

## THAILAND AND DEMOCRACY

# BAYONET TRUMPS THE BALLOT

Jayantha Dhanapala writes that political reforms are desperately needed in Thailand

On 22 May, the military in Thailand announced that it had taken over the country, suspended the Constitution and ousted the democratically elected – but controversial – Government of Yingluck Shinawatra. She is the sister of the exiled former PM Thaksin Shinawatra. Thus ended a period of political gridlock, as supporters and opponents of Shinawatra conducted their months-long struggle for supremacy on the streets of Bangkok – imperilling the economic stability of the country and its reputation as a booming tourist capital of the world.

For some, this came as a welcome relief. Others view it cynically, as more of the same in Thailand's chequered history after 1932. That was when a constitutional monarchy was established, leading to a fragile democracy, with a vibrant Tiger economy enjoying Newly Industrialized Country (NIC) status within the pro-US regional group of ASEAN.

Military dictatorship, rather than elected democratic governance, has been the predominant pattern in this country – approximately eight times the size of Sri Lanka, and a 65 million population (over three times as large as ours) – sharing centuries-old Theravāda Buddhist religious ties with Sri Lanka, and enjoying the unique advantage of never having been under colonial rule.

Are we witnessing a different



concept of democracy, beyond the basic 'one person, one vote' electoral mandate?

In Egypt, when elections resulted in the Muslim Brotherhood being elected, a backlash enthroned the Army (once again), in an ironic

reversal of events which began in Tahrir Square.

Now, in Thailand, popular elections are not sufficient as a mandate to rule, when the Bangkok elite thinks otherwise, and while profound social and political transformations are

taking place. They are symbolised by clashes between the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts.

The source of the current political problems may be traced back to the January 2001 general elections, widely

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AFP PHOTO/NICOLAS ASFOURI

**BANGKOK MAYHEM** Thai soldiers clash with anti-coup protesters, during a planned gathering in Bangkok, not long ago. Thailand's military junta disbanded the Senate and placed all law-making authorities in the hands of the army chief, dramatically tightening its grip after a coup that has sparked protests on the streets of Thailand's capital, and drawn international condemnation.

regarded as free and fair, when the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party led by Thaksin Shinawatra won by defeating the incumbent Democrats. After a four-year term, the Thaksin Government was re-elected with an absolute majority in the 2005 elections, which had the highest voter turnout in Thai history. However, the Government was

overthrown in a coup in 2006, and the military took power. Under military rule, the TRT Party was dissolved. A new Constitution was approved by referendum, and democratic general elections were held on 23 December 2007. The People's Power Party (PPP), led by Samak Sundaravej, formed a government with

five smaller parties. But after a series of controversies, it was unseated by the Constitutional Court. The succeeding government was also plagued by controversy until, on 2 December 2008, Thailand's Constitutional Court described it as 'a judicial coup,' in a disputed ruling, and found the PPP guilty of electoral fraud.

This led to the dissolution of the party, according to the law. The military then met with factions of the governing coalition, to get their members to join the Opposition, and the Democrat Party was able to form a government for the first time since 2001. The leader of the party, Oxford-educated Abhisit Vejjajiva, was appointed and sworn in as the 27<sup>th</sup> Prime Minister of Thailand, together with a new Cabinet, on 17 December 2008. Vejjajiva's tenure was marred by constant demonstrations by the Red Shirts, who opposed his party. Army efforts to control these demonstrations led to many deaths and injuries.

On 3 July 2011, the Opposition Pheu Thai Party, led by Yingluck Shinawatra, won the general elections by a landslide (265 seats, out of 500 in the House of Representatives). Prime Minister Shinawatra (a newcomer to politics) was the country's first female leader, and she ruled despite street demonstrations until the coup of 22 May, led by Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha.

An attempt to grant amnesty to her brother and others provoked strong opposition, as did populist measures like the rice subsidy scheme marred by corruption. The street demonstration led by Suthep Thaugsuban was called the Muan Maha Prachachon (The Great Mass of People) and awarded the Bangkok Post's People of the Year award.

There is an unmistakable class conflict behind the politics of Thailand. Thaksin Shinawatra is seen as a nouveau riche parvenu billionaire, who made his money in the telecom industry. His Thai Rak Thai Party commands strong support

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in the rural north and north-east of the country.

Anthropologists warn that this is an over-simplification of complex change in Thai society. For example, Grant Evans writes: "Thailand's north-east region, just across the border, accounts for 31 percent of the total population. Commonly called Isan (and its people, Khon Isan), the region is mostly ethnic Lao and has been a major base of support for Thaksin."

"According to anthropologist Charles Keyes, the region's ethno-regional identity and solidarity has made the local people into a formidable political force. But, as Keyes also shows, Isan has been transformed out of sight since he first visited 50 years ago," Evans adds.

Thaksin's opponents are drawn mainly from Bangkok's upper and middle-class elite, and from Opposition strongholds in the south. The Bangkok Post has described them as "white-collar working-class people and business entrepreneurs," who comprise the Yellow Shirts. They claim that Yingluck's government was controlled by her brother, the former PM, from Dubai.

Many of the middle class protesters make no effort to conceal their scorn for the Shinawatra Red Shirt supporters, whom they portray as country bumpkins whose

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votes are easily bought with Thaksin's money. Surin Pitsuwan – a former Secretary-General of ASEAN – sees this mass mobilisation as a political evolution and social transformation.

He is quoted as saying: "Deep grievances are being articulated against a rampant and unprecedented level of corruption, abuse of power, cronyism in business, nepotism in the bureaucracy... pervasive and systematic violations of human and civil rights."

What is evident is that major political reform is needed for Thai democracy to work, and the military must allow that to happen. Land reform, and reform of the Buddhist Sangha, is also being pursued.

Before the coup, the UNDP reported positively on Thailand's economy, stating: "Thailand has shown remarkable economic growth during the past 20 years, reducing poverty from 21 percent in 2000 to around eight percent in 2009."

"It has also been extending the

coverage of its social services, including education and health care, to nearly all of its population. In the areas of poverty, education and health, Thailand has made strong progress during the past two decades... Thailand has met the majority of its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) ahead of the 2015 deadline," it noted.

At the same time, corruption remains a key challenge, and there is limited access to justice for the poor and vulnerable. Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) ranks Thailand at No. 102, from among 175 countries. Inequality is another challenge. Vulnerable groups such as migrants, informal workers and displaced persons are not equally benefitting from Thailand's economic successes. Women and children are still at risk of sexual and domestic violence.

There is a subtext to the Thai scenario which can never be published in Thailand, because of the stringent laws surrounding any reports concerning the monarchy. That has to do with the fact that King Bhumibol Adulyadej is 87 years old, and ailing. The Crown Prince is unpopular, unlike his sister, and is regarded as a playboy with links to Thaksin.

The military coup was endorsed by the King, giving it the legitimacy it needed, in a nation where the monarchy

is deeply revered. Thus, all the institutions – the monarchy, political parties, military and judiciary – are involved through interconnected oligarchies, and no one is blameless in the political imbroglio.

Minister Charupong Ruangsuwam of the Yingluck Government went into exile, to lead a campaign against the military coup. Allegations have been made that the coup was a long time in gestation. It has had bad press in the West, complicated by reports of slave labour being used in Thailand's fisheries sector.

Spokesmen for the military have denied the allegations, promising that controversial former PM Thaksin Shinawatra and his family could still return to Thai politics.

No elections are scheduled for at least after October next year. Meanwhile, observers fear that the economy will decline, with capital leaving the country. The military has made determined efforts to make itself popular, by organising public airings of the 2014 FIFA World Cup that was played out in Brazil recently and peace demonstrations to heal the rifts among the people.

However, like the Roman emperors of yore, this policy of 'bread and circuses' is unlikely to win the hearts and minds of the people, unless it is accompanied by genuine political reforms.



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