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The Battle for Thailand

Can Democracy Survive?

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Over the past three years, Thailand has lived through a military coup, six prime ministers, and widespread civil unrest. The ongoing crisis grabbed headlines last year when protesters occupied two international airports, and it culminated this April in violent clashes in Bangkok. Observers have wondered how what was once such a promising democracy could devolve so quickly.

Today, a semblance of normality has returned to Thailand. But the battle for the country is far from over, and its future remains uncertain. The fractures that led to the confrontation in the first place have yet to be mended. Thai society has become deeply polarized, with different elites jockeying for power and the urban population pitted against the rural population, the north and the northeast against Bangkok and the south, and the poor against the rich. With Thailand's economy now contracting, these divisions might become even more salient. To make matters worse, speculation abounds about the health of the country's 81-year-old monarch, Bhumibol Adulyadej, who has traditionally stood for stability and continuity.

Whatever the outcome of the present crisis, the future of Thai democracy does not look good. Thailand's democratic institutions remain weak and vulnerable to interference by unelected institutions, such as the military and the judiciary. Unless Thailand develops solid, independent state entities that can bridge the gap between various interest groups, the situation will only deteriorate.

THAKSIN'S TENURE

It all began with the meteoric rise of Thaksin Shinawatra, an immensely wealthy telecommunications tycoon who became prime minister in 2001 after his party -- the Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais), or TRT -- won the general election by a landslide. (Thaksin's 2005 electoral victory would be even more spectacular.) He ran on a platform of reform, but once in power he flouted democratic rules.

In 2003, for example, Thaksin launched a bloody and controversial "war on drugs." The campaign was initially regarded as successful: the price of methamphetamines, Thailand's drug of choice, more than doubled within a few months. But soon it began to lose its effectiveness. Extrajudicial executions became a commonplace policy tool. In each province, the police (and in some cases, the army) followed quotas on the minimum number of drug dealers to kill. Many innocent Thais who had nothing to do with the drug trade died during the campaign, having been targeted by the police after neighbors with grudges called government hotlines to report them as drug dealers. Community organizers and other innocent villagers, including children, were also killed. (The indiscriminate killings were documented by Human Rights Watch in a 2004 report and by the Asian Center for Human Rights in 2005.) In border provinces, the police started killing army intelligence informants, who were often in the drug trade, and the army responded by killing police informants. By late 2003, the price of methamphetamines was back to its pre-drug-war level.

Another highly controversial aspect of Thaksin's premiership was his campaign against the media. For example, in 2003 the Shin Corporation, a telecommunications and satellite company founded by Thaksin and owned by his family, brought a multimillion-dollar lawsuit against Supinya Klangnarong, a media rights advocate, for writing in the *Thai Post*, a Thai-language daily, that the company had benefited from favorable treatment by the Thaksin government. When Thaksin later claimed in an interview with *Time* magazine that he had "never intervened" in media activities, the executive director of the Thai Journalists Association responded, "Before he came to power, the Thai press was considered one of the freest in the world. . . . Thaksin constantly interfered with Thailand's printed and broadcast media using advertising revenues and stock acquisitions as key strategies. He shut down community radio, websites and TV programs critical of him."

Thaksin was also widely accused of manipulating the democratic system to make billions for himself and his family. In January 2006, a firm owned by the Singaporean government bought a 49.6 percent stake in the Shin Corporation for nearly \$2 billion. Because the sale was made through a shell company registered in the British Virgin Islands, the Shinawatra family -- one of Thailand's richest -- paid no taxes to the Thai government. After the deal was announced, more than 100,000 protesters gathered near the old Royal Palace in Bangkok to demand Thaksin's resignation and impeachment. Thaksin responded by busing in nearly 200,000 supporters from the countryside. He accused his opponents of being "stupid" and pledged not to "betray the confidence of 19 million voters," who had supported the TRT in the 2005 election.

A month after the controversial sale, Thaksin's opponents formed a loose federation known as the People's Alliance for Democracy. The PAD brought together a motley crew of various interest groups whose lowest common denominator was opposition to Thaksin's government: they see Thaksin and his cronies as a threat to the monarchy and the country's unity. Although Thai sources are reluctant to discuss the role of the monarchy, a taboo subject in Thailand, the PAD is also concerned about the king's impending succession and wishes to make sure Thaksin is not in power at such a sensitive time.

The PAD's members are referred to as the Yellow Shirts, after the color associated with the Thai king; Thaksin's followers, who are known as the Red Shirts, call themselves the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). But neither side could accurately be described as democratic. If Thaksin's tenure was characterized by undemocratic practices, his

opponents are even more openly antidemocratic. The PAD advocates something it calls "new politics," whereby the elected parliament would be replaced by an assembly consisting of both elected and appointed members. Many of those living in Thailand's rural areas, the PAD believes, are not sophisticated enough to take part in general elections and are likely to sell their votes to the highest bidder.

PARTY-HOPPING

The PAD's rallies in 2006 led to the military's intervention in politics and the ouster of Thaksin. Staged while Thaksin was in New York for a United Nations meeting in September of that year, the coup was swift and bloodless. Since then, Thaksin has been convicted of corruption, and a warrant has been issued for his arrest. He lives in exile, mainly in Hong Kong and Dubai, and his assets in Thai banks -- totaling around \$2.2 billion -- have been frozen.

Meanwhile, the government that the coup makers installed -- led by a former army chief and a member of the king's advisory body -- failed to live up to the expectations of the anti-Thaksin movement. It did not purge Thailand of Thaksin's influence. In certain parts of the country, a strong undercurrent of support for Thaksin survived. Following more than a year of rule by a military-appointed government, new elections were held. These resulted in the formation of a coalition government led by the People Power Party (PPP), the successor to Thaksin's TRT. (The TRT had been found guilty of electoral fraud and dissolved by the country's constitutional tribunal seven months before.) But by no means was the election a landslide victory for the PPP; the party was able to form a government only because it allied itself with smaller political parties -- some of which later joined the opposition.

The PAD, which had ceased its activities after the coup -- its goal of toppling Thaksin had been achieved -- reestablished itself in March 2008. It led demonstrations in May 2008 to protest the government's proposal to amend the constitution in a way the PAD thought would benefit Thaksin and perhaps pave the way for his return to power; the PAD believed the PPP government was merely a proxy for Thaksin. In August 2008, tens of thousands of Yellow Shirts occupied the compound around Government House in Bangkok. Soon after, the PPP's first prime minister, Samak Sundaravej, was forced to resign when the courts ruled that his participation in a television cooking program violated the Thai constitution. He was succeeded by Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law. By the fall, the antigovernment demonstrations were occurring almost daily. They culminated in November 2008 with the PAD protesters' seizure of Bangkok's two airports.

The crisis ended only when the PPP was dissolved by the courts -- like the TRT, it was convicted of electoral malfeasance -- and Somchai was forced to resign. The protesters vacated the airports. A new coalition headed by the Democrats, which had been the main opposition party during the Thaksin era, took over in December 2008. Led by the 44-year-old Oxford graduate Abhisit Vejjajiva, the new government rests on a fragile alliance between the Democrats and some smaller parties, as well as members of parliament who defected from the dissolved PPP and whose loyalty to the new prime minister cannot be taken for granted.

MULTIPLE DIVISIONS

The recent restlessness in Thailand is the result of the country's deep fault lines. The Thai imbroglio has often been labeled a struggle for democracy, but this is overly simplistic. Although the PPP and its predecessor, the TRT, won all the elections they participated in, once in power, both parties behaved in an extremely authoritarian manner.

The political crisis has also been described as a battle between the traditional urban elite, represented by monarchic institutions such as the military and the bureaucracy, and the rural poor, whose interests Thaksin supposedly sought to advance. Indeed, what at the beginning was not a social conflict has to some extent become one. The pro-Thaksin UDD has exploited the plight of the poor, whereas the PAD has rejected representative democracy for fear it would give the rural population too much political clout. Speakers at UDD rallies talk of a "class war," sometimes even going as far as advocating a "people's army" to challenge the elite.

But it would be wrong to describe the crisis, as the Western media often do, as just a social conflict between the rich and the poor. For one thing, there are rich and poor in both camps, and Thaksin is a multibillionaire who primarily represents ethnic Chinese business interests, not poor farmers. The PAD, for its part, cannot be described solely as the vanguard of an "urban elite." Trade unionists, for example, rallied behind it because Thaksin had once tried to privatize state-owned enterprises. When the PAD was formed, its five-person central committee consisted of a media tycoon (Sondhi Limthongkul, the coalition's founder), a former Bangkok governor and retired major general (Chamlong Srimuang), a social activist and longtime pro-democracy campaigner (Piphob Dhongchai), a labor leader (Somsak Kosaisuk), and an academic who is also a prominent Democrat (Somkiat Pongpaiboon).

The present struggle for Thailand is actually more political and regional in nature than economic. The political crisis is best understood as a simple power struggle between two different groups of elites. According to David Fullbrook, an author and observer of the political scene in Thailand, conflict has been simmering since the rise of "new money" -- much of it in the hands of Sino-Thais, such as Thaksin -- in the 1960s, thanks to surging exports and modernization. Thaksin and his new-money cronies inevitably came to compete with "old money," represented by the monarchy and the traditional elite. This conflict pitted Thaksin's government against the institution that is supposed to bridge such gaps in society, the king's advisory body -- and therefore against the monarchy itself. As the Thailand scholar Kevin Hewison has argued, Thaksin and the palace were competing for the same things: societal supremacy and the hearts and minds of the masses.

The origins of the anti-Thaksin movement thus lie in the old establishment's desire to keep from power someone they perceived as a manipulative arriviste. But even though Thailand's political crisis was not at the beginning a social conflict, it became one because of the way in which Thaksin took advantage of the plight of the poor, especially in the impoverished northeast. It is doubtful that the demonstrators who took to the streets in April -- who may have genuinely believed they were fighting for democracy and better living conditions -- realized that they were little more than pawns in a bigger game.

As a result, the country has become deeply divided, not only between the old and the new elite but also between Thaksin's strongholds in the north and the northeast and his opponents' in Bangkok and the south. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, two of Thailand's leading commentators on social issues, have traced the regional divide to the north's and the

northeast's "sense of exclusion and disadvantage, the legacy of a highly centralised state system and persistent neglect."

Although Thailand has experienced some spectacular economic growth over the past few decades, not all regions have benefited equally, and the country has one of Asia's highest Gini coefficients, a measure of income inequality (the higher the coefficient, the greater the inequality). However, Thaksin was successful in portraying himself as a champion of the poor, mainly in the northeast, where he cleverly marketed his rural-development policies, inexpensive health care, generous monetary support for villages, and other populist policies. On the other hand, in the north, where Thaksin comes from, local residents know the Shinawatras as a Sino-Thai business family whose fortunes have waxed and waned over several generations. Thus, the TRT's election campaigns there never focused on poverty elimination but instead focused on provincialism, emphasizing that Thaksin was "a native of the north" and using distinct, northern Thai spelling on election posters and billboards. Clearly, playing on the rich-versus-poor divide has only been a tool for Thaksin's camp to gain support in certain parts of the country. As one Bangkok-based analyst put it, "This is not a class war but a regional conflict."

The present Democratic-led coalition is acutely aware of the opposition's popularity in the north and the northeast, and it has pledged not to abolish any of the populist policies that Thaksin initiated. Still, it will be an uphill battle for the Democrats to win over those regions, where they are seen as representing mainly the upper and middle classes of Bangkok.

AN UNCERTAIN DEMOCRACY

Deep rifts such as these are enough to paralyze any country, but in Thailand, the monarchy has historically acted as a bridging institution. It is revered not only by the elite but also in the countryside, where the king enjoys an almost divine status. Most Thais think of the monarchy as a sacred institution, and Thailand has some of the world's most stringent *lèse majesté* laws (which criminalize offenses against the monarch). The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology claims to have shut down more than 2,000 Web sites deemed offensive to the monarchy. This drive began well before the Democrats came to power. But Abhisit's justice minister has gone a step further and suggested that the current maximum penalty for *lèse majesté* convictions, 15 years of imprisonment, should be extended to 25 years. This does not tally well with Abhisit's stated commitment to liberal democracy.

In a recent speech before the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand, Abhisit defended these laws, arguing that the monarchy, which is the key to political stability, must be shielded from the country's political turmoil. Near-universal respect for the monarchy is undoubtedly a unifying factor, but it is also closely linked to the present king. Because of the country's *lèse majesté* laws, no one is prepared to talk openly, let alone write, about what may happen when a new monarch takes over. Bhumibol, who ascended to the throne in 1946, is the world's longest-reigning monarch, and the vast majority of Thais have never experienced another king. The trauma that his succession will inevitably entail will be immense. According to Shawn Crispin, the Southeast Asia editor of *Asia Times Online* and a veteran observer of Thai politics, when the king dies it is possible that "the military will invoke the Internal Security Act -- which in times of crises gives the army commander more executive power than the prime minister -- to ensure a smooth and favorable transition."

Indeed, despite Thailand's democratic institutions, the military is a powerful force, and it is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. Between 1932, when the absolute monarchy was overthrown, and 2006, when the military ousted Thaksin, Thailand witnessed at least ten successful coups and seven abortive coup attempts. Powerful elements of the military have closely allied themselves with the PAD, which shares their loyalty to the monarchy and their dislike of Thaksin. According to Crispin, the military worked behind the scenes to form Abhisit's coalition. And if it retains such influence, Crispin wrote in *Asia Times Online* in January, Thailand's stability will be determined less by how Abhisit deals with the UDD and "more by how Abhisit negotiates power-sharing first with the military and second with his junior coalition partners." That prediction does not augur well for Abhisit, and it calls into question his progressive credentials.

FORECAST: FAILURE?

After taking power at the end of 2008, the Democrats gained even more seats in parliament and improved their majority in by-elections held this January. But their opponents still feel cheated. They believe that both of Abhisit's immediate predecessors and Thaksin were toppled by unconstitutional means -- Samak and Somchai by politically motivated court decisions and Thaksin by a coup. The new coalition, Thaksin's followers argue, is the product of behind-the-scenes horse-trading. The UDD has called Abhisit an "illegitimate prime minister." In April, the opposition's anger culminated in violent clashes that left two confirmed dead and more than a hundred wounded. In the coastal resort of Pattaya, protesters forced a regional summit to be canceled and its attendees to be evacuated by helicopter.

Most of Thaksin's closest relatives left the country before and during the April events, but they are still in close contact with supporters in Thailand. Even before April, Thaksin himself -- who after his 2006 ouster pledged never to get involved in politics again -- repeatedly addressed his followers in Thailand by video from Dubai. During the height of the protests, he told them that he was prepared to come back and lead the country again, if they asked him to do so. In one address, he even urged his followers to stage a "people's revolution" -- a call that cost him his Thai passport. Even in exile, Thaksin remains powerful, and the country has become divided between those who love him and those who loathe him.

The violent clashes in April failed to dislodge the government, and they antagonized residents of Bangkok, whose daily lives were upset by the Red Shirts' blockades. As a result, the UDD is now in retreat, and Abhisit has strengthened his position. The Red Shirts have been regrouping since the debacle and have vowed to continue their struggle. More violence may come. The assassination attempt in April against the PAD's founder, Sondhi, came as a grim reminder of how violent Thai politics has become.

The UDD is still demanding that parliament be dissolved and fresh elections be held. But it remains to be seen if the Puea Thai (For Thais) Party, the successor to the dissolved PPP, will fare as well in an election as Thaksin's supporters believe. The party lacks a coherent leadership and, like the UDD, is disorganized and undisciplined. It is also insular and paranoid: close relatives of Thaksin -- trusted but inexperienced -- have been appointed to important positions in the party, making it seem like a family-run company.

The crisis is far from over, and it is an open question how long Abhisit's government will last. Abhisit may be one of Thailand's brightest and best-educated politicians, but his coalition

remains fragile. The price he and the Democrats had to pay for being able to put together a government was the inclusion of dubious characters, some previously allied with Thaksin, others PAD partisans. For example, Abhisit's choice of foreign minister, Kasit Piromya, was a regular speaker at PAD rallies and once described the group's occupation of Bangkok's international airports as "a lot of fun."

The relationship between the Democrats and the less-than-democratic PAD is one of the most controversial aspects of the new coalition. Abhisit, who has repeatedly said that the law applies to everyone, touts transparency and good governance. But it is unclear whether his administration can afford to go after the PAD, which blatantly disregarded the law and severely tarnished Thailand's international reputation when it occupied the airports.

Thailand can ill afford more turmoil as it begins to feel the effects of the global economic meltdown. For the first time in years, its exports are down and unemployment is rising. In the once-lucrative automotive industry, thousands of jobs are at risk: Toyota Motor Thailand, the country's largest automaker, has already announced that it will cut production to cope with falling demand. Because of the recent turmoil, fewer tourists are visiting the country and fewer foreigners are investing in it. Just a few days after order had been restored in April, Thailand's finance minister forecast that the Thai economy would contract by five percent as a result of the violence. Layoffs could lead to social unrest, and the pro-Thaksin opposition would no doubt accuse the government of ineptitude and incompetence -- a charge that could work to the Puea Thai's advantage whenever new elections are held.

In an effort to avert another crisis, outside interlocutors are working behind the scenes to reconcile the opposing sides. Forming a government of national unity has been suggested, but the divide is so deep and antagonistic feelings so strong that it will not be easy to heal the country after three years of turmoil. Although the last thing Thailand needs is more street politics, they seem likely to return: the UDD's Red Shirts have vowed to continue their campaign to oust Abhisit's government.

If Thailand is to become truly stable, its democratic institutions will have to be strengthened through more grass-roots participation in the decision-making process at all levels. More attention will also have to be paid to the grievances of people in the north and the northeast; otherwise, populists like Thaksin will be able to ride a wave of social discontent, and Thailand will remain a political tinderbox. Never before has the country's future seemed as uncertain as it does today. If the confrontation continues and the economic crisis starts to bite in earnest, Thailand, a country seen as a pillar of economic and political stability in Southeast Asia just a few years ago, could become a textbook example of a democracy's collapse.

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