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WE GET IT.



History shows way out of Thai conflict

The demonstrations overtaking Bangkok prior to elections set for February 2 attract easy belief that this is a clash between impoverished rural Thais and urban middle classes. Corruption claims abound from both sides. But the deeper cause of tension is former premier Thaksin Shinawatra's blatant violation of Thai social norms. He wants the whole pie to himself. - **Jeffrey Race** (Jan 13, '14)



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History shows way out of Thai conflict

By Jeffrey Race

Deposed former prime minister police lieutenant colonel Thaksin Shinawatra brought something new to Thailand. It is what is preventing a peaceful settlement of the conflict now raging in Bangkok's streets, and it is not his political opening to the rural underclass as the press and public commentary superficially explain.

News coverage and editorial comment in the world press are both devoting increasing attention to the current conflict, now headed for a February 2 election which the main opposition party will boycott.

Local Bangkok press and public personalities are vigorously critical of much international coverage as ignorant and distorted by the obsessions and political histories of completely different cultures. Unsolicited comments by foreign officials have further inflamed local sentiment. Foreign coverage typically casts the conflict as a struggle for advantage between social classes. While that aspect exists, such superficiality misses other planes of the conflict, obscuring how it might end in a way consistent with Thai culture and history.

The current conflict has brought hundreds of thousands into Bangkok's streets periodically since 2006, and its material element is easily understood in terms common to other nations. Two great coalitions are struggling to control the Thai state, a cornucopia of tangible benefits. Within just a few years as prime minister before his 2006 fall from power, Thaksin rose from mere wealth to become one of the richest men in Asia.

In a pattern common to Thai politics, one coalition is thus centered on a party, originally Thai Rak Thai before its judicial dissolution in 2007 for electoral misconduct, then the People's Power Party, and now Puea Thai, or "For the Thai", as the vehicle to advance the interests of the Shinawatra clan and associates.

Previous examples from the '60s and '70s were the United Thai People's Party as a vehicle for continued domination by the ruling Kittikachorn and Charusathien families and the Chat Thai Party serving the Choonhavan and Adireksarn families. Puea Thai and its previous incarnations have attracted many financially and politically influential supporters who have calculated that this tie-up will pay more than the alternatives.

This party now dominates the state, more strongly in the civilian ministries, less in the military and quasi-independent agencies. While ornamented with such emotive terms as "democracy", "justice" and "the public welfare", its leaders have no goal other than personal benefit. But this is the norm of politics in every country, though definitions vary from place to place as to what is legitimate and what not.

Thaksin's variously named parties are the only recent political force to push policies bringing substantial and genuine uplift to rural areas. At the same time, many of their policies were and are specious, unsupportable in the long run, and fountains of self-serving corruption.

His party vehicles excite the imagination and galvanize public involvement in political demonstrations of those lower in the social scale often from economically stressed regions. These are the so-called "Red Shirts", who began their 2010 demonstrations in the normally polite Thai mode but ended up torching the World Trade Center and other buildings in the middle of Bangkok and as victims of state violence.

On the other side are the crowds - hundreds of thousands of people - now occupying central Bangkok, whom the Thais genially call the "mob" although they usually are well behaved, maintain public traffic flows and clean up after themselves. Over the years they have been raised up and inspired by figures generally arising from the business community and in some cases with previous ties to political parties opposing Thaksin's family vehicle.

High-level financing is clear to the naked eye, including professionally produced diversionary traffic signs ("Turn right - public assembly ahead"), meals distributed without charge, sophisticated transport systems for protestors, communications equipment, a satellite TV channel, 72-inch LCD monitors placed throughout the assembly areas so the large numbers far from the central stage (which moves throughout the city in well-planned operations) can follow the stage speakers.

The financiers are generally those squeezed out by the Shinawatra plan to dominate the local economy through a series of monopolies and concessions, or what informed commentators and Thai academics call "policy

corruption". Only occasionally are figures from these financier families seen at the public demonstrations.

The bulk of the "mob" consists of people from all walks of life, mainly from Bangkok, surrounding areas and southern provinces. On a personal inspection on November 30, this writer witnessed streaming toward the old palace area on Rajdamnoen Road young and old people, the well dressed and the simply dressed, people walking, riding bikes and scooters or driving in expensive SUVs, mostly Thai Buddhists, but many from their attire clearly Muslims. They were universally in a jolly mood.

A salient aspect of this "mob" is its high-status leaders, the ones who provide the legitimacy and cover for the lower-status members to occupy public spaces which (in view of the very strong Thai custom of deference) they would never otherwise imagine doing. They are not motivated by material interests but, like volunteers participating in local politics everywhere, by a craving for excitement, fun with friends and involvement in some uplifting public purpose.

Understanding the motives and the minimal position of these high-status legitimators is key to perceiving the future of this struggle.

Ruling patterns

Anyone arriving in Thailand realizes a few minutes after exiting the main airport for Bangkok - or perhaps even before - that Thais differ culturally from every other people in ways that are important for economics, politics and, above all, personal relations. Every aspect of life is influenced by Theravada Buddhist concepts of the Noble Eightfold Path and the Middle Way.

At the apex of society sits the king, who in a classical Indic pattern but of intense relevance today must reign (formerly rule) according to the Ten Kingly Virtues. His ministers may be imperfect but he sets the moral tone of the community which ensures the survival of the state. Without understanding these matters one will not get far in understanding Thai politics or the possibilities for the present situation.

Control of the modern Thai state has been through a gentlemanly alternation of elites, the composition of which has gradually changed since the end of absolute royal rule in the early 1930s. In keeping with the Middle Way, political figures have been moderately corrupt but with sensitivity to the transience of life (again a Buddhist notion) and thus the need eventually to move on with what one has accumulated (or even to give it up - which has happened historically).

No one until recently attempted to dominate either the state or the economy. Sometimes the politically powerful required a nudge (public demonstrations, tanks in the streets, a whisper from the king), but Thai politics continued its circulation of elites so everyone had a chance for a piece of the pie.

The Thai state generates and controls extraordinary wealth, and there has traditionally been plenty for everyone. Next-to-no-one starves in Thailand, and while the powerful and well-to-do are pleased to find their pictures in the social pages, they do not flaunt their wealth to the extent practiced in some other Asian societies and elsewhere in the world.

A clever manipulator but lacking in judgment and common sense, Thaksin left police service while still young to pursue a variety of commercial ventures which fared poorly until he found a winning formula: a series of sweetheart deals with the government. First was the supply of Motorola radios to the police, and then distribution of Motorola mobile handsets to the Thai market, at a time (now forgotten) when Motorola was the industry leader and mobile phones were just beginning to come into common use.

But Thaksin again had a gimmick to enrich his family: locking the sale of cellular service (via the GSM SIM card) to the sale of the user's handset. This violated an international agreement at the time overseen by the GSM MoU Association but it succeeded in raising local handset prices to three times their international level, with the increment (on Motorola handsets) going to Thaksin's family and yet more captive customer money going to Advanced Information Service (AIS), his family's cellular firm at the time.

This monopoly arrangement from early in Thaksin's political career prefigures the manipulation and abuse of market processes which characterize Thaksin's and his affiliated political party's current approach to public policy. Nonetheless, Thaksin's energy and persuasive demeanor led to political roles of increasing importance in which he clearly distinguished himself as a "can-do" figure capable of energizing the then-sluggish state

bureaucracy.

In the '80s, this writer called upon the major general then heading the Police Immigration Bureau to enquire why his residence application had been rejected. He opened his drawer, took out a sheet of paper, and after a moment replied that I had not paid the customary bribe. I thanked him, left, and for another two decades flew in and out of the country every three months.

After Thaksin's push for bureaucratic streamlining and rejuvenation, what had been an agonizing, time-consuming and expensive process for foreigners became quick, easy, and certain. Thai citizens experienced the same dramatic improvement in daily dealings with officialdom.

Thaksin built around himself the Thai Rak Thai Party, a vehicle to enrich his family and associates in a very traditional Thai pattern. But against tradition, this coalition of interests began to squeeze all sectors of the economy and polity. The public wherewithal to do this came from a series of populist policies still paying electoral benefits today.

Some see Thaksin's unwillingness to compromise, unwillingness to move on and "winner takes all" obsessions in both politics and the economy as growing out of his unhappy treatment as a youth in a family of Chinese origin in Northern Thailand. Whatever the source, Thaksin's motivations and resulting actions led to his rejection by powerful elements of Thai society, uneasy with unprecedented corruption and with his tense relationship with the present monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

He was overthrown in a coup d'etat in 2006, following which investigations into misconduct in office led to his criminal conviction for abuse of power and seizure of part of his ill-gotten fortune. His party was deregistered due to extensively documented violations of the law. Thaksin fled abroad in 2008 to avoid imprisonment and from various refuges has financed and directed the reconstruction of policies and political vehicles to continue his rule over Thailand, most recently installing his younger sister, Yingluck, as his proxy prime minister after Puea Thai won mid-2011 elections.

Yingluck's government is working hard using perfected "policy corruption" techniques to maintain a torrent of funding to the Shinawatra family and friends. Tried and true populist policies keep the votes coming in. Many of his Red Shirt followers accept that of course Thaksin is corrupt; that's the whole point of being in office in Thailand. But at least he gives them something in return, not just hope but also substantial life improvements.

Dueling elites

Some view Thailand's entrenched conflict as no more than two business coalitions competing to plunder the nation. In fact, they operate by very different rule sets. These differences make the present situation intractable but they are seldom captured in press analysis.

The forces now in opposition to the Shinawatra family machine have been generally content over the years to go through democratic forms, to liberalize the economy, to maintain the openness of the press, public life and public debate, and slowly to improve the reliability of the judicial system. Culturally, they follow the Middle Way, including its corollary, taking only so much while leaving something for others, and when it's time to go, going gracefully. In practice, they are indifferent to the cause of rural uplift.

In addition to its opening to those lower in the social scale, the Shinawatra family machine has introduced a new rule set to Thailand, not the Middle Way but My Way, in which they have shown they do not know when enough is enough, something most Thais sense is important and have no difficulty accepting.

During the 2001-2006 period of solid electoral power, the Thai Rak Thai machine began a program of dominating every sector of the economy and state on behalf of Thaksin's family and friends: banking, communications, media, foreign affairs, the courts, the police. At the end they were moving on the military and the last bastion of resistance, the royal palace. While they did not reach the depths of present-day Argentina, the direction was clear.

No "people's council" or agreement on "democratic procedures" is going to end or even mitigate the present turbulence in Bangkok. The legitimators of today's protests, indeed of the opposition to Thaksin since the start of the civil unrest leading to his overthrow, have lived with rebalancing of economic interests between classes in the kingdom and could again. They could accept greater and different kinds of political representation for less influential groups. They can do deals with Red Shirt leaders, as they have in the past.

During the 2010 riots when the Red Shirts were burning buildings in the national capital, this writer was concerned that the Royal Bangkok Sports Club where he runs most days would also be torched. It is the premier symbol of the ruling class - 400 acres of greensward in central Bangkok granted by the king a century ago, at any moment occupied by at most two dozen high-status golfers. At that moment in 2010, it was separated only by a simple fence from the violent Red Shirts rallying in front of the adjacent National Police headquarters. But a member of the RBSC General Committee reassured me: "We've made a deal; they won't come in." And they did not.

The legitimators of the current protest movement have one minimum obsession. For them, the idea that a fugitive criminal, and indeed a perceived enemy of the king, should by remote control run Thailand for himself and his family is not just unacceptable but inconceivable. To put it in a foreign context, Thaksin's approach to rule, so alien to Thai cultural values, arouses the same level and type of animosity in the minds of his opponents as does an abortion clinic in the minds of pro-lifers in the United States. It has little to do with economic interests or the division of political power. Ideas of "sharing power" or "a clear reform plan" or "democratic processes" are irrelevant to the core of the present conflict.

But for Thaksin it is arguably all about money and control. His corruption conviction in 2008 was actually quite even-handed: the court seized the equivalent of a US\$1.5 billion of his funds as ill-gotten gains (the legal basis for the judgment is factually unassailable) but left him almost another billion as not clearly the result of abuse of power. It was a typically Thai-style invitation to move abroad, where he maintains substantial financial assets.

Therein lies the rub of today's struggle in Bangkok. Stable politics assumes some fit between public political behavior and strongly held cultural expectations. Thaksin's behavior does not conform. One can see anger on his face in his TV appearances - a no-no in Thai culture; he wants power back personally; he wants his billion dollars back; and he does not want to go to prison, even though the court ruled he earned much of his money from abuse of power.

Thaksin argues that the legal cases against him were politically motivated, certainly correct in the sense that he had squeezed so many people and institutions (the press, banks, military and royal palace) that he had lots of political enemies. And it is certainly true that judicial proceedings against him resulted directly from the 2006 coup d'etat ending his prime ministership.

But that hardly delegitimizes the prosecutions: while in power, Thaksin and his family were above the law, and the convictions themselves were immaculate. This writer has reviewed the full Thai texts of the judgments against him and his Thai Rak Thai party and they are not just beyond reasonable doubt but beyond any conceivable doubt.

It is Thaksin's refusal to follow the cultural pattern of sharing and moving on - which accounts for the relatively gentle nature of power transfers in Thailand over many decades - that makes him intolerable to those in the streets today. For them, Thaksin is a "foreign" object, to be rejected, and if that requires a temporary breach with democratic formalisms, that is a regrettable necessity to preserve the special agreeableness of Thai community life and the relative lack of viciousness of Thai politics which so distinguish the country.

The legitimators hope to preserve the Thailand they know from Thaksin's import of alien values. And for them this matter is supremely urgent, because coming changes at the apex of Thai society may make their goal impossible. Thus a condition for ending the present turmoil is that Thaksin agree to remain permanently in exile, that his family agree to abjure power, and that his coalition abandons its innovative "winner takes all" political rule set.

But that's only one of two conditions to enable Thailand to resume a safe and healthy path to national development. Watch for this first key development, however unlikely though it might seem at present.

Unbroken precedent

Serious conflicts over ideology, power and money have regularly occurred in Thailand over much of the past century. But because of its Buddhist norms, Thailand has never experienced the horrendous violence of its neighbors or of many other countries in the world faced with similar conflicts. Instead of fights to the death in the streets of Bangkok, those whose moment has begun to pass have often left the country - starting in 1935 when King Prajadhipok abdicated and moved to the United Kingdom to die in exile.

In turn, Pridi Phanomyong, the famous leader of the political movement that forced Prajadhipok's exile, thrice exiled himself, in 1934, 1947, and definitively in 1949. He later died in Paris in 1983. Pridi's nemesis, Police General Phao Sriyanond, lost out in a power struggle in 1957 and moved with his fortune to Geneva, finally dying there without seeing his homeland again.

In 1973, Field Marshals Thanom Kitthachorn and Prapat Charusathien boarded planes to temporary exile in Taiwan and the United States, eventually returning to quiet lives in Bangkok. In 1976, respected economist Dr Puey Ungphakorn, on the wrong side of political currents of the day, moved to exile in London.

Thaksin's opponents also have some very practical reasons to wish him away, starting with his poor judgment. For example, any person in Thailand of normal judgment knows one thing before all else: one cannot advance in the kingdom acting, or even thinking, against the king. But Thaksin is widely perceived as flouting this iron rule, with inevitable bad consequences for himself and for the country. The same poor judgment was apparent in many economic policy choices.

A second element is Thaksin's aversion to the substance of democracy, despite his party's appeals to this ideal in its conflicts with those now in the streets. Ironically, Thaksin himself was the beneficiary of the gradual strengthening of democratic institutions in the decades since the first flowering in the mid-1970s, being the first elected prime minister to complete his full term of office.

But Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party, even as such a beneficiary, was dismantling democracy's supporting elements as fast as it could through threats and strong-arming of the press, use of bank credit for commercial blackmail, prejudicial use of the police, and intimidation and bribery of the courts. For the Shinawatra family, ruling the state is a business, similar to running a telecom firm. Elections, blackmail and bribes are all tactics their affiliated political parties use to keep the money coming in. The opening to the lower classes is just another tactic that will be abandoned as soon as it is safe, and plenty of Red Shirt leaders are worried about just this.

Understanding the possibilities for the future may be clearer with this explanation of the real motives of the participants. Most Thais are exquisitely sensitive to the feelings of others and respond appropriately. But they have a charming expression for what must be done to social deviants: aw may tii hua or, "you have to hit them on the head with a two-by-four". That's what the people in the streets of Bangkok are now trying to do.

The immediate turmoil in the streets will stop when Thaksin and his family figure out that they can make no lesser sacrifice than did their predecessors, everyone from royalty on down. But even with this sacrifice, the social stresses that the Shinawatra family so cynically exploit will continue until some as yet unidentified fragment of the elite develops a competing - but honest, practical and durable - program for rural uplift.

This actually happened during a preceding period of great domestic conflict in Thailand, in 1973 with the collapse of the amiable but out-of-touch military dictatorship. A group of bankers and aristocrats joined to found the Social Action Party, which went on to implement a series of policy innovations, dramatically changing the rural-urban terms of trade through alterations in rice taxation policy and import duties on agricultural inputs.

Today, other issues such as the failing rural education system and the geographic locus of state investment cry out for attention. The remarkable puzzle today is why no group of political entrepreneurs has emerged to compete against Thaksin in this great empty space in the Thai political marketplace.

That is (as it was in the 1970s) the second condition for genuine stability. If and when that happens, outsiders might begin to feel confident again about the future of Thailand.

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