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Bill Durodié

The battle for Thailand's soul

Far from being a 'stage army', the Red Shirts could potentially refresh and reinvent democracy in Thailand.

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For over a year now, the political scene in Thailand has been in tumult. At the end of 2008, protesters wearing yellow shirts got international media coverage by forcing the closure of the capital city's two airports. Now, protesters wearing red shirts occupy parts of Bangkok, demanding the resignation of the prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, and fresh elections.

On the evening of Saturday 3 April, the uneasy stand-off between government forces and protesters, which has lasted for a month, spilled over into violence. At the time of writing, more than 20 people, including a Japanese Reuters reporter and four Thai soldiers, have died. Many hundreds more have been injured.



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So, who are the Yellow Shirts and who are the Red Shirts, what do they represent, and what significance do they have for politics in Thailand and beyond? To understand what is going on today, it is necessary first to cast a glance back at Thailand's modern history.

Thailand is often described as the only state in South East Asia not to have been colonised by the European powers. Siam, as the country was once called, achieved this dubious distinction through shedding territory to its south and west (Malaya and Burma) to the British and to its north and east (Laos and Cambodia) to the French. Siam thereby maintained a feudal monarchy that the imperial powers felt comfortable doing business with.

A 1932 military coup, supported by civilian democrats, led to the dissolution of absolute monarchical powers, followed by an abdication in 1938. But the new, uneasy alliance also broke apart, with liberals and radicals being ousted. Indeed, the country was first renamed Thailand in 1939 as a nationalist gesture to exclude those of Chinese origin.

A brief deal with the Japanese during the Second World War returned lands lost to the British and the French. But after the



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war, the US ensured that the status quo ante prevailed, and used the Kingdom as a platform for launching regional anti-communist operations. This proved a recipe for constant coups and turmoil, which continued, both internally and with aggrieved neighbours, subsequent to the expulsion of US forces in the mid-1970s and until the end of the Cold War in 1989. The end of the Cold War heralded a more concerted transition to democracy.

The current king, Bhumibol Adulyadej, or Rama IX, having come to power in 1946 after the mysterious death of his brother, is now the world's longest serving head of state. He is widely revered by the Thai people, but his age and failing health have raised issues regarding any succession to his less popular son, Vajiralongkorn.

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It is within this context that Thaksin Shinawatra, a former police deputy superintendent, entered into politics in 1994. Typically, for a not-too-well-paid public servant, he started a string of failed businesses on the side before resigning his police commission in 1987. But he hit the big time in 1990, obtaining a 20-year license to deliver Thailand's first mobile phone services. His business interests gradually grew and were spun out to various members of his family and trusted friends. Thaksin won the first of his landslide election victories in 2001, when he became prime minister of Thailand. He completed a notable full-term in office and was re-elected in 2005 on the back of the highest voter turnout in Thai history.

Thaksin is an unashamedly populist politician. He is like a cross between Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Italy's Silvio Berlusconi. By combining rural poverty alleviation programmes in the north of the country, where he hails from, with the first universal healthcare scheme – now so successful that medical tourism is one of Thailand's boom sectors – his success was assured.

Thaksin is also undoubtedly a man of contradictions, promoting micro-credit schemes popular with Western liberals on the one hand, while determinedly, and some might say ruthlessly, quashing Muslim separatists in the south of the country. His draconian campaign to eradicate drugs also met with accusations of human rights abuses by various groups, leading Thaksin to denounce the United Nations, whose envoy he had invited in to assess the situation.

In 2006, while Thaksin was in New York – ironically, to speak at a UN summit – things came to a head. A fresh military coup, supported by old and new elites within the monarchy and the media – who Thaksin had continuously thwarted through reporting restrictions and through setting up various communications empires – swept Bangkok. But upon the restoration of free elections in 2008, the people had the temerity to elect the People's Power Party, which Thaksin supported from his exile. This was a step too far for the urban elitists, and so protesters wearing yellow, in symbolic allegiance to the king, seized the airports and brought the country to a standstill.

Despite this superficially radical move, it is important to understand that those involved were entirely reactionary in their outlook. Comprised largely of urban intellectuals, and

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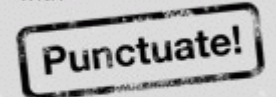
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pretty much allowed to take over by the military, their view was that democracy was not for the uneducated masses from the north.

The various protests have been widely viewed merely as disruptive, as damaging Thailand's reputation and economy. Some Thais who avow themselves as neutral to the conflicts wear pink shirts. But in fact, the protests represent a fundamental struggle that reflects, and will shape, views about popular participation in Thailand and elsewhere.

Having brought the country to a halt, the Yellow Shirts, backed by little more than a political pressure group with influential and wealthy backers – the People's Alliance for Democracy – managed to get the pro-Thaksin government disbanded through the legal establishment. It was this silent, judicial coup that led to the current mass demonstrations by Red Shirt supporters of Thaksin.

Thaksin has been repeatedly accused of corruption and censorship. On their part, the Eton- and Oxford-educated current prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, and his hastily reconstituted Democrat Party, which includes some of his British-educated chums, are themselves not wholly innocent in this regard. But, far from being a battle between rural populists and urban intellectuals, the conflict has, over the past month, become about much more than that.

Accusations fly that the Red Shirt protesters in Bangkok have been bribed and corralled to act as a stage army. That may be true – the path to democracy is never clear or clean – but the fact is that they are a *de facto* people's army. They have sustained over 100,000 people on the streets of Bangkok for a month, held rallies, met with the prime minister and successfully regained control of a media outlet that government forces had occupied and closed down, if only to lose control of it again.

With so many Thais taking matters into their own hands for the first time, and consciously avoiding violence, there is now an opportunity for the political agenda to move beyond Thaksin. The protesters are learning that while they were galvanised into action for the sake of the exiled Thaksin (the Thai judiciary has recently moved to seize his assets), he himself may no longer be central, or even necessary, to realising their ambitions. At the same time, some of the urban elites may lose faith in the current prime minister's ability to keep control of the situation, leading to more draconian responses which, in turn, may fuel further violence.

What we are witnessing in Bangkok is a transformative moment. How it will end is anyone's guess. The Red Shirts may be placated by recent official apologies. They may, after their prolonged occupations of certain key streets and government buildings, return to their northern constituencies to observe the Thai New Year this week. Such demobilisation could be dispiriting and fatal.

On the other hand, in democracy, there is strength in numbers, and the Red Shirts may grasp a sense of their own power and steer a very different course. If the protesters prevail, they could offer important lessons in the messy business of politics elsewhere.

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