

Popular Mobilisation and Thai Democratisation: **Thai Politics** in Late Rama IX Era

Mr. Pravit Rojanaphruk The Nation Newspaper, Thailand

Since 2006, Thai politics has witnessed mounting popular mobilisation and a deepening political crisis. As so-called 'yellow shirts' and 'red shirts' have taken their protests to the international airport, the national government, and the city streets of Bangkok, Thailand has also seen the articulation of ultra-royalist versus (alleged) anti-royalist sentiments. In a bid to oust (former) Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, the yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) presented themselves as ultra-royalist and Thaksin as a threat to the monarchy. According to the PAD, Thaksin aimed to turn Thailand into a republic. From 2007 onward, when the pro-Thaksin red-shirted United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) came into being, a significant element within this movement became critical of not just royal advisors, whom they accused of having orchestrated the military coup in 2006 which ousted Thaksin, but became critical of the institution of the monarchy itself.

By late 2009, the UDD leadership began distancing itself from the faction most critical of the monarchy, Red Siam, and insisted that all red shirts are loyal to the throne as well. Beneath the surface, however, discussion about Thai politics and the monarchy continues. Indeed, political mobilisation since 2006 reflects, in no small measure, the differing views about the role of the monarchy in the future of Thai society and politics.

The meaning of democracy in Thailand

Although the contestation over the meaning of democracy in Thailand between yellow-shirt and red-shirt supporters has intensified, genuinely in-depth discussion about democracy in Thailand remains difficult under current legislation. That is, the role of the monarchy in Thailand's politics, society and economy cannot be discussed openly in a critical manner without risking severe punishment under lese majeste law which carries a maximum punishment of 15 years of imprisonment. This constraint shapes Thai political discourse, including the on-going protests, in important ways.

When the PAD demonstrated against the then elected Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, charging him with corruption and abuse of office they called for a royally-appointed prime minister to replace him and denounced him as a threat to the throne. Eventually it was a coup on the eve of September 19, 2006, which, while claiming to be under His Majesty's grace, managed to oust Thaksin. The coup makers, later known as the Council for National Security quickly dropped any link by name to the king as their initial proclamation met with consternation from foreign governments. Instead, they denied that the palace was in any way involved in leading or giving the putsch a blessing.

In Thailand, those who care and dare to discuss the stark choices that confront the political system as regards the role of the monarchy have mostly gone underground, withdrawn to virtual anonymity

on-line, or confined themselves to private reflections, amongst a close circle of trusted friends. In public, even red-shirt leaders, branded anti-monarchist by the movement's foes, still insist publicly that they are in favour of a democratic system with the king as head of state, while also expressing many critical views about the monarchy and its royal advisors.

The comparative absence of open and critical discussion and debate about the role of the monarchy in Thai politics and society in the country is all the more striking when viewed from abroad. Last year, for example, saw at least three issues of the London-based *The Economist* banned from circulation in Thailand, allegedly due to the sensitive nature of its articles on the Thai monarchy. In a similar vein, Paul Handley's unauthorised biography of the reigning Thai monarch, King Bhumipol Adulyadej, has been banned in Thailand. Titled 'The King Never Smiles,' this book was published by Yale University Press. More generally, hundreds of websites critical of the monarchy are blocked by the state.

Of course, officials will insist that His Majesty plays no role in politics. However, those critical of the institution long for a transparent, accountable monarchy subject to public scrutiny and criticism. By contrast, ultra-royalists dread to think what will happen if the Thai media were to behave like tabloid newspapers in London when it comes to coverage of the royal institution.

As for the mainstream media in Thailand, they will typically not hesitate to lavish ever more excessive praise and flattery on the members of the royal family. They are also virtually silent when it comes to portraying the royal institution in an even mildly critical manner. Instead, their depictions tend to idealise people's relationship with the monarchy as an institution and to censor anything even mildly critical of the monarchy. At best, such media portrayals present a flat, one-dimensional caricature of the Thai people, always eternally loyal to the throne. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that most Thais learn about the royal family through whatever is reported on mainstream mass media.

The meaning democracy to the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)

As noted by observers, PAD has emerged an advocate for the leadership of the well-educated and 'moral' elites. This was perhaps most apparent in their now-abandoned proposal for 'New Politics.' According to this proposal, some 70 percent of the members of parliament should be selected by some "independent" organisations while only 30 percent were to be elected. More generally, it has been noted, the PAD harbours deep distrust of poor and less educated Thais who comprise about 70 percent of the population. Hence their call for a royally appointed prime minister and support for the 2006 coup which ousted Thaksin.

Indeed, it would appear that, to the PAD, elections are little more than a sham and fraudulent way for rich and corrupt politicians to grab power. As expressed by a frequent reader in a letter to the Editor of *The Nation*, the country's major English-language newspaper: *"In Thailand, the event (the general election) is just a ritual to confer the reign of parliamentary control through vote-buying."* (Nethirat Intira, 22 July 2008)

Challenges facing Thai democracy

In the present context of continued mobilisation and unresolved crisis, there are at least four key challenges confronting the Thai people:

First of all, how to put the military back in their barracks for good? After 20 coup attempts with nine successful putsches, the military, especially the army, is not about to give up its power easily. In fact the most crucial meeting which paved way for the current Abhisit Vejjajiva administration to assume power took place at the residence of Army chief Gen. Anuphong Paochinda in late 2008.

Under the junta-sponsored 2007 charter, the prime minister has no direct control over the appointment of army chief, the most powerful post at the Defense Ministry. Coup rumours are common whenever political tension exists. Civilian oversight over the military is very weak and the army control a large number of radio stations and two television stations for “national security” purposes. Yet blame should not simply be placed upon the military alone as the Thai public, including the vast majority of mainstream Thai media, have repeatedly welcomed tanks on the streets of Bangkok in hope of political salvation. Thailand is a coup-addicted nation in need of some form of serious political rehabilitation. Military intervention remains a popular idea especially among many of the educated middle class and elite.

Second, what kind of space will the monarchy inhabit after the current reign draws to a close? This big issue is tragically avoided by the mainstream mass media due to censorship, self-censorship, lese majeste law and ultra-royalist ideology amongst influential members of the media. In private, many Thais, be they red-shirt, yellow-shirt, and those not part of the two political movements do discuss and speculate about what might become of the monarchy in Thailand, especially in the post Rama IX era. Due to media censorship and self-censorship, virtually all speculations are based on rumours and hearsays, making it very difficult to discern a way

out of the current impasse. More informal and on-line speculation and discussion can be expected however as the current king advances in age and weakens in health.

Some want to see a strong monarchy to counter balance the power of non-royal related political and business groups. Others wish to see a strictly limited monarchy system like those in the United Kingdom, while a few are republicans. With the media not really touching the issue in any significant manner, Thai society appears to be in self-denial about what is going on. Reform, beginning with the abolition lese majeste law, may enable people to become less restrictive in discussing the role of the palace in Thai society but many ultra-royalists want to see more severe punishment added into the law.

Third, what to do with the voices of the poor and less educated? Decades of elitism and middle class’ misgivings about poor and less-formally-educated people’s ability to make sound political and electoral decisions have fanned a good part of the red-shirt anti-old-elite movement. The poor have found their political voice through Thaksin, who, despite charges of abuse and corruption has not diminished in his popularity among the rural poor. Instead, it seems unlikely that, in the wake of his populist policies, these rural folks would return back to their villages and let politics be the same as before Thaksin came to power and find themselves voiceless again. But is it possible for the rural and other poor to strike some kind of compromise with the mostly urban educated middle class who look down upon them?

Fourth, what to do with new political-business groups like Thaksin and his cronies? There is no easy answer to this vexing question either. For one thing, many of those in opposition to Thaksin opted for a military intervention or top-down “solution”, as discussed above. As also noted, however, this familiar formula has failed to provide a viable resolution to the political crisis which is instead deepening.

Conclusion

On February 7, 2010, front page news reports from Daily News newspaper and ASTV-Manager Daily newspaper reported that privy council member Gen. Kamthorn Sinthanond called for the government to protect the monarchy from being attacked. "Thais must be knowledgeable and truly understand about royal power and royal activities so they can be proud and know how important the king is to the nation; however we are currently witnessing an increasing media war... and the monarchy has been dragged into it..." Kamthorn, who insisted that he was speaking in a private capacity as a citizen, added that perhaps organisations such as the state's Psychological Institute for Security should be enlisted to "make the people understand about the role of the monarchy."

As Thai society is unable to critically and publicly debate the monarchy, attacks and remarks critical of royal persons (e.g., the King, Queen) and the monarchy as an institution typically resort to the usage of code names, allusions, innuendos, metaphors and parables in order to avoid falling foul of lese majeste law. However, the excessive lavishing of praise on the institution of the monarchy that tend to characterise mainstream media portrayals has also backfired as some Thais perceive it in a negative fashion.

Groups critical of the monarchy are today crudely branded in only one shade – as that of anti-monarchists working with Thaksin toward abolishing the monarchy. A more nuanced public debate has become impossible and Thai society is paying a high price for it. Such is the tragedy of Thai politics in a transitional period late in Rama IX's reign. According to the ultra-royalist discourse, Thaksin is but a corrupt and ambitious politician wanting to overthrow the monarchy, and thus, conveniently enough, the cause of all political crises. At the same time, a deafening silence accompanies the calls by a substantial number of the Thai population for a change in their relationship with the monarchy and its advisors, as well as for a greater political voice.

Thailand is like a sick man who cannot discuss his own medical condition fully and openly. Like a patient who needs surgery but does not dare to undergo medical examination, diagnosis and treatment, he waits bitterly, grudgingly and confounded as the pain mounts and the situation becomes increasingly untenable. ■

Pravit Rojanaphruk

(B.A., University of the Philippines, MSc., Oxford) is Senior Reporter at major English-language newspaper in Thailand, The Nation. Pravit also writes column and commentaries for independent magazines and news media, including prachatai.com and Fah Diew Kan magazine, and comments on Thai politics for Al Jazeera International Television. A Reuters Fellow at University of the Philippines and a Chevening Scholar at Oxford, Mr Rojanaphruk has also been presented with an Award as Outstanding Journalist from the Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation.