

Commentary

24 November 2010

In a Divided Country: Comments on Thai Politics by an International

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“Thailand’s Democracy still suffering from growing pains.”

Looking specifically at May of this year, downtown Bangkok and Thailand itself have seen troubling times. Beginning with a march into the city from northern provinces into Bangkok by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) and their supporters, the country saw the latest boiling over of what commenters have described as a broken polity. As tensions rose after unrealistic demands of dissolving government and a number of others virtually overnight were not met, Bloody May as it became known is easily understood if one were to look only at the two years which preceded. To grasp however the conflict in its many facets it helps to understand underlying realities faced in Thailand, including a basic look at fundamental aspects of culture and politics. These two spheres of life shape more than any other the political structure which governs the country, always under the rule of His Majesty the King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the royal family, and the aristocratic elite.

Modernization of Thailand in terms of infrastructure and cultural Westernization into cities has certainly happened in Bangkok which can easily rank with if not outdo, cities such as Miami, Berlin,

and Johannesburg. In the immediate vicinity though it is without doubt, the leading center for cosmopolitan globalization in South East Asia. Strangely enough, to those who visit or on a medium-length business trip, cultural influences would seem to have a lassie-faire stance on development and the economy. A take life as it comes stance is the most visible approach with those of a different mind frame in business obscured from most travellers while they work in office buildings built in the most modern of styles and standards. Entrenched in Buddhist philosophy and with no signs of its deep roots being disturbed, its influencing factor on the approach taken to political demonstrations and protests even when taken too far, epitomizes pacifism. An approach of giving space while waiting out the aggression of those involved as discussions carry on is of interest. Not to the extent that it occurs, as it is perhaps the safest method in resolving conflicts being ideal in its deliberative and understanding nature, but with its use in even extreme cases such as that of the Suvarnabhumi airport seizure in 2009 by the PAD (People’s Alliance for Democracy).

A Note on Saving Face

Not entirely unique to Thai culture although particularly well known for it, an approach to social behaviour of continuously saving face pre-dominates social interactions. While feelings are always hurt regardless of culture or nationality, when an unknown, or intentional insult is delivered the Thai example is quite interesting. Experience with such an extreme example of saving face, even against subtly placed observations of stark realities can have a deleterious impact on the mind of a Thai socialite, executive, or one in the public eye. Whether it is an inability to handle such “confrontations”, or difficulties with language leading to bureaucratic confusion, resolving such situations amicably is not always the path chosen. There are numerous stories of retaliation through passing of information and blackmail or intimidation (if such a distinction can be made) for those not aligned with current political doctrine, do not share the belief in subtle nuances at all times, or simply did not understand Thai culture prior to making an innocent off the cuff remark. This information is often suppressed for lengthy periods of time rather than immediate confrontation as the idea of saving face compels many to de-escalate the problem rather than publicly escalate it. Careful distinctions need to be made here though in distinguishing such practices from that of its occurrence in developed countries through typical political mudslinging and backroom dealings. Largely the missing component which makes a vast difference and is found in many developing countries is a legal structure which is seen as uncorrupted, accessible by the people without fear of retribution, and contains redress mechanisms which produce visible results. With this component absent, environments of fear and mistrust are easily created which then allow for a population to be increasingly susceptible to intimidation, retaliation. An approach which can easily be prescribed to all diplomatic missions of “walking on egg shells”, is none the more appropriate than with Thai politics as reflected and supported upon a culture of saving face. How this clashes with Buddhist philosophy is clear although difficult to explain if not to dispute the foundation of Thai culture on Buddhist

teachings and practices.

90% Percent of Politicians are Giving the Other 10% a Bad Rap

Favouritism, conflicts of interest, corruption and cronyism, are all at play in Thai politics as in many in the South East Asian region such as Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Those who have touched upon the subject will tell you that such practices on the one extreme slow progress and development as qualified individuals are excluded from prestigious posts, while at the other the political sphere becomes deadly. A Thai observer of politics, particularly those in rural areas is rudimentary and in that sense similar to North America. Difficult to say is whether the level of propaganda among lower levels of politics is more or less rampant and blatant than what can easily be watched on local news of some of the larger stations. What is known and what most have come to accept is a certain degree of corruption involved in politics. While historically one side will claim sainthood, the other will do so just as adamantly. Decisions on who is least corrupt always is determined by the people and based upon the amount of increase they can expect in their living standards. The more they receive the less corrupt their leader is, objectively.

Rallying calls of “Truth Today”, a call linked with transparency and from UDD or pro-Thaksin supporters are interesting. With the February court ruling against Thaksin on charges of corruption and sub-rulings which allowed for a floodgate of lawsuits from former competitors such as TAT and seizure of 1.4b Bhat, it is difficult to say Thaksin is not in the barrel of corrupt politicians. This in fact is not what a “Red Shirt” (UDD colours) would argue but would rather take a stance of Thaksin being a lesser of two evils and certainly one which has in mind the rural population more so than an elite urban population. During his term of office as PM, large emphasis was being placed on development and social programmes including a widely popular 30 Baht health insurance policy. In doing so, he clearly aimed at garnishing the support of numbers rather than power. Through his rise into politics by at first telecommunication contracts

with military, he had established a sufficiently powerful base of might, by which entrance into politics took place. After which time and overlooked only by the UDD, political influence directed substantial contracts to those who brought him into power, while legislative decisions passed in favour of companies where he himself, relatives, or political allies held substantial shares. Corruption being an issue, it was his non-traditional Thai background, particularly a family history of honest and true hard work, which separated him in the minds of his supports from that of entrenched politic elites whose aristocratic heritage is viewed by rural groups as corruption, despite high-levels of education and grooming.

Differences within Thai culture on ideals of a righteous path to prosperity is a large contributing factor in what is clearly a fracturing of the country along two schools of mind. One is that of inherited status and positions with a reverence for Dharma and a clear caste system, the other that of unfettered capitalism. Both see the other as corrupt. Thresholds then occur when injustices or mere perceptions of them are allowed to go unaccounted for and resolved whereby either of the two schools begin to demonstrate in light of a clear position of government indifference to the matter.

Bloody May being the most recent example, its scale separates it from others with the particularly swift clamp down by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajivas on May 19 leading to 91 casualties and more than 1000 injured. In under a week, areas larger in size to that of Time Square and similar to that of Central Park which had UDD fortifications were dismantled.

The Masses Revolt

With numbers of protesters marching into Bangkok in the hundreds of thousands, it becomes abundantly clear the push for democratic justice is as always, done by those who have the largest stake in its reformation although know the least about it and its workings. In the build up to Bloody May, farmers from Isaan province particularly were called upon to demonstrate their disapproval

of Government and to dissolve the House. Essentially rounded up by UDD town leaders and transported to Bangkok by means of large buses, pick-up trucks, and cargo tractors used in farming, the caravans went through Ayutthaya (Thailand's oldest capital) where military check points were set up for inspection of vehicles and suspicious people thought to be carrying weapons of various kinds including heavy arms and light makeshift explosives. Emotions were stirred and a strong sense of a "Ford" revolution was in the air, created by exceptionally knowledgeable UDD tacticians whose education came from that of the military.

Comparative to developed standards, only those who attend the most prestigious of Universities, Thammasat for example receive an education which is on par with standard developed education systems. Those attending such Universities are comprised in near entirety of PAD leaning youth. For those in the country side, Universities are available although at an admittedly lower level, not on par with private high-schools in Europe, nor some of Thailand's private schools. For the children of international immigrants, temporary or permanent, private schools located in Bangkok can offer world class amenities and levels of teaching. As with all countries, Universities are found in the urban centers with only a few notable exceptions in rural communities found throughout provinces such as Isaan with development increasing on whole. Looking only at the level of distinctly Thai Universities, not one ranks close to those which are established in Canada for instance or elsewhere in the developed world. Conditions are therefore nearly always right in Thailand for such large demonstrations as witnessed throughout the past two years to end in clashes as an environment of fear perpetuates in various corners with low levels of education. This lends itself easily to forms of mysticism whose figures or not that of Buddha or other deities but that of political leaders such as Arisman Pongruanrorg. Indeed such clashes do not occur more frequently due to the vast resources needed in a sustained demonstration. Figures for Bloody May ran to approximately 30m Bhat a day for costs linked to basic services and payment of ex-police/military who were placed at demonstra-

tion sites as guards and intermediaries.

Bloody May

The UDD March into the country which was supposed to last for the weekend, the time thought needed to have their list of demands for government dissolution seen into fruition, threw an international spotlight on Thailand's broken polity. Early as streams of trucks brimming with Red Shirts entered the city they progressed towards monuments representative of inspirational moments in Thai history such as Victory Monument. In line with a pacifist approach, police reaction was at first done in such a manner as to allow for the protest to continue as legally allowed and consisted of crowd control and surveillance. As large encampments of supporters such as those positioned on Rajadamnern became increasingly entrenched and marches within the city to various political offices met with failure, police involvement increased and clashes turned violent. As such interactions increased, the Internal Security Act (created after the ASEAN Summit and first implemented during the Songkran riots) was utilized and facilitated for the eventual violence on May 19.

While political protests of a more toned down approach are well known in Thai politics from all camps, recent examples are certainly coming from the end of UDD. Near the end of Oct. 2008 though, political demonstrations and clashes with police were carried out by the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and escalated to the point where during the Christmas period of 2008 the Suvarnabhumi became over run for two weeks by activists in a peaceful demonstration of disapproval. When demands of a dissolution of the Constitutional Court had been agreed upon, the demonstration finished having cost THAI Airways billions of Bhat in damages. A shift in political power followed changing not only those with the largest force in government but also the colour and demographic of the protesters on the streets.

Only a few months after a shift in government the UDD whose political power had been severally diminished turned to a larger than normal display of

force in their disruption of Songkran, the Thai New Year of 2009. As with Bloody May but with fewer numbers, Red Shirts entered Bangkok in droves, took over local buses and with support from already present sympathizers driving taxi's of various kinds, shut down major routes of transit including Victory Monument and large areas around Government House and Rajadamnern. Hijacked buses were utilized in forming barriers, positioned throughout the city and following major celebrations were set ablaze along with piles of tires as military force was used to squelch the disruption.

Although protests from the UDD during Songkran made it into international news, what was altogether missing was the depth at which the UDD had solidified their base of supporters. By that time it was clear by most that training camps in northern Thailand were being used to indoctrinate supporters at a very early age. For those pushing the boundaries of information into the realm of conspiracy, the northern effort was being coordinated by a small group of stringent Thaksin supporting generals who served for him only several years ago although disbanded and asked to operate independently when needed. Separating the normal Red Shirts and those who were part of the "Black Brigade" an extremist group within the UDD who often boast of attacks of which they are responsible for and called upon to carry out, can easily be made among UDD supporters and ought to be done. Such extreme elements are utilized in securing arms from the south of Thailand and transporting them to locations within Bangkok and in the northern provinces. Given levels of turmoil in the south and its Muslim influence along with decreased powers of state sanctioned policing operations, the flow of arms in Thailand clearly stems from the south upwards.

With the ease of arm movements from the south, a group of UDD supporters more than willing to take on responsibility for direct action against the government, and a large mass of supporters stemming from the rural provinces outside Bangkok city, the formula for an admittedly ad-hoc revolution was present leading into May 2010. Dispite an ongoing desire of those in favour of a

Thaksin or anti-establishment government, success in overthrowing the present government, the elite minority of PAD leaning politicians, and essentially the mere existence of a class system failed. Failure I would say can largely be attributed to the sheer scope in ambition of the UDD whose ultimate goal would be of replacing in Thailand the existing government to a non-secular democratically elected government from that of one deeply connected to monarchy and Buddhist Dharma. Simply put, it is recognition of how reality truly is rather than falling into the effort of making dreamers reality truth.

Thinking now of Bloody May and the court case in particular against Thaksin Shinawatra which opened the flood gates of potential lawsuits against him, it was in basic terms a demonstration which was allowed to continue to the point at which 91 supporters had been killed due to clashes with police and military forces and similarly over 1,000 had been injured. Beyond the numbers it marked one of the deepest felt conflicts in recent Thai history and a clear sign UDD are unwilling to live passively in a time when democratic rights, and the support thereof, is held by modern societies, and yet are living in a country where such rights cannot be expressed due to lack of administrative capacity and scales of corruption.

Interesting to note within this conflict is the fundamental sense of injustice from those willing to take up arms in the mentality that comparable work to living standards and salary between groups is unjust. It is an entirely pessimistic although pragmatic view of reality and one where the only solution would be supportive of a Rawlsian future. Those demonstrating outside Siam Paragon and Central World could not afford the tall Americano's at the Starbucks inside, which their PAD counter parts could. This reality will always speak volumes to a revolutionists mind and push forward uninformed emotional notions of what is fair and therefore just in a society.

Clearing a Path to Thai Prosperity

It is always abundantly clear when two political

“movements” are clashing to such levels in the streets, that what is missing is a developed democracy. The vacuum of proper political representation leads groups such as the UDD supporting the Peoples Power Party to resort nearly as the defacto means towards political demonstrations which increasingly are boiling over into civil unrest. Supporters simply do not, and rightly so, see an effective alternative to violent protest, as similarly the PAD did not. Fundamentally, what is being seen and was seen, is a transition state of an under developed country becoming a developed one with a current lack of a functioning democracy, ripe for corruption, stemming from an inadequate education system arguably perpetuated by saving face rather than taking advice and insufficiently utilizing Thailand's basic resources to establish monetary security for its people.

The old adage that an uninformed mass is easy to control remains true and although in Thailand there is an intellectual elite which are exceptionally small, both sides fall under uninformed by and large on issues of contemporary politics and ways of development as it transitions from developing to developed. Foreign Aid in a number of forms flows into Thailand although continues to suffer from contextual problems and natural resistance from local populations of political bodies. In light of the levels of education, and particularly looking at the struggle between the UDD and the PAD the work of playwright Henrik Ibsen in his play “Enemy of the People” is exceptionally apt. Through the writing, a struggle ensues between ideas of governance revolving around whether small educated elite should govern over the uneducated masses. Although the question is applicable for all governments and is timeless, in Thailand that question is being answered. In answering it, civilian lives are being lost as it is played out in its truest form on the streets of Bangkok and in small occurrences of civil disobedience in rural areas. The majority of international observers taking interest will easily come to the conclusion that a functioning democratic structure to government ought to be the push for development and sustained political peace and prosperity.

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