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The Destruction of Thai Democracy

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RED, YELLOW AND BLACK: The Destruction of Thai Democracy¹

By Peter Warr²

On the afternoon of Wednesday May 19, following weeks of protests and mayhem, most of the core Red Shirt leaders surrendered meekly to the Thai government forces. One leader who evaded capture was the volatile Arisman Pongruangrong. Just before vanishing later that afternoon, Arisman was wearing a T-shirt bearing the image of Mahatma Gandhi. The symbolism was deeply ironic. Almost a century before, Gandhi had expounded a political principle that the Red Shirt leadership, including Arisman, had still not absorbed. To dislodge an entrenched government like Thailand's, a popular uprising had to do two things: attract public support in very large numbers and be non-violent. The Red Shirts failed on both counts.

Why the Red Shirts Failed

The Red Shirts were protesting grievances related to the 2006 overthrow of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government and what they said was political and economic injustice stemming from income disparities between the rich and the poor. Their central demand was that the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva dissolve parliament and call immediate new elections. In questioning the electoral mandate of the Abhisit government they had a point. In drawing attention to the government's lack of a constructive response to the social and economic grievances of the Red Shirt movement, they had another point. But they were never going to remove Abhisit through direct physical confrontation alone. They were neither sufficiently numerous nor sufficiently well-armed for that.

Weeks before, Red Shirt leaders had promised one million protesters on the streets of Bangkok. Their numbers never approached that total and dwindled as the conflict continued, with escalating violence. For their protest to achieve its stated aims, they had to persuade police and/or army personnel to disobey if and when the government ordered a crackdown. If that happened in sufficient numbers, the government would be defeated. But for that to occur, the Red Shirts had first to attract large numbers of previously uninvolved Thai people to join them. Their failure to do either was due largely to their lack of commitment to non-violence.

As the conflict continued it brought growing inconvenience and disruption to the lives of ordinary Bangkok residents. Public transport and the delivery of public services were disrupted, especially harming the livelihoods of the working poor – the Red Shirts' main potential allies. I was present in Bangkok during most of the three weeks leading up to and including the night of May 19. Over those weeks, the opinions of Bangkok residents noticeably hardened against the demonstrators. This included, for example, roadside food vendors who early in the conflict had applauded red-shirt motorcades through parts of the city where their barricaded encampments had not yet become established. The enthusiasm did not last.

The Red Shirt leadership displayed a lack of interest in the hardships caused by their disruption of the city's economic life. This cost them public support and placed them in a similar self-serving category to the pro-establishment Yellow Shirt demonstrations of late 2008. Those

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demonstrations had included the blockading of Bangkok's airports, also causing massive disruption to the city. The worst feature of the Yellow Shirt demonstrations was that they seemingly worked. As many saw it, with the help of the courts the Yellow Shirts successfully unseated a government they disliked. More of the same behavior from their political opponents was then inevitable. The Red Shirt version of a similar strategy was no less disruptive, no less arrogant. But it was significantly more violent.

Who are the Red Shirts?

There were several different elements among the Red Shirts, with correspondingly different agendas. Most felt a sense of injustice, both political and economic. But they differed among themselves on how their protest should proceed. First, there were large numbers of genuinely non-violent and unarmed rural people, and this group was numerically the largest. They included many elderly people, women and children, the latter innocently dragged into the conflict. A significant number of these people were among the 89 who would die in the fighting. They were the true victims. Second, there were large numbers of youthful hot-heads, men in their 20s and 30s armed with home-made weapons – sling-shots, petrol bombs and rocks.

Finally, there were mysterious, black-clad, well-armed and well-trained men, possibly former or serving military or police personnel, who were not necessarily protesting anything.³ There may have been different groups among these black shirts, but they seemingly included professional killers, there to implement the agendas of other, as yet unknown, employers. That included killing soldiers and police. One of their goals was apparently to incite wider violence with the hope that this would destabilize and discredit the government. Nevertheless, despite abundant rumors, we still know little for sure about who they were and who hired them.

The failure of the Red Shirt leadership was that – contrary to Gandhi's admonition – they tolerated the co-existence of all three groups within their midst. The presence of the violent black shirts, especially, meant that eventually the state would have no choice but to move against them, leading to many innocent deaths. It also meant that the protesters progressively lost the sympathy of the Bangkok population and any chance that significant numbers of rank and file military or police personnel might disobey orders, potentially bringing down the government.

Many of the poor and lower-middle income majority in Bangkok are first- or second-generation migrants from the poor and heavily rural North and Northeast regions of Thailand. The bulk of the politically active Red Shirts are either current residents of these regions or recent migrants to Bangkok. But as the seemingly endless protest dragged on, resentment and fear of the hard-core Red Shirts and their tactics replaced the sympathy that many had earlier felt towards them. The English word "mob" was used to describe them, even by Thais who spoke almost no other English. The same word had been applied to earlier protest groups, most recently the rival Yellow Shirt demonstrators of late 2008 and it implied a similar degree of contempt. Increasingly, Bangkok people came to fear the Red Shirt mob. As the arson and vandalism of the night of May 19 subsequently showed, the fear was not unfounded.

Many of the police and military personnel called upon to contain the protesters also come from the North and Northeast. Early in the conflict, there may have been a chance that police or soldiers might eventually side with the demonstrators. But the armed violence directed against the police and soldiers, starting with a lethal shoot-out on April 10, destroyed that possibility. A non-violent protest may or may not have succeeded, but without non-violence there was no chance.

³ Video footage can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_xg0l6-oHY and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hmSPbugDAA> [accessed 1 June 2010].

Without doubt, most of the serious weaponry, and most of its use, was on the government side. But some external observers, especially those attracted to the Red Shirt cause, have been reluctant to acknowledge the existence of any armed violence on the Red Shirt side. Ideology may explain part of this, but logistics may explain some as well. Once shooting started, most journalists viewed the confrontation from the rear of the government's forces, quite distant from the Red Shirt positions behind their tire and bamboo barricades. It was much harder for journalists and others to see what was happening behind those barricades than to see what the police and soldiers were doing.

There were also snipers operating with high-powered weapons from the tops of tall buildings, but they could not be seen from the ground. Most of these killers were presumably acting for the government's forces, especially those who shot and killed the renegade Major-General Khattiya Sawasdipol, the army officer siding with the Red Shirts who was known as "Sae Daeng," or Commander Red. But the identity and objectives of most of these gunmen is still not fully clear. Appalling atrocities occurred, such as the fatal shooting of a uniformed nurse attending to a red-shirt demonstrator dying of a bullet wound. Her murderer was an unknown sniper.

Economic Undercurrents

Short-term politics dominated the crisis, of course, but there were important underlying economic drivers, some of which had been building up for decades. First, although average incomes in Thailand have increased dramatically in recent decades there has simultaneously been a long-term increase in economic inequality. This occurred even though the incidence of absolute poverty has declined. The Gini coefficient of income inequality increased from 0.43 in the early 1970s to 0.53 according to the latest government data, making Thailand one of the world's most unequal countries.⁴ Moreover, there is reason for thinking that even these numbers understate the true increase in inequality that has occurred. In short, the poor have benefited from economic growth but the rich have benefited proportionately much more. Over the same period unskilled wages have fallen markedly relative to average incomes. Agriculture's share of national income declines in all growing economies but its share of total employment typically declines more slowly. Thailand is a classic example of this discrepancy. The result is that rural incomes have fallen relative to average incomes.

A further and more recent economic driver of red-shirt grievances is less widely understood. The Thai economy is heavily export-dependent. The global financial crisis that began in 2008 impacted severely on Thailand through a 25 percent contraction in global demand for its exports. Many of the industries most heavily affected are labor-intensive, employing vast numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled people from the North and Northeast. In response to the crisis they were laid off in huge numbers, many returning to their villages. Unfortunately for Abhisit, the global financial crisis and the suffering it produced coincided with his accession to power. Global events were largely responsible but it was easy for a local rabble-rouser to blame the current hardship on Abhisit and to contrast it with the relative prosperity of 2001 to 2006, Thaksin's period in government.

These economic phenomena have meant that unskilled and semi-skilled rural people have not participated fully in Thailand's long-term economic progress. With reason, they feel left out of the development process and their absolute economic position has recently deteriorated. It is not difficult for a populist demagogue to portray these events as meaning that the urban elite has

⁴ The Gini coefficient takes values between 0 and 1 with higher values indicating greater inequality.

gained unfairly at the expense of the rural masses. Thaksin's great political achievement was to recognize this electoral opportunity and to grasp it. It was also his undoing.

Thaksin's downfall came at the hands of a military coup in September 2006. The coup touched off a cycle of political unrest that culminated in the present crisis. According to the military coup-makers their intervention was made necessary by Thaksin's corruption. Already a billionaire, he could not resist misusing his political office to enrich himself and his family even further, at public expense. But mere corruption is nothing new for Thailand. As viewed by the elite, Thaksin's offences went well beyond that. He had upset the long-standing political balance by developing an independent power base in the north and northeast that was beyond the control of Bangkok's traditional elite, implicitly even challenging the semi-divine standing of the monarch as champion of the rural poor. Thaksin had to go. Two subsequent, elected pro-Thaksin governments were also removed, this time by seemingly dubious court decisions. From the perspective of the Red Shirts, their communities had been disenfranchised.

Gandhi's Commitment to Non-violence

Gandhi had understood the danger of tolerating violent groups within his movement. The famous Chauri Chaura incident of 1921 illustrated his position. A police station in Uttar Pradesh was burned down by supporters of his Non-Cooperation Movement and 23 policemen trapped inside were burned alive. Gandhi immediately suspended his movement and began a hunger strike in protest against his supporters' action and in acknowledgement of his own partial responsibility for the deaths. The incident illustrated Gandhi's understanding of the importance of non-violence. Nevertheless, it was still many years before his movement succeeded.

The success of the 1986 non-violent People's Power movement in the Philippines in removing President Ferdinand Marcos demonstrates that it can be done. But the tragic experiences of the movements led by Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma and the Dalai Lama in Tibet, not to mention the Tiananmen massacre in Beijing 1989, demonstrate that non-violence alone is not sufficient. Overwhelming public support is also necessary. Gandhi understood that in the case of a firmly established government there was no chance without non-violence. Unfortunately, the Red Shirts had no leader with the vision or moral authority of a Gandhi, including Thaksin, his Thai Rak Thai political party and its successors.

Thaksin's position within the conflict is highly ambiguous. According to the current government, Thaksin was a major financier of the protests and they have accused him of fomenting terrorism. In early May, the government had negotiated with the protesters a 5-point road map to peace that included early elections in November in exchange for the Red Shirts abandoning their occupation of central Bangkok. The movement at first agreed but later rejected it, adding new demands. From the standpoint of the Bangkok public, the Red Shirts belated rejection of the road map removed the last hope for a peaceful solution. It was rumored that the rejection derived from Thaksin's veto, transmitted by telephone. The agreement would have delivered no benefits to him; in particular, the government had reportedly rejected a demand for the return of his Thai passport and amnesty for the many crimes alleged against him.

To the best of my knowledge, in his various public statements on the crisis and in his video messages to his supporters, Thaksin never specifically urged his followers to adhere to non-violence. In any case, Thaksin is no Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi or Dalai Lama. His time in government was characterized by electoral fraud, suppression of press freedom, persecution of

his political opponents and murderous campaigns against presumed criminals and drug dealers, all combined with unbounded personal avarice.

Now What?

Having seen off the immediate threat, the government must surely offer a gesture of reconciliation. That must include a commitment to elections in November or earlier and a guarantee that the electoral outcome will be respected, even if a pro-Thaksin party wins. There must also be a commitment to a process of genuine dialogue to address the Red Shirts' real grievances – not brinkmanship based on mutual threats of violence.

But there is a major obstacle: disagreement on the meaning of “democracy.” The word democracy appears in the official names of both the Yellow Shirts (Peoples’ Alliance for Democracy) and the Red Shirts (United front for Democracy and Against Dictatorship). Both are misnomers. Neither group adheres to democratic principles internally. The Red Shirts extol democracy only when they think they can win. The Yellow Shirts’ political theory is that if one-person-one-vote electoral democracy produces an outcome that the elite opposes, then it is their right, even duty, to replace the result with something more enlightened. According to this vision, the uneducated masses are analogous to children, needing the guiding hand of a parent – the educated elite and the monarchy – with the military as their instrument. The way out of this dilemma is unknown. If new elections are won by the supposed rabble and again overthrown by the elite, the cycle will only continue and the bitterness will deepen.

To the surprise of some observers, the royal palace has remained silent throughout the conflict. I do not know the reason. Several possible explanations have been suggested. One is that the revered 82-year-old King Bhumibol Adulyadej may be even more ill than the public knows and was thereby unable to intervene. A second is that the Red Shirt leaders might not have responded positively if there had been a royal intervention. The palace would not act unless it was sure its intervention would be accepted and some of the Red Shirt leaders are known for republican views. A third explanation is that the palace itself may be divided on what should be done. Fourth, the royal succession remains uncertain within the public mind, and a royal intervention could have opened this issue to public comment in a way that the palace would not want. A final possible explanation is that by May 19 the Red Shirts had seemingly lost. The government seemed to have the situation under control and intervention was not deemed necessary. After that unanticipated night of rage, it was too late.

As he was being arrested on May 19, one of the Red Shirts’ more moderate leaders, Veera Musikapong, was quoted saying that he and his colleagues must now “dissolve our anger, because democracy cannot be based on anger.” Wise words, but is anyone still listening to anyone else?