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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## Whither Civil Society in Thailand?

Antonio L Rappa

27 August 2008

*Civil activism is looming over the Samak government. Although the Royal Thai army has remained in the barracks since the 2007 elections, they may become restive again. What is the position of civil society vis-à-vis Thai civil-military relations today? What does the future hold for the Samak administration?*

AS ORDINARY Thais make merit by giving alms to monks during the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations of the beloved Queen Sikrit, Thaksin Shinawatra and wife simultaneously announced their indefinite exile in London, citing security threats and judicial double-standards. The two-term former PM had tremendous grassroots support especially from the poverty-stricken Northeastern areas.

Despite his popularity, Thaksin was forced out of office in a bloodless coup in 2006 by Thai generals he had appointed to high command. The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) is ostensibly one of the most vociferous civil-society associations with a correspondingly loud political ambition: to topple governments linked to Thaksin. The PAD wants to oust any government that has traces of the Thaksin past. This is because the Thaksin administration had marginalized the PAD's founding leaders by denying them licences and stonewalling their business efforts. Thaksin once retorted that the PAD leaders themselves had brought this on themselves by supporting those opposed to the government.

### Reasons for Complexity

In the Thai democratic transition, civil society groups articulate the interests that reflect the pluralistic nature of the country. And it is clear that Thailand is heading that way. Civil society in Thailand is perhaps best understood as an umbrella of unlikely socio-political bedfellows including human rights activists, religious groups, right-wing activists, left wing activists, moderates and conservatives, royalists, anti-royalists, intellectuals and scholars from research centres, universities and think-tanks, students' unions, trade unions, and cultural organizations.

Civil-military relations in Thailand have been tenuous for decades ever since the 1932 coup. That putsch attempted to devolve political power to Parliament but had the unintended effect of galvanizing the power of the Thai military forces especially the army units concentrated in Bangkok. Various

civilian action groups gradually emerged over the decades ranging from foreign-supported human rights groups, domestic religious associations, newspaper and media, education, commerce, and social watch-dogs. Since the successful 2006 bloodless coup against Thaksin, there has been a new Constitution, new military leaders, a general election, and a fledgling majority coalition government.

The passing of Princess Galyani Vattana, the King's sister, dampened the growing tension between the Council for National Security (CNS) led by former army strongman Sonthi Boonyaratglin and their opposite numbers represented by various civil society associations and political action groups in the run-up to last year's election. However during the long mourning period there was a significant toning down of civil society activism in the capital. Nevertheless, tensions continue to exist across the spectrum of civil society groups and within Government and Opposition as well.

### **Samak government under threat**

As of the middle of August 2008, Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej has held office for 200 days. This is a remarkable political feat given the range of problems that his government has faced. Pressure from the opposition and from civil society activism have left cabinet ministers under scrutiny for corruption; other cabinet ministers have resigned or come under investigation for electoral fraud amidst almost daily allegations of vote-buying and demands for Samak's resignation.

Indeed, if these allegations can ever be proven, the ruling PPP will be dissolved, Parliament prorogued, and convicted party members banned from holding political office for five years. The five-member Election Commission for example made a unanimous decision recently for a judicial review of the qualifications of the current prime minister because of his involvement in two cooking shows.

The same commission ruled out such a review for Samak's Deputy Commerce Minister Wiroon Techapaiboon. Samak's PPP parliamentarians have also gone on the offensive. They raised charges of political fraud on 23 members of the Opposition.

The military has remained relatively disciplined during this period but not without acrimony. For example, the chief of the advisory council to the Royal Thai Armed Forces, General Pathomphong Kesornsuk, is under internal investigation after making an anti-Samak speech at the PAD protest site while wearing military uniform thereby violating Article 74 of the Constitution.

Article 74 requires the impartiality of all government officials and hence they cannot take sides during civilian peace protests or acts of civil disobedience. If the PAD and other groups continued their protests, sit-ins and demonstrations, it would only be a matter of time before the military commanders entered the political arena again.

### **Safety valve**

However, the recent political backlash and groundswell surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple controversy ironically became a "safety valve" for military restiveness. It allowed the mobilization of the military which resulted in a brief diplomatic stand-off before cooling down with negotiations held by the Thai-Cambodian Boundaries Commission.

In the ideal state, the military is subordinated under democratically elected governments. The military never intervenes. Thailand is an exception because of the historical impact that the army has had on the public sphere. So where does Thai civil society lie in the complex nexus between authoritarian military command structures on one hand, and democratic civilian mechanisms of government on the other? Civil society associations in Thailand occupy the space in between the market and the state.

In Thailand, the executive arm is dominated by the military. This is part of the reason why Thailand is

home to some of the most aggressive contemporary civil society groups in Southeast Asia today. Thai civil society groups are embedded within Thai Civil-Military relations. These groups have long understood that a high level of aggression is required for any such movement to survive.

However, civil society associations, important as they are in the democratic transition will not determine whether or not the Samak administration remains in power. The fragile and precarious nature of the Samak administration as well as his fate depends on several factors: (1) the management of the military after the annual rotation of military field commanders is over; (2) the determination of the Electoral Commission as a neutral arbiter of politics; (3) the acrimonious onslaught of successive waves of anti-government protests; and, Samak's recent ultimatum to the PAD.

So while business trends continue their roller-coaster ride alongside civilian demonstrations, the political future of the current government remains uncertain and bleak.

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