



CANADA-ASIA AGENDA

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Issue 38

Thailand Focus: The Failure of Democracy and the Victory of People's Power?

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In November 2013, observers in Canada and around the world watched as Bangkok again became embroiled in weeks of protests led by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which lobbied to stop Thailand's national election and replace its parliament with a non-elected national assembly. As support for the PDRC's cause mounted and Bangkok started shutting down, the Thai national elections in February 2014 were boycotted by the Democrat Party, the largest opposition party. In this issue of *Canada-Asia Agenda*, Aim Sinpeng explains the history and political forces behind the PDRC movement, and concludes with an argument for why Canada needs to take a stronger stance in advocating for democracy in Thailand.

"We will have elections, but only after a complete reform of the political system," shouted Suthep Thaugsuban, in front of a sea of supporters as they marched towards the city centre on Bangkok Shutdown Day. Suthep, leader of the reform movement, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), vowed to stop a national election and replace parliament with a non-elected national assembly, all in the name of the popular will. As hundreds of thousands of PDRC supporters cheered on the no-election campaign, one wonders if democracy has completely failed in this nation of 67 million, one that was once known as Southeast Asia's beacon of democratic hope. What does it mean for people to rise up *against* democracy? How do we understand the latest rounds of conflict in Thailand? What implications does the political crisis have for the country and for the broader region?

Background

Thailand has once again descended into chaos and its capital, Bangkok, is almost completely at a standstill as anti-government protesters sought to prevent the February 2 election from taking place. The PDRC, a loosely aligned protest movement under the leadership of veteran politician Suthep Thaugsuban, began the fight to oust the



"Red Shirts" protest in Bangkok

[@istockphoto.com/tbradford](#)

interim government of Yingluck Shinawatra in October of 2013. To date, more than 10 people have been killed and scores have been injured in this latest round of violence and volatility.

The latest rounds of protests were triggered by the Yingluck government's attempts to pass amnesty bills that were seen by the opposition as a ploy to vindicate her brother, the



exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The PDRC is convinced that as long as the Shinawatra clan remains in power, Thailand will be heading towards disaster. Large-scale corruption, cronyism, threats to the constitutional monarchy and vote-buying are among the key allegations the PDRC has levied against the government.

But the current conflict represents a continuation of a crisis that really began in 2005, when opposition forces, known as the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or more widely, "Yellow Shirts," mobilized against the Thaksin Shinawatra government. Thaksin was a hugely popular but controversial leader whom the Yellow Shirts saw as highly corrupt, tyrannical and manipulative. The PAD orchestrated a series of mass protests in Bangkok that eventually led to a military coup d'état in September 2006. Yet for each national election held since, a Thaksin-aligned party has managed to secure an electoral victory, including the most recent government led by his sister, Yingluck.

The Shinawatras were able to build a strong and loyal electoral support base, thanks to the genius of Thaksin. His populist policies, which include universal healthcare, village funds, debt moratorium and various rural development programs, quickly captured the hearts and the minds of a majority of the poor in Thailand. A common feeling among many Thais is that never before has a politician met the demands of the rural poor like Thaksin. As his sister continues his pro-poor policies, the support base for their political party, Pheu Thai, seems as strong as ever.



Thaksin Shinawatra

Source: Department of Defense



"Yellow Shirts"

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Those who oppose the Shinawatras' rule, however, are quick to argue that the poor are being duped by these populist "hand-outs." Much of the resistance to Thaksin and his parties can be categorized into four major groups.

The first is the Thai middle class, which sees its privileged position deeply threatened by the growing power of the poor. Thaksin has effectively enfranchised the rural poor, who for the first time understand their own political power. Their power is based on not just the ability to vote, but on the knowledge that if they are united, they represent nearly 70% of the population and can thus choose for the government they want. The middle class and the elites used to be decisive in selecting Thailand's government, but now they feel that they have forever lost this privilege. Moreover, during Thaksin's rule the tax-paying middle class felt that their hard-earned money was being spent scrupulously by a populist government that was catering to the (non-tax paying) poor. The deep resentment that they as a class were paying for a government that completely ignored their interests sparked outrage at the Shinawatras.

The second group includes the "old guard": the traditional elites whose power and interests have long been entrenched in the Thai political system. This includes the members of the military, bureaucrats, long-term politicians and royalists, all of whom have long comprised Thailand's core political institutions. This old guard has been marginalized and displaced by the rise of a new breed of businessmen-cum-politician like Thaksin. Moreover, their opposition to Thaksin not only contributed directly to his downfall, but has also been a major factor in sustaining subsequent opposition

to any government aligned with Thaksin. This group is now feels that it must fight back or risk permanent obscurity.

NGOs and civil society groups represent a third force within the anti-Thaksin camp. Thaksin was hostile to NGOs, the media and interest groups that sought to hold him accountable. NGOs, particularly those working for the poor, felt that their political space has disappeared and been replaced by Thaksin's pro-poor programs. Ideologically, many NGOs felt that Thaksin's neo-liberal economic policies, with their preferences for mega-projects and export-oriented production, were the wrong kind of development for Thailand. In other words, they felt that building a dam that would displace many fishing villages while compensating the displaced with hand-outs would not help the poor in the long-run. And Thaksin's spite for the opposition media even threatened the freedom of the press.

Lastly, the pro-monarchy Thais are a cross-class conservative group who believe that the Shinawatra family represents a grave threat to the constitutional monarchy. Thailand has a much revered monarch, King Bhumichol, whose power and authority is viewed as being undercut by popular and populist Thaksin. "Saving the monarchy" thus quickly became one of the most effective and widely used rallying cries to mobilize supporters and mount opposition to the Shinawatras.

Between 2005 and 2013, Thailand experienced six governments, three elections (one annulled), two constitutions and one military coup. This political rollercoaster has resulted in a series of prolonged mass protests and violence that have left the entire nation in flux. This new round of political crisis, led by the PDRC, has only served to prolong the already ongoing drama in the Thai political scene, deepening the social divisions and plunging the country further into the abyss. Meanwhile, Thailand's Deep South (the muslim-majority borderland provinces) continues to be the site of one of the most violent conflicts in the world, with more than 5,000 deaths since 2004.

The 2014 Election

The February 2 election in Thailand was not only one of the most bizarre elections, but also one of the most pointless. Missing polling stations, locked-up ballot boxes, an M16 shooting match and a complete boycott by the second-largest political party are just some of the many incidents that characterized the recent election. There was little campaigning by any political party, while the streets of Bangkok were jammed with anti-election protesters. The government pushed for an election only to find out that it



Yingluck Shinawatra

Source: Wikimedia Commons

did not resolve, but instead prolonged, the ongoing conflict. The Pheu Thai party, under the leadership of current Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, called a snap election late in 2013 in order to find a solution to new rounds of massive waves of protests that have brought Bangkok to a grinding halt. The government made a disastrous decision earlier that year to pass amnesty bills, seen by many as a way to vindicate Thaksin, who was ousted from power in military coup in 2006 and sentenced to prison for corruption charges. The push for amnesty by the incumbent set in motion the latest rounds of anti-government mobilization. The protest movement, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), was largely led by the main opposition party in parliament, the Democrat Party. The Democrats, who have failed to win an election since 1992, decided to pursue street politics full-time and walked out of parliament to fight for power not through the ballot, but through the streets. Building on the frustration of the various groups that had been disaffected by the Shinawatra's rule, the Democrats saw an opportunity to mobilize their supporters to not only oust Pheu Thai, but also to put an end to electoral democracy. As hundreds of thousands of anti-government protesters poured into the streets and seized key government offices, Yingluck felt that the only way out was to get people to the polls, a decision she knew would lead to her party's victory. The PDRC retaliated with more protests and pushed for the "No Vote" campaign to get Thais to forgo their voting obligation (Thailand has mandatory voting). An escalation of violence leading up to election day prompted the government to declare a state of emergency.

The "Reform before Election" campaign is the PDRC's call for an end to the current electoral system in Thailand. To some it may seem blatantly anti-democratic, but in the minds of

the protesters, democracy has already failed in Thailand. Their belief is that elections are now bought and sold to the highest bidder (which lately is the deep-pocketed Shinawatras), the system of checks and balances is broken, and corruption is at an all-time high. As such, “reforms” to overhaul the current political system are needed to ensure that democracy brings about legitimate governments. The PDRC thus proposes halting elections, bringing in an appointed national assembly and “cleaning up” bad politics for good. They hope for a Thailand whose electorates are well-informed, politicians who are uncorrupt, and a constitutional monarchy that is well-preserved.

So far the PDRC leadership has refused to negotiate with the government. The country is already in the state of emergency and the PDRC is vowing “to fight until the end.” An intervention from institutions such as the Election Commission, the Constitutional Court or a postponement of an election might bring some temporary relief measures. Yet none of these strategies will resolve the conflict in the long-run. Thailand will continue to be embroiled in the cycle of protests and violence for the foreseeable future.

The February 2 election was marred by irregularities and violence from the get-go. The candidate registration day was filled with tear gas and barricades, while an estimated two million voters were unable to cast the ballots on advanced voting day due to protests. When election day finally rolled around, nine provinces in southern Thailand, the Democrats’ heartland, had no voting at all, while the overall turnout was 47%, the lowest in decades and a far cry from the 75% turnout in the previous two elections. The No Vote movement is believed to have succeeded in keeping 10 million Thais at home on election day, combined with the unusually high number of invalid and Vote No ballots, the PDRC declared its anti-election campaign a victory. Meanwhile, the government received a significant decline in votes even in their own strongholds in the North and Northeast of Thailand. Pheu Thai will emerge as a clear winner, given it nearly ran unopposed, but the election weakened the incumbent while giving a legitimacy boost to the opposition movement.

The election could not provide the government a way out. The very constitutionality of the election is in question, and pressure to nullify it is mounting. The PDRC has used the unpopular election as leverage to prolong its street protests, while its legal team is pursuing dissolution of the Pheu Thai party. The political conflict will surely drag on in Thailand as both sides are raising the stakes in their fight for power.

An unstable Thailand is bad for business and bad for trade relations. While the latest protests have not yet driven away foreign investment, the overall confidence in Thailand as a place for trade, investment and tourism has continued to wane. The ongoing political conflicts, which have now dragged on for nearly a decade, have marred relations with neighbours, including members of the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The political conflicts have also caused major rifts within Thai society and have casted doubt over the country’s ability to be an important player in the region. As Southeast Asia looks to its ASEAN Economic Community to promote free movement of goods and labour, Thailand appears to be unstable and unprepared for such regional integration.

If ASEAN-Canada trade and investment are to remain pivotal to bilateral relations, then Ottawa must express its clear preference for a democratic and stable Thailand. ASEAN cannot afford to see a failed Thailand, and therefore neither can Canada. Yet in 2006 Canada failed to actively condemn the coup d’etat that happened in September of that year.¹ The military-backed government, post-coup, has been disastrous for both Thailand’s economy and its society. It is not enough for Canada to merely make a plea for stability; rather, it needs to champion democracy by denouncing coups, communicating concerns about anti-democratic activities and proposals, and clearly signaling that a deterioration of Thailand’s democracy will damage its relations with Canada.



Stephen Harper and Yingluck Shinawatra
Source: canadainternational.gc.ca

¹ See my previous report, Aim Simpeng, “Thailand: the Battle of Colour,” *Canada-Asia Agenda* Issue 10, June 17, 2010, <http://www.asiapacific.ca/canada-asia-agenda/thailand-battle-colours>.



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