it happen?

Last month, the magazine *Fa Dieo Kan* put out a special issue on the coup. The editor apologizes upfront for making no pretence of even balance. This book is unremittingly and furiously against the coup. The contents include articles, speeches, interviews, and translations by twenty people, so there is no single argument, and much disagreement. But the book's overall message is daring, revealing, and very challenging.

The cover tells it all. The graphic lampoons the generals' protests that it was not really a coup. The title is: "*The Coup for Democracy with the King as Head of State.*" The book's first main point is that you cannot start to understand this coup, or current Thai politics at all, without confronting the role of the monarchical institution.

In these writers' usage, the monarchical institution is not an individual or family but a much larger collection of people including Privy Councillors and royalist supporters. This monarchical institution is like a "black box" in economic or scientific theory. You cannot see inside so you don't know how it works. But you can see what it does and what the effects are on the outside world. Several of the writers argue that the major role of the black box in this coup is undeniable. You need only consider the role of Privy Councilors both before and after. These writers then ask: why did this happen, and what are the consequences.

Thongchai Winichakul answers these questions using a long perspective. The history of modern Thailand has tended to be written as good democrats combating bad soldiers. But the crucial battle of that war was fought in 1973, and the war ended by 1992. Instead Thongchai suggests the whole dreary history of coups from 1947 onwards should be seen as an attempt by self-serving elites to control the consequences of what happened in 1932. Their goal is not to return to monarchic rule, but to a form of elite rule which clings to the monarchy for legitimacy. But over time the politicians and the people have become pushier. One counter strategy of the old elites is to go on and on about corruption and money politics. In itself, this criticism is not bad. But it can easily become a tool to discredit parliamentary politics as a whole, and overthrow the fundamental concept of democracy, the sovereignty of the people. In Thongchai's words, "If a government supported by a popular majority is only a 'jockey,' then in the end the government machinery belongs to the king."

But how do such historical forces work in practice, in the present? After the coup, General Sonthi B. said he moved at "the request of the people." General Saprang Kalyanamitr let slip that the planning took seven months, meaning it started in February 2006, amid the furore over the Shin Corp sale. Thanapol Eawsakul tracks back to that month to examine the genesis of the coup in fine detail.

Sondhi Limthongkul had begun his crusade several months before - wrapping himself in yellow, splashing "we will fight for the king" across his chest, and claiming to light a "dharma candle" to

spotlight Thaksin's evil. Sondhi created the idea that politics had become a contest between the prime minister and the King. But his movement was stumbling. The rallies were dwindling and Sondhi's allegations of corruption were embarrassingly thin. The Shin Corp sale gave him a second chance.

A week later one of his future PAD allies, Somkiat Phongpaiboon wrote, "Please watch the royalist group and the Privy Councillors, which Sondhi has called 'the return of the royal power'."

On 4 February 2006, Thaksin said he would resign if the King whispered in his ear. That evening, Sondhi thundered from his rally stage "Where is the army? This talk is enough to bring [Thaksin] to the execution post." That night he took a petition to General Prem. As he told the world on the following day, the Bureau of the Royal Household was surprisingly open at 9 p.m. as if ready to receive him. Sondhi also went to meet General Sonthi, and related later, "I asked [Sonthi], 'Are you going to stand by the people?' He nodded, 'I will stand by the people because I am a soldier of the King'."

From that point, Sondhi organised more rallies, but they did not build. He called for the use of Clause 7, but on 25 April the King said that would be inappropriate. As Thanapol concludes, the coup happened because Sondhi L. issued an invitation to the army to carry out the coup, and Sonthi B. accepted the invitation.

Given these events, how can monarchy and democracy coexist for the long term, without regular crises? To help answer this question, Sulak Sivaraksa surveys monarchies which survive and prosper in other democratic countries. He concludes there are four conditions: the monarchy "has nothing to do with the generals"; its finances are transparent; it is seen as working for the people rather than for itself; and it truly supports a democratic form of government.

More people have begun to doubt that this coup was ever the solution to anything. This book argues that the big issue now is not the military or political corruption or populism, but how to prevent an elite minority controlling politics and keeping the mass as passive partners, in part by exploiting the symbolic power of the monarchy.

P.S.

* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/samesky.htm>