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The Land of Forced Smiles: Military Rule in Thailand and its Discontents

James Buchanan

Senior Research Associate and PhD Candidate

Department of Asian and International Studies

City University of Hong Kong

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by **James Buchanan**

Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong

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Abstract

Since the military coup of 2014, Thais have been living under one of their most repressive regimes in decades. Various junta appointed bodies are currently working in accordance with a 'roadmap' they claim will restore democracy to the country - but what kind of democracy remains to be seen. This discussion paper places the recent coup in a historical context, arguing that it was a way for traditional elites to gain the upper hand in a decades-long struggle against elected politicians. With this in mind, it seems clear that the 'roadmap' and any constitution drafting overseen by the junta and their allies will actually be a way to reduce the power of elected politicians to the detriment of Thai democracy. The paper then turns its attention to those who opposed the coup, asking to what extent opposition to the junta has been possible in Thailand and what conditions might lead to a mass mobilisation against it.



Correspondence address: James Buchanan, Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong, 83 Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon Tong, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR.

Email: j.buchanan@my.cityu.edu.hk

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Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong



Introduction

Since a military coup on May 22nd 2014 toppled the elected government of Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand has been ruled arbitrarily by a military junta calling itself the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), fronted by old-style strong man Prayuth Chan-ocha. Coups and military rule are hardly exclusive to Thailand and Prayuth is certainly not the first general to assume control of a country, enforcing his own vision of peace, order and reforms. However, there is one quirk of the NCPO which does seem uniquely ‘Thai’ and has captured the attention of the world’s media on more than one occasion - their strange obsession with enforcing ‘happiness’ on the country. Apparently worried that the political conflict of the past decade has brought sadness to Thailand, the army launched a campaign to bring back the famous Thai smile

so often mentioned in guidebooks. Prayuth urged all Thais to relax and feel good about the coup which had ended the long political conflict. He penned a song called ‘Return Happiness to Thailand’ and has hosted a weekly television and radio show called ‘Returning Happiness to the People’. Several ‘happiness’ themed events have been held around the country, featuring crooning soldiers, free refreshments and petting zoos. Perhaps more than anything else, this has made the army seem out of touch and old-fashioned. Even the middle-class Bangkokians who largely support the junta’s efforts would be hard pressed to find much joy in the tacky events, which elicited a bemused response from the international press.¹ The campaign also gives us a glimpse into the junta’s worldview, in which they pine for an imagined, simpler and ‘happier’ time of days gone by, when the majority of Thai people - particularly those in rural areas - were content and paid little attention to politics in the capital. When General Prayuth bemoans the heavy burden he has taken on his own shoulders for the good of the country, the message is this: let us worry about politics, you just be happy and stay quiet. Whether or not people are actually happy nowadays depends on who you speak to. The broad smiles on photographs from a birthday party attended by People’s Democratic Reform Council (PDRC) leaders Suthep Thaugsuban and Chitpas Kridakorn shortly after the coup suggest they were delighted.² With the population at large, the military does enjoy some

¹ By contrast, the royal-nationalist pressure groups People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and People’s Democratic Reform Council (PDRC) were able to use their impressive funding and goodwill from Bangkok’s rich and famous to stage some very slick events, featuring a host of Thai celebrities. If the military and the royal-nationalist forces are as lockstep as people often assume, it’s curious that these were not continued after the coup.

² The photos caused anger in some sections of the country due the camouflage t-shirts they wore, showing their gratitude to the army for giving them the coup they had clearly been looking for.

support, particularly in the capital. Following the coup, signs in shop windows declared their support for the military and khaki became *de rigueur* in Bangkok's malls and restaurants. But the expectation is that the military will cede power to technocratic rule as quickly as possible and any delay in doing so will test the patience of its support network. However, the fact that the current Thai crisis is deeper and more protracted than before and takes place in the context of a looming royal succession gives the military considerable leeway and, despite some recent grumbling, its support networks seem likely to continue to back it for the foreseeable future, especially given the lack of alternatives.³ So support for the military may not show that people are 'happy' as much as it does that they are simply 'grinning and bearing' during what is considered an unpleasant but necessary transition period. Taking a broader look, it seems unlikely that the pro-military camp speak for the majority of Thais, despite an unconvincing poll flaunted by the junta which claimed that 99.3% of people were happy with its performance.⁴ So how can we gauge people's true sentiment under military rule? One way would be to use the general election result from 2011, which is perhaps also an unofficial referendum on the past decade of political turmoil. It is clear to everyone now what result the traditional elites want from a Thai election and how far they are willing to go to ensure it.⁵ Yet, much to their annoyance, a clear majority of Thais once again voted for a party aligned to former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Of these nearly 16 million people who voted Pheu Thai, it is hard to imagine why any of them would be happy to see their choice annulled by the military. In fact, for many of them, Yingluck Shinawatra is likely to be the

fourth Prime Minister they have supported in the past decade, only to see toppled in one way or another. Such people often tell me that they don't know whether to laugh or cry at the state of affairs in the country. On the other side of the political divide, of the nearly 11.5 million people who voted for the opposition Democrat Party, it is questionable how many of them dislike the pro-Thaksin party so much that they are willing to endure a military coup and rollback of democracy to be rid of it. Living under a party you do not like for an election cycle is one thing, but living under a military dictatorship is quite another. It therefore seems likely that the military coup and ongoing 'reform' period has caused infinitely more suffering than happiness to the majority of people in the country. This paper will have two aims. Firstly, it will discuss military rule in present day Thailand. By placing the current situation in a historical context, it will attempt to explain how the country has found itself caught in the same cycle of conflict and coup so often. This will help us to understand the goals and motivations of the junta, its supporters and the various bodies in charge of the constitution drafting process. Secondly, it will look at those Thais who are refusing to be happy, discussing where in Thailand resistance is coming from and how much of a threat it could pose to the junta and its future plans.

The vicious cycle turns again

In states without democratic consolidation, political conflicts provide an opportunity for the military to step in to assume control as the ultimate arbitrator. This was the justification given by the Thai army when they staged a *coup d'état* on 22 May 2014. The putsch came after a street movement led by former deputy prime minister and secretary general of the Democrat Party, Suthep Thaugsuban, mobilised supporters in a bid to topple the government of Yingluck Shinawatra and completely overhaul the country's political system, which he claimed was corrupt and under the influence of 'bad

³ Indeed, any opposition to the military from its own supporting networks may well come from a royal-nationalist faction more extreme than the military itself, who hope to influence its decisions.

⁴ Publicising such an unrealistic poll once again showed how out of touch they were and drew a sarcastic response both at home and abroad.

⁵ In case it was not clear enough, General Prayuth explicitly reminded everyone to vote for 'good people' in the run up to the 2011 election.

people'. The movement, known as the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), rallied under the slogan 'shut down, Bangkok, restart Thailand' and now seems to have achieved both of these goals. The protests - which at their peak drew an impressive turnout of well over 100,000,⁶ made up mainly from Bangkok's middle classes - effectively shut down the capital for six months, paving the way for the coup. Since then, the military has been administering the country while a new constitution is drafted, which will 'restart' Thailand's political system with a set of rules likely to be more acceptable to the PDRC and its supporters. Whether or not the new constitution will ever be promulgated remains to be seen but the country is nonetheless going through a transition period which will have a considerable impact on its future.

“In states without democratic consolidation, political conflicts provide an opportunity for the military to step in to assume control as the ultimate arbitrator.”

However, these events seem like recent history repeating itself. The PDRC protests were just the latest in a series of mass mobilisations which have disrupted life in the capital since 2005. The first was the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), fronted by media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul, who held a sustained campaign against then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra during 2005 and 2006. These protests led to a political stalemate followed by a coup on 19 September 2006. After a period of military rule for one year and the passing of a new constitution by referendum, elections were held on December 2007. Despite being under immense pressure from the junta, the People's Power Party (PPP) - a new party created from the remains of Thaksin's banned Thai Rak Thai

(TRT) - managed to win the most votes and form a coalition government. With a pro-Thaksin party back in control of the country, it seemed that the efforts of the PAD and the coup makers had all been for nothing. Their answer was renewed street protests, which began in May 2008 and led to the occupation of major roads, several ministries and Government House, putting pressure on Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej to step down. He resisted but was eventually dislodged by a questionable verdict passed down by the Constitutional Court, which removed him from office for taking part in a television cooking show. However, his party simply replaced him with Somchai Wongsawat, the brother-in-law of Thaksin, and the protests continued. Events reached a climax later that year when the PAD laid siege to parliament and then occupied Bangkok's main international airport, leading to its closure and severely damaging the image and economy of the country. Again, the Constitutional Court stepped in to break the deadlock, dissolving the PPP and several other parties for electoral fraud. Backroom deals, rumoured to have been brokered by army chief Anuphong Paochinda, led to the Democrat Party forming a new coalition government with Abhisit Vejjajiva as prime minister. To the many Thais who had voted for Thai Rak Thai and subsequently the People Power Party, this new government and the way it was formed lacked legitimacy. These people found their voice in the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), known as the Red Shirts, who had formed in the aftermath of the September 2006 coup and had at times mobilised to oppose the actions of the PAD in 2008. The Red Shirts held chaotic anti-government protests in Pattaya and Bangkok in 2009, which were put down forcibly by the military. The movement then returned, in bigger numbers and with better organisation, in March - May 2010. These months witnessed Thailand's most serious and violent political conflict in its modern history and by the time the military moved to clear the protestors from their camp at the busy commercial district at Ratchaprasong

⁶ The PDRC had claimed 6 million, which is a patent fabrication.

intersection, more than 90 people had been killed and 2000 injured. The vast majority of these were unarmed protestors and a Human Rights Watch press release claimed there is “overwhelming evidence” that they were shot by soldiers.⁷ Major buildings in Bangkok and town halls in other provinces were also burned to the ground, seemingly as a final cry by enraged Red Shirts after the crackdown.⁸ However, even after the events of March-May 2010, the protests continued. The Red Shirts held several commemorative events which once again attracted huge crowds at the Ratchaprasong site and the PAD became active again, turning its attention to a long-running temple dispute with Cambodia to enflame nationalist sentiment. The Abhisit government saw out its time in office and held elections in 2011, which resulted in a decisive victory for Pheu Thai, the latest incarnation of the Thai Rak Thai / People’s Power Party. That government, fronted by Thaksin’s younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, enjoyed only a year and a half of stability before a new anti-Thaksin movement, Pitak Siam, was established to replace the floundering PAD. The group, led by a retired general, were of a now familiar royal-nationalist orientation and advocated a ‘freeze’ on democracy for a period of up to five years to rewrite the constitution, rid the country of the influence of Thaksin and teach the people about the value of monarchy. Although Pitak Siam never really got off the ground as a movement, these ideas became the basis of the PDRC, which proved more successful and led to the military coup in 2014. Despite assurances from coup leader and self-appointed prime minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha that elections will take place in 2017, several scenarios could see this delayed to the point where the ‘five year freeze’ proposed by Pitak Siam leader General Boonlert Kaewprasit becomes a reality - or even

a conservative estimate.

Thailand’s historical narrative of the last decade is messy and packed with as much drama as most countries see in a century but it is important to keep it in mind. To fully understand the current situation, recent events should be viewed as a protracted political crisis beginning in 2005. In fact, many aspects of what we have seen in the last ten years can be traced back even further. Thai scholar Chai-Anan Samudavanija first spoke of the ‘vicious cycle’ of Thai politics more than thirty years ago.⁹

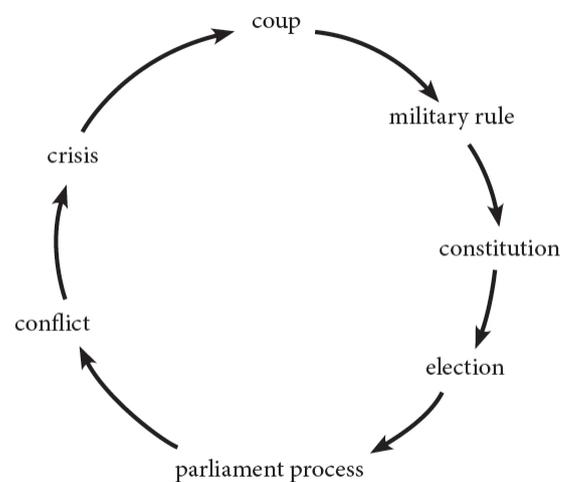


Figure 1: The vicious cycle of Thai politics

The cycle he described (figure 1) has played out in full on two occasions in the past decade.¹⁰ The cause of the vicious cycle is an unsettled and long-running struggle for primacy between civilian political elites and other actors, such as the bureaucracy, military and the monarchy. Since the coup against the absolute monarchy in 1932, this struggle has assumed various shapes, with alliances switching between the main protagonists. However, from the Sarit Thanarat regime in the 1950s onwards, the military and the monarchy have formed a close alliance, with support from the ‘bureaucratic

⁷ Human Rights Watch, (2013). Thailand: Hold Army Accountable for 2010 Violence. [online] Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/07/thailand-hold-army-accountable-2010-violence> [Accessed 10 Sep. 2016].

⁸ Amongst the Red Shirts, conspiracy theories abound regarding both the arson in the provinces and the capital.

⁹ Chai-anan Samudavanija, (1982). *The Thai Young Turks*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

¹⁰ If we accept the allegations of a ‘judicial coup’ against Samak and Somchai, a more truncated cycle could also be said to have occurred in 2008.

polity'.¹¹ It is these 'traditional elites' who are lining up against the powerful rise of elected politicians, represented at present by Thaksin Shinawatra and his associates. If the wheel of the cycle is spinning faster and more vigorously than before, it is because the elected politicians are becoming stronger as more demands are placed from below, leaving the traditional elites to work ever harder to restore things to their desired state.

The Return to 'Thai Style Democracy'

The main justification given for the coup in 2014 was to stop the conflict that had resulted from the PDRC protests. On the surface this seems reasonable, given the chaotic and often violent events of this period. However, on closer inspection the claim seems disingenuous, for several reasons. First, if the aim of the army was to maintain order then the timing of the coup is strange, given that the worst of the violence had already occurred and things seemed to be calming down. On the night of 1st December, groups affiliated with the PDRC and Red Shirts clashed around the Rajamangala stadium, leaving four dead and more than fifty injured. Throughout January there were numerous incidents in Bangkok and other provinces, resulting in several deaths and injuries. In February, the government attempted to hold elections to resolve the crisis but these were blocked by the PDRC and throughout that month there was more sporadic violence. For the next couple of months, the theatre continued but the number of violent incidents were on the decline. In fact, the protests seemed to be running out of steam when the PDRC abandoned several major protest sites in Bangkok, downsizing to just one main location in Lumpini Park, as well as encircling the UN building on Rajadamnern Nok Avenue, within sight of army HQ, government house, and the throne palace. PDRC leader

Suthep Thaugsuban had also lost face by declaring numerous 'final battles' and missing several self-set deadlines to achieve his goals. By May, the Constitution Court had stepped in once again, removing Yingluck for nepotism charges, along with several other ministers. However, the court stopped short of dissolving the entire government, leaving Niwatthamrong Boonsongpaisan to be selected by his cabinet as caretaker prime minister. The elected government was dying the slow death of a thousand cuts but between the various courts, senate and independent agencies all perceived to be hostile to Thaksin, nobody seemed willing to make the decisive blow. Indeed, this reluctance may also have been shared by the military, which would explain the unusual timing of the coup. Although the dominant clique in the military also wanted the government removed, they seemed to prefer that some kind of pseudo - legal mechanism be used. However, when the buck was passed from one agency to another, it eventually stopped with the army, forcing them to proceed with the unpleasant task of staging yet another, highly embarrassing, 21st century coup.

“The elected government was dying the slow death of a thousand cuts but between the various courts, senate and independent agencies all perceived to be hostile to Thaksin, nobody seemed willing to make the decisive blow.”

The claim that the military had no choice but to go ahead with the putsch also seems odd, given the number of alternatives they had. As the Yingluck government invoked first the Internal Security Act and then the Emergency Decree, the military could have worked with her to restore order. In particular, the military could have created a secure environment in which the February elections could take place. Also, when

¹¹ Riggs, F. (1967). Thailand ; the modernization of a bureaucratic polity. Second printing. Honolulu: East-West Center Press.

the army declared martial law two days prior to the coup, they could have used the considerable powers at their disposal to restore order but stop short of staging a full blown coup and tearing up the constitution, which they themselves had sponsored just seven years earlier. Instead, they held negotiations at the Thai Army Club which seemed designed to pressure the government to resign. The record of proceedings from that day shows that, growing frustrated with the talks and the insistence from the government of their legal duty to stay in office, General Prayuth clarified one final time that they refused to step down, before announcing that he had no alternative but to seize power. So it seems that the aim of the military was not to restore order but - once more subtle methods had failed - to bring down the Yingluck government with the bluntest tool at its disposal, a military coup.¹²

“So it seems that the aim of the military was not to restore order but - once more subtle methods had failed - to bring down the Yingluck government with the bluntest tool at its disposal, a military coup.”

After the coup, it became obvious that reforms designed to weaken elected politicians and strengthen the hand of the unelected elites were high on the junta's agenda. Not only would this give them an advantage in their struggle against Thaksin and his associates, it would also prevent another politician from ever gaining as much power as he did in the future. Thaksin may be a uniquely ambitious and determined character but the conditions that created his conflict with the traditional elites actually have very little to do with him. The coup which toppled Yingluck in 2014 had amazing parallels to that

which brought down her brother in 2006, but that coup in turn had much in common with the one that deposed the elected government of Chatichai Choonhavan in 1991. Being the first properly elected Prime Minister in more than a decade — following four years of dictatorship and then eight years of semi-democracy under the appointed premiership of Prem Tinsulanonda — the Chatichai government threatened the traditional elites in much the same way as Thaksin did and, in what has now become a familiar script, the coup leaders justified their putsch on the grounds that Chatichai was corrupt and presided over a “parliamentary dictatorship”. So the ultimate goal of the 2014 coup is to curb the elected politicians who are challenging the traditional elite's monopoly on power. Doing so will require a new constitution which considerably limits the role of politicians, subjugating them to other bodies such as the courts, independent agencies and senate. Of particular concern is the likely inclusion of some kind of ‘crisis council’ which will be empowered to step in to seize control from the government in the event of an unspecified ‘crisis’. This council would be a sword of Damocles forever hanging over the head of any elected government and would exempt the generals from having to dirty their hands on yet another messy coup.¹³ The result would be an extremely limited form of democracy in which a toothless parliament was controlled by unelected institutions. Elections will be held, but the power enjoyed by traditional elites in the military and bureaucracy will be preserved, as will the prestige of the palace and the privileges enjoyed by those around it. This model is often referred to as ‘Thai-style democracy’ and is largely based on the system used during the premiership of Prem Tinsulanonda - a period many in the royal-nationalist camp look back on with nostalgia. However, much has changed in Thailand since the eighties. Whether you prefer

¹² As has become customary, there is some speculation that the strange timing could have been due to a scare regarding the health of the ailing king.

¹³ Aside from any democratic concerns, the inclusion of such a provision suggests the junta themselves are not overly optimistic about avoiding another turn of the wheel of the vicious cycle of Thai Politics

to call them ‘urbanised villagers’,¹⁴ ‘cosmopolitan villagers’,¹⁵ or ‘political peasants’,¹⁶ people in rural Thailand have more knowledge, information and aspiration than ever before and are more assertive in having their expectations met. The election campaign run by Thaksin in 2001 was a watershed moment in Thai politics, in which more people than ever before voted for a political party who had an attractive platform and seemed to speak directly to them. In addition, the political crisis of the past decade has been a learning experience for many Thais. The traditional elites have overplayed their hand badly, bringing too much attention on themselves and shining the spotlight on where power lies in Thailand. The Red Shirts call this learning experience an ‘awakening’ or ‘*dtaa sawang*’. It seems unlikely now that they will allow the wool to be pulled over their eyes and accept the return to the ‘Thai-style democracy’ the junta are currently setting their sights on.

“This model is often referred to as ‘Thai-style democracy’ and is largely based on the system used during the premiership of Prem Tinsulanonda - a period many in the royal-nationalist camp look back on with nostalgia.”

The Civil War that Never Was

Before looking at opposition to the current junta, it is worth examining how Thailand got to this stage to begin with. Many observers calculated that a coup against the Yingluck

government would be met with fierce resistance by her supporters. During the PDRC protests, there was even a fear of civil war breaking out, spurred on by talk of secession and videos of marching militias in the northern province of Phayao and Udon Thani in the northeast. The Red Shirts had already mobilised several thousand supporters at Aksa Road in the outskirts of Bangkok when news of the coup broke and it was not lack of spirit that stopped them from fighting - when the army arrived at the rally site, core leader Dr Weng announced from the stage that people should be calm and cooperate with the soldiers and was met with stunned silence, then jeers and boos.¹⁷ So what factors explain the rather muted response to the coup?

One reason is that, on the day, the military simply outflanked their opposition, creating a situation that was impossible to counter. The military always had the advantage of knowing if and when a coup would take place whereas for everyone else, it was a guessing game that had been played since the day Yingluck was elected. During the PDRC rallies, the expectation that a coup would happen had been raised significantly but so many opportunities for one had passed that people began to think it might never happen. Indeed, because the PDRC protests were running out of steam and violence decreasing, people could be forgiven for thinking that a coup was becoming unlikely. By invoking martial law in advance, the military gave themselves extra powers to mobilise their troops, positioning them in key areas which could stop unrest and by the time they had done so, it was already too late for the Red Shirts to respond. In particular, surrounding the Aksa rally site in advance of the coup gave the Red Shirts little room to manoeuvre. The final touch was to invite key government and Red Shirt leaders to the talks at the Royal Army Club, which meant that they could easily arrest them, holding them

¹⁴ Naruemon Thabchumpon and Duncan McCargo, “Urbanized Villagers in the 2010 Thai Redshirt Protests: Not Just Poor Farmers?” *Asian Survey*, 51(6), 2011, pp.993–1018

¹⁵ Keyes, C. (2012). ‘Cosmopolitan’ villagers and populist democracy in Thailand. *South East Asia Research*, 20(3), pp.343-360.

¹⁶ Walker, A. (2012). *Thailand’s Political Peasants*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

¹⁷ This was not the first time that the rank and file Red Shirts had shown a willingness to fight that surpassed that of the leadership.

as a disincentive to resistance and depriving the movement of its key leaders.

Mobilisation difficulties also contributed to the lack of immediate opposition to the coup. Overcoming the 'free rider problem'¹⁸ is a perennial problem for social movements. Why would people endure the costs associated with taking part in collective action when they stand to benefit from the gains of that action irrespective of their participation? Although this is not a problem exclusive to the Red Shirts, several factors make it particularly troublesome to them, particularly during the Aksa Rally, which was only able to draw around 3000 people. First, given that most of their support base is in the north and northeastern provinces, it is difficult to mobilise them into Bangkok, where most protest events happen. The Red Shirts who arrived in Bangkok in March-May 2010 did so gradually over the course of a few days and weeks, encouraged by the growing crowds and emboldened by the perceived lack of action by the security forces at that time. When the coup was announced, it was impossible to mobilise that many people at short notice, especially with the military blocking roads and highways. In the days and weeks leading up to the coup, even many Bangkok-based Red Shirts were put off travelling to Aksa, which is quite far on the outskirts of the city and awkward to get to. With the crisis dragging on interminably and no guarantee if and when a coup would occur, it likely seemed pointless for many Red Shirts to give up their time to go and sit on a hot afternoon in the middle of nowhere. Also, when making the cost-benefit analysis about whether to join the rally at Aksa, some Red Shirts may have been put off by the high risk involved, having witnessed the events of 2010 and the violence that December at the Rajamangala stadium.¹⁹ It

¹⁸ M. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965).

¹⁹ Some might argue that Pheu Thai's perceived lack of responsiveness to grassroots demands for justice for those killed by the military and attempts at reconciliation with the traditional elites through the controversial amnesty bill also weakened its support base

now seems apparent that much of the talk of resistance - particularly of armed resistance and secession - was hyperbole and blown out of proportion by all sides. For the Red Shirts, it may have been considered useful to follow Alinsky's rule that "power is not only what you have, but what the enemy thinks you have",²⁰ in order to raise the stakes for their opponents who were considering staging a coup. For the royal-nationalists, the fear may have been blown out of all proportion due to deep, historical anxieties regarding loss of territory to the British and French colonialists, not to mention the current turmoil in the three southernmost provinces.

When faced with the inevitability of the coup, it seems the Red Shirt leaders' only course of action was to simply let it happen. They had failed to mobilise a sufficient number of people to prevent it, they had been outmanoeuvred on the day, their bluff of resistance had been called and they were ultimately unwilling to engage with a military who had left no doubt in 2010 that they were willing to kill unarmed protestors. Taking a longer term view, the Red Shirt leaders may also have estimated that the task undertaken by the military had no clear exit strategy and was doomed to failure. Sitting back for a while and letting the military make a mess of things must have seemed like a good option under the circumstances. Having successfully orchestrated the coup, the military then settled into their role of restoring 'order' and bringing about the reforms necessary to return to a 'Thai-style democracy'. But what oppositional space has been available in this transitional period? And what conditions might lead to a mass mobilisation against the junta?

Opposing 'Thai-Style Dictatorship'

Although the expected mass mobilisation against the coup never materialised, there was nonetheless a small but very angry

²⁰ S. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*. (New York: Vintage Books., 1989).

reaction in the days following it. Small crowds - a mixture of Red Shirts and other activists - gathered spontaneously at several locations in Bangkok and faced off with soldiers, who seemed unsure how to handle the situation. As the rallies grew to around a thousand people, they moved to Victory Monument and forced the army into an embarrassing retreat. An army jeep was trashed and spray-painted with anti-coup graffiti and it seemed for a moment that the military were losing control. However, they regrouped and poured more troops into the area. Protestors then changed tactics, appearing in undisclosed locations as flash mobs, protesting in inventive ways with A4 sheets of paper, George Orwell books and even sandwiches.²¹ Undercover agents snatched and dragged protestors away to undisclosed locations. Others were 'invited' for periods of detention at army bases where they faced 'attitude adjustment'. Many observers have noted something different about this coup compared to others in the past; it seems more serious somehow, the stakes seem higher, the army seem to be settling in for a longer period than has traditionally been the case. Freedom House downgraded the country from 'partly free' to 'not free' based on events in 2014 and Reporters Without Borders, described the junta as waging "a blitzkrieg aimed at achieving absolute control over the provision of news and information" since it seized power in 2014. The atmosphere under the junta has been described as the most repressive in decades and the country's international reputation has tanked.

However, even in this repressive atmosphere, two groups of young activists began testing the limits of what they could get away with. In Bangkok, a group called the Thai Student Centre for Democracy held several

symbolic protests whilst another group of students in Khon Kaen called Dao Din began protesting on local issues as well as against military rule. The two eventually came together to form the New Democracy Movement (NDM) and have held several small but significant protests under the watchful eye of the junta.²² However, several factors militate against a broader student movement gaining ground in Thailand. Since the atrocity at Thammasat University in 1976, activism on campus has been limited. Student life has militaristic tendencies, as evidenced by the enforcement of uniforms and the controversial hazing rituals inflicted on freshmen. Although pockets of activism exist, much of the student body seems depoliticised and no longer has the institutional memory needed to facilitate a movement of any significance. Compounding this is the fact that students tend to be from more privileged sectors of society, particularly those attending elite universities such as Thammasat and Chulalongkorn. In the current climate, they are therefore more likely to fall on the opposite side of the political divide. Also, despite some likely assistance from progressive Thais, the movement lacks the necessary resources to grow beyond the small gatherings they have thus far organised. If they are to play a larger role, it could perhaps be in a loose alliance with the broader Red Shirt movement, with whom they have much in common. Curiously, the NDM activists have been arrested several times but have always been released, albeit with charges hanging over their heads. The junta may have made a cost-benefit analysis that it is less trouble to let the students continue with their small protests than it would be to lock them up and face criticism both at home and abroad. In fact, of all the opposition activists summoned or arrested since the coup, most have been released in the same way, with threats issued

²¹ The A4 pieces of paper could be easily concealed, then waved when the flash mobs caught the eye of the media and then quickly disposed of to avoid detection by the security agencies. Publicly reading George Orwell's 1984 in small groups became a silent protest repertoire after the coup and eating sandwiches became a way to circumvent the banning of political gatherings - protestors could claim they were not breaking the law but merely having a 'picnic'.

²² Buchanan, J. (2015). Thailand: Poking the Tiger. *The Diplomat*. [online] Available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2015/10/thailand-poking-the-tiger/> [Accessed 10 Sep. 2016].

Haberhorn, T. (2015). A Budding Democracy Movement in Thailand. *Dissent*. [online] Available at: <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/new-democracy-movement-thailand> [Accessed 10 Sep. 2016].

and charges hanging over them, but without actually seeing any sentencing.²³ There should be no doubts as to what the regime is capable of when it feels threatened, especially with regards to perceived threats against the three pillars of 'nation, religion, king' — this became more than apparent during the crackdown of the Red Shirts protests in 2010, which General Prayuth personally oversaw. However, as oppressive as the atmosphere has been in Thailand since the coup, the junta at times seems relatively soft, especially when compared to oppressive regimes elsewhere.²⁴ If 'Thai-style democracy' is a poor version of a fuller democracy then we might say we are currently experiencing a rather half-hearted 'Thai-style dictatorship'.

One explanation could be that the junta lacks the state capacity to fully enforce its diktats. The junta can order that minibuses not be allowed to queue for customers at Victory Monument or that street vendors must clear the streets at the Klong Thom night market area, but endemic corruption in Thai institutions and resistance to change in the population means these orders are ignored and soon forgotten about. Political motivations on the part of the police and rank and file soldiers tasked with implementing the junta's orders may also play a part. Both are often regarded as being pro-Red and many individuals will not take kindly to taking commands from the junta which overthrew their preferred government. Orders may dissipate as they are handed down the ranks as an 'everyday form of resistance'.²⁵

Another explanation is that the junta is well aware of how precarious its situation is and has opted for a softer approach, in an attempt

to maintain a delicate balancing act. Pushing too hard may not only provoke a backlash from the opposition but could eventually lead to an erosion of its own support networks. While some sections of Thai society have shown a remarkable disregard for the rights of others,²⁶ it is questionable how many of the middle classes have the stomach for the level of oppression necessary to truly close down all oppositional space in the country. However, the junta is only in power by virtue of its brute force and any perceived weakness could be its downfall.

A Red Return?

After the coup of 2014, it was widely believed that the Red Shirts were dead in the water. While the coup and its aftermath undoubtedly halted the Red Shirts' ability to mobilise, their organisational structures remained largely intact and in recent months they have become active again, suggesting they have merely been 'playing dead' and waiting for an opportunity to resume their activities. The top floor of Imperial Ladprao mall, which once held the UDD offices, a book shop, several Pro-Red television stations, and other supporting structures lay quiet for a while but is now back in business, as the movement tentatively tests the limits of what it can get away with. A newly opened 'People's Cafe and Library' has been attracting steady crowds in the past few weeks. The busy library is full of Red-leaning political books and the customers are even wearing red shirts whilst they sip their coffee. The workers in the small book shop next door, owned by exiled founding member of the Red Shirts, Jakrapob Penkair, have dusted off his large framed portrait and it now hangs proudly on the wall, as it had done prior to the coup. The fact that the military maintain a constant presence at the mall, keeping a watchful eye over the Red Shirts but yet allowing them not only to exist but to expand

²³ The exception to this is any cases involving *lèse-majesté*, which is a definite "red line" for the junta

²⁴ Compare the Thai junta with the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which ruled Burma with an iron fist from 1988 until 1997 for example

²⁵ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.)

²⁶ Look, for example, at the support given to the controversial 'popcorn gunman'.

their activities is extremely puzzling. As with the NDM, the way the junta is currently handling the opposition from the Red Shirts seems relatively soft in its approach, relying more on pressure and threats than on outright oppression. On 18th February, Red Shirt leader Jatuporn Prompan was taken from Imperial Ladprao by the military and briefly detained for ‘attitude adjustment’ after comments he made criticising the junta for delaying the appointment of a new Supreme Patriarch.²⁷ As before, he was quickly released and when I visited the People’s Cafe and Library a couple of weeks later for research, he was there singing karaoke songs about democracy in front of a small but enthusiastic crowd. Whatever the reason, the junta is allowing a degree of oppositional space to the Red Shirts and it seems to be widening.²⁸ According to Political Opportunity Structure, one of the classic and most enduring approaches to social movement studies, three main conditions are necessary for a movement to transpire. The first is insurgent consciousness, or relative deprivation.²⁹ This is a grievance caused by the perception that you lack something in relation to others in your society. The Red Shirts have this in abundance, whether it is the income disparity felt by the majority of their supporters, the lack of respect shown to them as provincial ‘buffaloes’, the lack of justice they feel over the political events of the past decade or the political rights they feel are being denied to them as equal citizens of Thailand. The second is referred to as Resource Mobilization.³⁰ A movement will not be successful

unless it is able to access the resources it needs to mobilise supporters and push for its goals. Due to its close relationship with the Pheu Thai Party, the Red Shirt movement is extremely rich in funding, organization at local and national level, communications infrastructure, skills, know-how and experience, as well as having access to a host of well-known and charismatic protest leaders. The third condition is known as Political Opportunity,³¹ which focuses on institutional space, rifts between elites, building elite alliances and state capacity for repression. Working within the system, the Thais who would become Red Shirts have already taken advantage of a political opening when Thaksin and his parties courted their votes. Finding these votes overturned, they then turned to mass mobilisation to pressure the system from the outside, taking advantage of the split between the political and traditional elites and aligning themselves with Thaksin to push for their political rights. It remains to be seen what opportunities will present themselves to the Red Shirts over the twenty months earmarked in the 6-4-6-4 formula, as the junta pushes on with its plans to return to a ‘Thai-style democracy’ - but with political opportunities within the parliamentary system likely to be closed off, grievances burning as strongly as ever and organisational structures still intact from previous outings, it seems certain that they will seize whatever comes their way.

“The top floor of Imperial Ladprao mall, which once held the UDD offices, a book shop, several Pro-Red television stations, and other supporting structures lay quiet for a while but is now back in business, as the movement tentatively tests the limits of what it can get away with.”

²⁷ A new and potentially worrying layer to Thailand’s national crisis is the politicisation of who will be appointed as the Supreme Patriarch of the Buddhist Sangha, with fears that the junta is taking sides. In February, a scuffle broke out between the military and monks protesting against perceived state interference.

²⁸ The resumption of Red Shirt activities was followed by the recent reappearance of Thaksin Shinawatra, who gave a series of interviews in the international media criticising the junta. Perhaps more interestingly, Thaksin’s media blitz was followed by an opinion piece by former diplomat and foreign minister Kasit Piromya, which could signal a split amongst the royal-nationalist elites.

²⁹ Ted Gurr, *Why Men Rebel*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970).

³⁰ Charles Tilly, “From Mobilization to Revolution,” University of Michigan Working Paper, March 1977.

³¹ S. Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) and S. Tarrow, *Power in Movement*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Conclusion

The elite project to restore their dominance and the ‘Thai-style democracy’ they fear has been lost to Thaksin Shinawatra and his electoral forces is essentially an attempt to turn back time and will therefore be hard to achieve, if not impossible. It increasingly seems that the junta lacks both a plan and an exit strategy and the longer they stay in power, the weaker they appear to become. Whilst rights groups and the international community rightly condemned the oppressive atmosphere after the coup, there has been more oppositional space available in Thailand than is often reported, and this is being exploited by groups such as the New Democracy Movement and the Red Shirts. Of these two, the latter still remains more capable of staging a serious challenge to the junta.³² However, counter-intuitively, the limited oppositional space available in Thailand does not necessarily mean that mass-mobilisation leading to a regime transition is more likely. According to Aspinall’s study of the Suharto regime in Indonesia,³³ the “combination of repression and toleration is a common feature of resilient authoritarian regimes” and it is actually regimes who “rely on little else but repression to maintain themselves (who) often end up radicalizing society and creating powerful revolutionary oppositions”.³⁴ So it seems the junta’s balancing act may be a wise calculation after all. But the more space that becomes available, the more the opposition will test the limits of what it can get away with. And the more they push, the more likely it is that

they will provoke a repressive (and radicalising) reaction from the junta. When I asked one Red Shirt at Imperial Ladprao what he thought the leaders’ plan was, he told me they were waiting and watching the junta. When I asked him what the junta’s plan was, he laughed and said they were waiting and watching the Red Shirts. Thailand is currently waiting, almost with bated breath, for several key events: the appointment of a supreme patriarch, the referendum on the constitution, the first election under the new constitution and, crucially, the succession. Each of these has the potential to shape its trajectory in important ways. For those of us watching and awaiting the outcome, the future in Thailand remains hard to predict.

“The elite project to restore their dominance and the ‘Thai-style democracy’ they fear has been lost to Thaksin Shinawatra and his electoral forces is essentially an attempt to turn back time and will therefore be hard to achieve, if not impossible.”

³² However, they may decide that a “re-branding” is in order and appear in a new form, without their signature red. Doing so would perhaps allow the movement to broaden its support base. This is something the “yellow” side of the political divide have become rather adept at over the years.

³³ E. Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005): p. 2.

³⁴ Of course, the Red Shirts play an important role even without mobilising as they did in 2010. The mere threat of mobilisation gives pro-Thaksin elites immense bargaining power and, as it always has, the real strength of the pro-Thaksin camp lies in its electoral power.

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Southeast Asia Research Centre Management Committee

Professor Mark R. Thompson, Director

Dr. Thomas Patton, Associate Director

Dr. Bill Taylor

Dr. Y-Dang Troeung

Southeast Asia Research Centre

City University of Hong Kong

Tat Chee Avenue

Kowloon

Hong Kong SAR

Tel: (852) 3442-6330

Fax: (852) 3442-0103

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<http://www.cityu.edu.hk/searc>

