



# CANADA-ASIA AGENDA

## Thailand: The Battle of the Colours

By Aim Sinpeng

The protracted and violent political turmoil in Thailand came to a head last month following the army's forcible removal of anti-government protestors from central Bangkok. Despite the complexity of the situation, it is imperative for Canada to have a sense of what is going on in Thailand. Tourist dollars and investment flows aside, Canada's ongoing interest in Southeast Asia and Thailand's key role in the region mean Ottawa must pay attention.

Army tanks, armed soldiers, and barbed-wire barricades were familiar sights in Bangkok in recent weeks, as anti-government protesters ("Red Shirts") and their pro-government antagonists clashed. More than 80 people were killed, most of them civilians and media caught in the deadly cross-fire. For the past five years, Thailand -- an otherwise progressive and relatively well-off nation by developing countries' standards -- has been trapped in cycles of mass demonstrations, street violence, martial laws, and social instability. The most recent clash between the two opposing forces was, by far, "the worst ever seen in a 100 years."<sup>1</sup>

The "Bloody May of 2010" differs from the anti-government protests of 1992 and 1973 in that the occupation of key business areas and burning of more than 30 buildings were specifically aimed at destroying the current administration's purported financiers. Most notably, the Red Shirts have their own security forces led by Maj. General Khattiya (who was

shot and killed during the protests) and his military faction. This provided crucial leverage for the Red Shirts in their bargaining with the government. Direct attacks on the government's political and financial base, coupled with the Red Shirts' willingness to confront the army were not only unprecedented, but they also made compromise between the two parties much less likely.<sup>2</sup> With government forces having retaken the occupied areas of Bangkok and the emergency decree still in place, uncertainty prevails concerning the future in the current Thai government and generally in the Thai state itself.

### Making Sense of the Colours

Broadly speaking, the "Red Shirts" are made up of two groups. First are supporters of ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who championed pro-poor policies and drew his largest support from the country's poorest regions



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of the North and the Northeast. Second are “pro-democracy” proponents, who opposed the military coup in 2006 and subsequently objected to a series of “undemocratic” measures designed to weaken Thaksin’s political influence, including the seizure of his assets and disbandment of Thaksin’s political party. The Red Shirts represent an odd mix of the rural and the urban poor who advocate against the current government, the elite, and the “establishments” of the country,<sup>3</sup> as well as some highly educated, affluent urban segments of society, who want to see Thailand moving forward in its democratization process. The common threads that pull together the Red Shirt movement are their shared concerns over the Thai government’s perceived disrespect for the wishes of the majority; the gross injustice that exists in government practices; and the country’s many “double standards.”

The People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or the “Yellow Shirts,” who initiated the mass demonstrations against Thaksin in 2006 that culminated in the September military coup, draw their support largely from the Bangkok middle class and elite. The rise of Thaksin and his populist political engine shook the Bangkok-based establishment to the core.<sup>4</sup> The Yellow Shirt movement is a reaction to what many in Bangkok see as a highly corrupt, manipulative and dangerously authoritarian leader who threatens “the old ways” and disrespects the country’s core institutions: the military, the bureaucracy and the monarchy.<sup>5</sup> The colour yellow - a colour associated with the royal institution - is worn by PAD supporters to advance the impression that it is a pro-monarchy movement, one that seeks to do whatever it takes to protect the monarchical institution from the perceived threat

posed by a Thaksin administration. Two of the Yellow Shirts’ top leaders - Chamlong Srimueang and Sonthi Limthongkul - were once Thaksin’s closest allies. Such examples of betrayal and vengeance are not uncommon in this violent crisis.

The current Democrat-led coalition government of Abhisit Vejjajiva - largely seen as backed by the military regime that toppled Thaksin’s government and encouraged by the judiciary - took office after two consecutive constitutional court rulings removed some of Thaksin’s closest allies from power.<sup>6</sup> Despite having continued some of Thaksin’s populist policies, such as the 2,000-Baht handouts and land reform initiatives,<sup>7</sup> much of the Red Shirt heartland remains too dangerous for Abhisit and his Cabinet to visit.<sup>8</sup> After a court decision to strip half of Thaksin’s US\$1.4 billion assets on charges of corruption, the Red Shirts took Bangkok hostage by bringing in, according to their estimates, some 500,000 protesters<sup>9</sup> to demand dissolution of the legislature, a new



Red Shirt Demonstration, March 2010.



Multi-Coloured Shirt Protest at Victory Monument for the “Protection of Nation, Religion and Monarch,” May, 2010.

election and a return to “true” democracy. Attempts at compromise between the two opposing sides failed as a result of the distrust between the two, as well as squabbles within the Red Shirt leadership. While the military has attempted to maintain the impression of neutrality by dispelling coup rumours and encouraging both sides to talk,<sup>10</sup> it has been implicated in the crisis.<sup>11</sup>

The battle between the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts is viewed by many as a class-based conflict. Such class division is exploited and perpetuated by the Red Shirt leaders, who have constructed a discourse of struggle between “Prai” versus “Ammat” (“serfs” versus “aristocrats”), with the

Reds representing the former group rebelling against the privileged class. The Yellow Shirts have also done their part to deepen the rural-Bangkok divide by portraying the rural folks as “hillbillies,” “stupid”, and “vote sellers.” While a substantial income gap does exist between the rich and poor in Thailand, such disparities are not new and they do exist both across and within regions (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Key Socio-Economic Indicators, by region**

	Thailand	North	Northeast	Central (excl. BKK)	South	Bangkok
Population (millions)	61	11.4	21	5.7	8	6.4
Educational attainment (years of schooling)	7.2	6.1	6.3	7	7	9.7
Average income (Baht)	3,321	2,470	1,949	3,676	2,852	7,767
Inequality (1st versus 5th income quintile)	9.3x	6.9x	6.8x	6.3x	6.8x	6x
Share of population in rural areas*	69%	80%	83%	65%	77%	n/a

\*Based on the share of population living outside municipal areas. Source: Census (2000), Thailand National Statistical Office.

This conflict involves multiple layers of various divisions in society and factions in the realms of business, provincial power, regional strongholds, political groups, rural-urban divides, etc. Class cleavage is a convenient and easy-to-grasp concept that can be used strategically to create divisions in society in order for Thaksin to rally political support from the countryside where 70% of the country’s population still resides. Since Thaksin’s political support base draws mostly from the north and northeast regions, which represent more than 50% of parliamentary seats in national elections, it makes sense for the exiled tycoon to mobilize supporters in areas where he stands to gain the most electorally. Serious class-based analysis, however, must come to terms with the fact that most of the Red Shirt leaders, including telecom tycoon Thaksin himself, are also well-educated, wealthy members of the elite.

Beneath all the rhetoric and posturing is one of the most important factors that triggered the current crisis: the unspoken issue of royal succession. The deeply revered and highly benevolent 82-year-old King Bhumibhol has reigned over Thailand for more than 60 years. Through it all, the monarchy survived numerous coups and oversaw the country’s most dramatic societal transformations. King Bhumibhol represents a symbol of national unity and stability in Thailand. In times of crisis, he has brokered peace between the opposing sides and brought the country back to normalcy. Thais are well aware of the King’s frail health, but given both

social norms and strict laws forbidding commentary on the monarchy, they dare not speak publicly about the future of royal succession. To many Yellow Shirt supporters, Thaksin comes across as arrogant and disloyal to the King, and they fear that his control over the matter of royal succession could lead to the collapse of the monarchical institution altogether. The Constitution of 2007 ensures that only the King and his Privy Council are endowed with the power to decide on the question of royal succession.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the death of this King may set in motion the country’s worst ever crisis.

**Implications for Canada-Thailand Relations**

Canada’s top priorities in Thailand have typically focused on the issues of economic and democratic development, human rights, and good governance.<sup>13</sup> While continuing to fund projects that seek to further development of Thailand’s democracy, such as sponsoring Canadian speakers in conferences on issues of democratic accountability and election observation workshops, Canada did not sever diplomatic ties with the junta government in the aftermath of the 2006 military takeover.<sup>14</sup> It appears that Ottawa preferred to take a soft-line approach toward Bangkok in the initial phase of the political crisis by refraining from taking tough action, such as suspension of aid or public condemnation of the coup. The ensuing riots and frequent government changes between 2006 and 2009 did not appear to shake Canada’s confidence in Thailand as a tourist and investment destination. In fact, after the Bangkok airport shutdown and deadly fighting between the Red Shirts and the government forces in November 2009, Trade Minister Stockwell Day concluded a plan to develop “an unprecedented Canada-Thailand stra-



Abhisit Vejjajiva, Prime Minister of Thailand.



tegic energy partnership,” which included a major direct investment by Canada’s top engineering firm, SNC-Lavalin.<sup>15</sup>

The Bloody May 2010 tragedy, which resulted in a temporary closure of the Canadian Embassy in Bangkok and two wounded Canadian journalists, substantially raised Ottawa’s concerns over the security situations in Bangkok.<sup>16</sup> A tougher stance on Thailand’s political crisis from Canada would be welcomed not only because Canada must protect its investment interests and the safety of its citizens, but Ottawa should also send a strong message to Bangkok that future violence, instability, and divergence from the democratic path is unfavourable for its bilateral relations.



Bloody May 2010, Downtown Bangkok.

Canada stands to benefit from a strong partnership with Thailand, one of the most influential and largest member states of ASEAN, in meeting its economic goals in the region.<sup>17</sup> The political crisis in Thailand has, however, crippled the government’s capacity to act and weakened its role as a regional leader. Thailand has failed, on more than one occasion, to hold ASEAN meetings due to unmanageable security concerns. The country’s domestic turmoil has also raised serious doubts about the country’s ability to deal with regional issues, including its border disputes with Cambodia; violence in the far South that worries Malaysia; and rebel fighting along the Thai-Burmese border. Canada’s objectives in promoting democratic governance, stable political conditions and friendly business environment in Thailand and Southeast Asian as a whole should not be pursued separately, but rather as interrelated matters.

### The Road Ahead

As the turmoil that had embroiled the capital city for the past few months came to an end, observers were left with the

question: What is next for Thailand? In the short-run, Prime Minister Abhisit has announced a five-point “road map” to attain national reconciliation and restore law and order to society.<sup>18</sup> The extent to which Abhisit will succeed in carrying out this program, coupled with the ability to battle any future unrest, will depend on the support from his coalition partners. Thus far, members of his coalitions, some of whom are former Thaksin allies, have lent their support to his leadership. This means the Democrat-led government may last long enough to finish its electoral term, thereby putting off the prospect for a new election for at least another year or more.

Unrest in the Red Shirt heartland is likely to ensue in the foreseeable future as protesters were assaulted and forced to flee, further compounding their grievances over social injustice and deep economic inequalities. Such discontent and dissatisfaction with the current “order” of Thailand is unlikely to dissipate unless some level of justice is brought to those on both sides of the conflict. Unfortunately, Abhisit’s government has closed in on the Red Shirts rather aggressively through massive shut downs of various media outlets, arrests of suspected Red Shirt supporters, and blacklisting bank accounts of potential Red Shirt financiers. Such encroachment of already eroded civil liberty bodes badly for his road map for national conciliation. Worse, the perceived threat of future unrest provides an excuse for Abhisit to continue to operate under the emergency decree, which gives undue power to his government and the military.

As Professor Charles Keyes argues in his recent op-ed on the Bangkok Post, it is “time for ‘time out’.”<sup>19</sup> Leaders on both the Red Shirt and the government camps need to put their personal vengeance aside and give time for everyone to “cool off” and turn the temperature down a notch. Immediate grievances by the Red Shirts, especially the deaths of their supporters in the turmoil, must be addressed along with the economic losses incurred by those caught in the crossfire in Bangkok. Now that the Red Shirt leadership is in disarray (except for exiled Thaksin), Abhisit has an opportunity to make amends with some of the Red Shirt supporters by reaching out and following through with his plan of reconciliation. Abhisit and his government needs to demonstrate a genuine effort to bring justice to the Reds, such as the six deaths at Wat Pathum Wanaram on the final day of the crackdown, and refrain from using the kind of language that further deepens the division, such as calling some of the Red Shirts “terrorists.”<sup>20</sup> If his administration insists on the Red Shirt heartland being a “no-go zone,” he only does himself and his country disservice. It is the time for a ‘time out,’ as well as a time for building bridges.

- <sup>1</sup> Kasetsiri, Chanvit. (May 20, 2010). "Chanvit chee poh-koh ammahit laew rai sud rob 100 pee sa-lai mob 'Mark' dai kae jai khon krung - phao tun ror-bor cheu 'Maew' mee ew" (Chanvit argues black May the worst in 100 years - protest crackdown by Abhisit only pleased the Bangkokians; Thaksin was involved." Maticchon Daily. Available at [http://www.maticchon.co.th/news\\_detail.php?newsid=1274329841&catid=01](http://www.maticchon.co.th/news_detail.php?newsid=1274329841&catid=01) .
- <sup>2</sup> Khanthong, Thanong. (May 28, 2010). "Who's who among the Reds." The Nation Daily. Available online at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/home/2010/05/28/opinion/Who-s-who-among-the-reds-30130364.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak provides a succinct description of the establishments in Thailand as "the royalist-conservative coalition of army officers, palace insiders, ruling coalition parties, the PAD and Bangkok's co-opted civil society." See Pongsudhirak, Thitinan. (2010). The Unstoppable Red Shirts. East Asia Forum Quarterly 2(2): 13.
- <sup>4</sup> Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a renowned Thai political scientist, explains that critics of Thaksin believe Thaksin has misruled the country and led Thailand down the authoritarian route - under the guise of a popularly elected leader - "for the purpose of graft and aggrandizement." See Pongsudhirak, Thitinan. (2008). Thailand Since the Coup. Journal of Democracy 19(4): 140-153.
- <sup>5</sup> The generals who overthrew Thaksin cited Thaksin's disrespect for the king as one of the reason for dislodging him.
- <sup>6</sup> Samak Sundhoravej, leader of People's Power Party, was removed from power through a Constitutional Court ruling in 2008 along with his successor, Somchai Wongsawat (Thaksin's brother-in-law), who was banned from politics along with 110 other members of Thaksin's disbanded Thai Rak Thai party. The then PPP-led coalition government dissolved, paving the way for Democrat-led coalition government, which is headed by Abhisit.
- <sup>7</sup> Bangkok Post. (June 15, 2009). "Stimulus Plan under Fire: Top Economists Says It'll Do Little to Spur the Economy". Bangkok Post. Available online at <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/9730/stimulus-plan-under-fire>.
- <sup>8</sup> Abhisit has received death threats from Red Shirt members in the northern region. See MacKinnon, Mark. (May 23, 2010). "In Thailand's North, the Red Shirt Revolt Lives on." The Globe and Mail. Available online at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/in-thailands-north-the-red-shirt-revolt-lives-on/article1578808/> . Also, see: Nanuam, Wassana et al. (November 11, 2009). ISA Likely for Chiang Mai: Northern Region Army Chief Fears Tourism Hit. Bangkok Post Daily. Available online at <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/27975/isa-likely-for-chiang-mai>.
- <sup>9</sup> This estimate was given by one of Red Shirt's leaders, Natthawut Saikau. Other estimates can be viewed on Bangkok Pundit Blog available at <http://us.asiancorrespondent.com/bangkok-pundit-blog>. No independent figure can be confirmed.
- <sup>10</sup> Thai Rath Daily (January 28, 2010). "Anupong insisted there would be no coup, everything will go on as normal." Available online at <http://www.thairath.co.th/content/pol/61693>.
- <sup>11</sup> Key roles the army has played in the Bloody May of 2010 included housing PM Abhisit inside an infantry barracks, while its commander-in-chief, Maj. Gen. Anupong Paochinda, was put in charge of the Centre for the Resolution of Emergency Situations (CRES) - effectively making the military responsible for all security aspects of the protest areas, the safety of government personnel as well as restoring order in the country.
- <sup>12</sup> See Article 22 of the 2007 Constitution available at <http://www.parliament.go.th>.
- <sup>13</sup> Government of Canada. (October, 2008). Canada - Thailand Relations. Available online at [http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/thailand-thailande/bilateral\\_relations\\_bilaterales/canada-thailand-thailande.aspx?lang=eng](http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/thailand-thailande/bilateral_relations_bilaterales/canada-thailand-thailande.aspx?lang=eng).
- <sup>14</sup> Foreign Minister Peter MacKay released a statement stating that "his government is deeply concerned by the developments" and urged "a peaceful solution to this crisis in conformity with the country's constitution." See Johnson, Ed. (September 20, 2006). "Thailand's Coup Prompts Travel Warnings by UK, US (Update 2)". Bloomberg News. Available online at <http://www.international.gc.ca/commerce/strategy-strategie/r3.aspx>.
- <sup>15</sup> Trade Media Relations Office. (November 10, 2009). "Canada-Thailand Strategic Energy Partnership." Media Release No. 337. Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. Available online at [http://www.international.gc.ca/media\\_commerce/comm/news-communiqués/2009/337.aspx](http://www.international.gc.ca/media_commerce/comm/news-communiqués/2009/337.aspx).
- <sup>16</sup> Between April and May 2010, Canada issued three releases expressing its deep concerns over the deteriorating situation in Thailand. See Government of Canada Highlights of 2010. Available online at [http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/thailand-thailande/highlights-faits\\_saillants.aspx?lang=eng](http://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/thailand-thailande/highlights-faits_saillants.aspx?lang=eng).
- <sup>17</sup> Trade Commissioner Service. (2008). "Seizing Global Advantage: Association of Southeast Asian Nations". Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada. Available online at <http://www.international.gc.ca/commerce/strategy-strategie/r3.aspx>.
- <sup>18</sup> The Five-Point Road Map for National Reconciliation includes: 1) Upholding the monarchy, 2) Resolving fundamental problems of social injustice, 3) Enabling media's constructive operation, 4) Establishing facts about violent incidents, 5) Establishing mutually acceptable political rules. Details of this road map are available online at [http://www.thaiembdc.org/Ann\\_Doc/thailandupdate05\\_10.pdf](http://www.thaiembdc.org/Ann_Doc/thailandupdate05_10.pdf).
- <sup>19</sup> Keyes, Charles. (May 26, 2010). "Dealing with 'the Devil', the Reds and Looking within." Bangkok Post. Available online at <http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/37712/dealing-with-the-devil-the-reds-and-looking-within>.
- <sup>20</sup> Jatuporn Prompan, an MP as well as one of the Red Shirt leaders, was called a "terrorist" by some of his fellow MPs during a parliamentary censure debate that took place between May 31 - June 1, 2010. See Rojanaphruk, Pravit, (June 2, 2010). "No Confidence Debate: Debate Widens Rift." The Nation Daily. Available online at <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/home/2010/06/02/politics/Debate-widens-rift-30130667.html>.

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