

## The Wheel of Life turned at Ratchaprasong

**Many sense something important is changing in Thailand. Actually it's just repeating. If we understand what's the same this time, and what differs, we can see more clearly the meaning of the present events**

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The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) presents itself as combating present power holders, to advance the interests of those neglected at the bottom and particularly in the countryside. They identify their enemy as the military-bureaucratic-aristocratic-royalist nexus dominating state policy. They assert that deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was genuinely helping those kept under foot by this power elite, and that he was removed for that reason alone.



FUGITIVE: A protester holds a poster of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra.

It is certainly true that Thaksin innovated many policies with an unprecedented focus on those lower in the social and economic scale and outside the capital city. As a clever businessman and aspiring politician, he clearly saw the market opening left by self-satisfied rulers in the capital. He built a powerful support base among those denied both symbolic and material rewards.

Some novelties had genuine merit and long-term viability; others were financially unviable yet a hit with the public.

Another innovation undid him - a personal inability to follow the Middle Way of compromise and accommodation, seen in his insistence on dominating every sector of the economy and state on behalf of his family and friends - banking, communications, the press, foreign affairs, the courts, the police. At the end he was moving on the military and the last bastion of resistance, the palace. His departure exemplified the novelty of his approach to controlling the state.

Predecessors have in a typically Thai way risen, taken their share, and (mostly) left the table with a smile to enjoy their winnings in Thailand or abroad. Thaksin declined to share, was rejected and declined quietly to accept his rejection. Since he lacks materially for nothing for this and a hundred future lifetimes, one must assign his behaviour to a quirky personality or failed socialisation into Thai politesse.

Is there any evidence as to the real purpose of the deposed PM? His first fortune came from a sweetheart deal selling radios to the police, his former employer. The use of monopoly also led to his next fortune - violating an international agreement banning the unrestricted locking of GSM SIM cards and handsets. The next step was securing near monopolies in the various spheres of political and economic power, for the same purpose - to magnify his family's fortune.

To become in a few years one of the richest families in the Kingdom entailed heavy doses of corruption and abuse of power. To control the political and legal systems and so prevent crackdowns on this corruption, a political base was necessary. Thaksin's populist policies were simply an expedient to gain this

political base. Amounts spent for such programmes were trivial compared with the loot in hand, and it was not the looters' money that funded such programmes.

And were the neglected (the red shirt followers we still see in the streets) upset to be thus used? Not at all, if you ask them. They reply that of course Thaksin was corrupt; that is the goal of political power. But at least he gave them something. It was, and is, a marriage of convenience.



CLEAN-UP: A soldier dismantles a tent after the crackdown on the red shirts' camp.

### THE CYCLE REPEATS



RED RALLY: Red shirt protesters gathered at Ratchaprasong.

So was the Ratchaprasong rally, as billed, actually an assault by the deprived on their oppressors?

No. It was an assault by an aspiring fragment of the elite denied power by the traditionally dominant. Country folk are only tools, and it's not the first time. We can learn a lot by looking back to the People's Party of 1932, a group of upwardly mobile Thais (many sent abroad on government grants) who felt their prospects didn't match their credentials, and who resented the self-seeking of the aristocratic-royalist nexus of the day at the expense of the public at large. Redistributive policies - prefiguring Thaksin's - were put in place, with harsh words for the royalists - prefiguring today's red shirts.

This aspiring elite fragment brought constitutional rule; it also brought the nation's first experience of class warfare. Some died in the ensuing Boworadet Rebellion, a lot of assets of the ruling class were confiscated, and the king went into exile.

Eventually (to shorten a very long story) a self-interested military faction among the People's Party gained the upper hand over the public-interested civilian faction, made its own deal with remnants of the ancient regime, and gave us the military-bureaucratic-aristocratic-royalist nexus ruling today.

The underclass for whom the People's Party seized power were lost to sight. The rulers genially ruled, and rule, over a highly corrupt polity that poorly serves its public. They survive their neglect of the public due to the nation's wealth and to the charming deference of the Thai people.

Why are the red shirts' shirts red? The colour proclaims a return to class warfare as a political stratagem, as does their constant invocation of the deprecated term *phrai* for commoners.



Let us look ahead by considering the People's Party's past. Their leaders had a normal mix of personal and ideal motives, but eventually idealism lost and concern for the public was abandoned. This despite leader Pridi Banomyong's commitment to ideal values, to the rule of law and to his country (shown by the risk he took supporting the Free Thai while regent, under the noses of the Japanese).



PUBLIC ADDRESS: UDD leaders deliver a speech on stage during their protest.

The red shirts lack a leader of such moral stature as Pridi, and are bankrolled by an angry fugitive, lacking in



mindfulness and focussed solely on recovering his fortune, power, reputation and personal liberty. If Pridi failed, it is hard to believe that the red shirts will not abandon the neglected as soon as they take their place in the circle of power.

In 1932, interior minister Prince Paribatra Sukhumbhand dithered on the evening of June 23 in ordering the arrest of People's Party leaders, whose plan he had discovered. And so the next day their coup d'etat succeeded, changing the course of Thai history. Did the events at Ratchaprasong display a comparable dithering? The present leaders announced political plans and deadlines, then withdrew them, announced crackdown measures and did not implement them, then announced a clearing operation without effective follow-through. Defiant crowds milled about blocking the centre of the nation's capital for weeks before forceful measures were taken to end the protest.

In fact, merciful methods exist for dealing promptly with such situations. They end when a force arrives in darkness, tears

aside the barricades at both ends (one announced for free exit) and enters with a solid rank in close-order formation covered by water cannon and tear gas. Noise and light shock and demoralise those who have surrounded themselves in an enclosed space. The matter (at least in the city centre) is over by daybreak as the leaders are captured.

The action moves elsewhere - the courts, parliament, the countryside. No live ammunition is provided to the troops; else a bloody and needless tragedy ensues, as has now happened.

The Kingdom's decrepit legal system is now at least beginning to twitch under the King's relentless encouragement. Should the red shirts take power in one way or another, prospects for the rule of law in the Kingdom (never very bright) will be poor indeed due to the methods they have chosen to use, the demands of their paymaster and of course the precedent set in 2008 by the yellow shirts. The red shirts embody a seriously aggrieved force in Thai society and they are not going away. Should the present leaders retain power with their present vision, one could at best hope for the continuation of the present stagnation. Many are mystified why none among them sees the fantastic opportunity identified by their deposed predecessor.

Everyone at the top, or aspiring to be there, understands that to rule Thailand is to live in impunity and grow rich fast. Billions are at stake, a number worth killing for to get or to keep. Only the intelligent exercise of power will settle this conflict.

Who now has that vision, on either side? If no one, we are in for a long struggle.

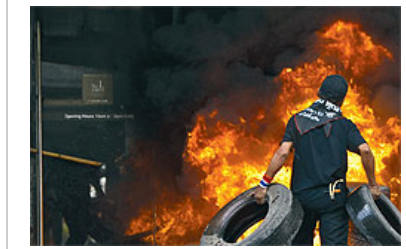
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### About the author



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ADDING FUEL: A red shirt protester piles tyres on a fire.