
Class Struggle between the Coloured T-Shirts in Thailand

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Opinion Paper

Abstract: *The political crisis and unrest which we have seen in Thailand over the last four and a half years, represents a serious class war between the rich conservative elites (Royalist Yellow Shirts) and the urban and rural poor (Red Shirts). It is not a pure class war. Due to a vacuum on the Left in the past, millionaire and populist politician, Taksin Shinawat, has managed to provide leadership to the Red Shirts. The labour movement, as an organised force, has remained on the fringes of this crisis, despite the fact that individual workers have been politicised and are active. This class war has turned Thailand upside down and raised important political questions about the roles of many institutions which we have to try to answer. The actions by the conservative elites have forced millions of ordinary people to reject the mainstream ideas about loyalty to the Monarchy. The taboo about criticising the Palace and the King's advisors has been broken. The courts have been exposed as merely puppets of those in power and the mainstream media has openly taken the side of the elites. Even traditional Civil Society groups, such as NGOs networks and academics have failed to defend freedom of speech and democracy, joining with the conservative elites and the military in their attempts to totally undermine the democratic process and all forms of social justice. The Red Shirt movement, starting out as passive voters, who supported Taksin and his political party, have now started to organise themselves into a grass roots pro-democracy movement. As the crisis progresses, Taksin's leadership of this movement has started to be undermined by his willingness to compromise with some sections of the elite, although he still remains very popular.*

Keywords: *Military Coup, Thailand, Red Shirts, Yellow Shirts*

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1 Background to Thai Political Crisis

In April 2009, for the fourth time in forty years¹, troops opened fire on pro-democracy demonstrators in Bangkok. Each time the aim has been the same: to protect the interests of the Conservative Elites who have run Thailand for the past 70 years. This time, the protestors were Red Shirts, and at least two people died and hundreds more were injured, some seriously².

For those watching the cold-blooded murder by soldiers on the streets of Bangkok in April 2009, it may be tempting just to assume that the present chaos is merely about different coloured T shirts or about an intra- elite struggle between two factions, which has drawn in supporters of either side, as though they were mirror images of each other. This is not so. The conflict which erupted in 2005 is rooted in class issues.

Five years ago, Thailand, under the elected Taksin government, had a developing democracy with freedom of expression, a relatively free press and an active Civil Society, where social movements campaigned to protect the interests of the poor. This was not, however the work of Taksin's *Thai Rak Thai Party* administration, since there were serious problems of human rights abuses. Taksin's government used murderous repression in the Muslim Malay southern provinces³ and killed over 3000 people in the so-called "War on Drugs"⁴.

Taksin's *Thai Rak Thai Party* was modernising. For the first time in decades, a party gained mass support from the poor because it believed that the poor were not a burden.

¹ Previously armed troops or police fired on pro-democracy demonstrators in Bangkok in October 1973, October 1976 and May 1992. See Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2007) *A Coup for the Rich*. WDPress. For free down loads go to: <http://wdpress.blog.co.uk/>.

² See Nick Nostitz's eye witness account:

<http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2009/04/20/the-crushing-of-the-red-shirts/>

³ Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2007) Chapter 4, already quoted.

⁴ See Jaran Cosananund (2003) Human rights and the war on drugs: problems of conception, consciousness and social responsibility. *Thailand Human Rights Journal*, 1, 59-87.

They argued that the poor should be “stake-holders” rather than surfs. These “populist” policies were developed after the 1997 Asian economic crisis and were a result of widespread consultations in society¹. This was no Socialist party, but a party of big business committed to free-market policies at a Macro and Global level, and Keynesian policies at village or grass-roots level². When the party came to power in 2001, the banks had stopped lending and there was an urgent need to stimulate the economy. It represented the modernising interests of an important faction of the capitalist class.

The present political crisis started with mass demonstrations led by the mis-named “*Peoples Alliance for Democracy*” (PAD) in late 2005. This was after *Thai Rak Thai*’s landslide re-election earlier that year. The PAD began as an “alliance from hell” between disgruntled Royalist media tycoon Sonti Limtongkul and a handful of NGO and social movement leaders. They attacked Taksin’s government for corruption. But they were never interested in criticising his human rights abuses or attacking the rampant corruption of other elites. Taksin responded to the growing crisis by dissolving parliament and calling fresh elections in April 2006. The opposition, including the *Democrat Party*, boycotted these elections because they knew that they were very unpopular with the electorate. “Liberal” academics “explained” that calling fresh elections was “undemocratic”. The courts then annulled the election, using the bizarre excuse that the ballot boxes were the wrong way round in the polling booths. No evidence was presented that any serious electoral fraud had ever taken place. Later the courts were used two more times, to dissolve *Thai Rak Thai* and then the party that was reformed under a new name. Rather than accepting that the electorate support for Taksin was because of the government’s first ever Universal Health Care scheme and many other pro-poor measures, Taksin’s

¹ Pasuk Phongpaichit & Chris Baker (2004) *Taksin. The business of politics in Thailand*. Silkworm Books.

² Kevin Hewison (2003) Crafting a new social contract: Domestic capitalist responses to the challenge of neoliberalism. In Ji Giles Ungpakorn (ed.) *Radicalising Thailand: new political perspectives*. Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

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opponents claimed that the poor did not understand Democracy. The *Democrat Party*, being extreme neo-liberals, spent most of the time attacking these pro-poor policies as being a waste of money and against “fiscal discipline”. No wonder no ordinary Thai would want to vote for them! When the *Democrats* eventually formed a government with military backing in December 2008, they cut the universal health budget by almost a third¹.

The NGO and social movement leaders of the PAD moved sharply to the Right during the enfolding crisis, becoming fanatical Royalists and calling on the King to sack Taksin’s elected government in 2006. This, the King refused to do, but the PAD demands were seen as a green light for a military coup and the military obliged in September. PAD leaders and military junta leaders were later seen celebrating their victory at a New Year party in 2007. At that time, the *Democrat Party* also welcomed the coup. According to deputy leader Korn Chatikavanij, “there was no constitutional” method of getting rid of Taksin. He also said that he “respected” the junta for trying to establish political “stability”².

The new military appointed cabinet had a neo-liberal slant. The Finance Minister, Pridiyatorn Devakul, was a man who believed in “neo-liberal fiscal discipline”. He opposed “too much spending” on public health. After the coup the Budget Bureau cut the budget for *Thai Rak Thai*’s universal health care scheme by 23% while increasing military spending by 30%³. Pridiyatorn also threatened to axe many good mass transit projects which could solve Bangkok’s traffic problems.

The army ripped up the best Constitution Thailand has ever had, and replaced it with their own. A referendum was held to approve the military Constitution. Many provinces were under martial law, campaigning for a “no” vote in the

¹ Prachatai 24/4/2009 www.prachatai.com

² Interviews with ABC news 20 September 2006, *International Herald Tribune* 29 September 2006 and with *Bangkok Business Day* 22 September 2006.

³ *Bangkok Post* 19 & 20/12/2006.

referendum was deemed to be illegal, and full page advertisements in the press urged people to vote “yes”. The referendum result was extremely close, a small majority being in favour. Half the NGOs, the PAD, most academics, the main stream media and the *Democrat Party* all supported the new Constitution. The military Constitution allowed for half the Senate to be appointed by the military, rather than elected. It decreased the role of political parties and installed a crony system where members of the elite appointed themselves to the Senate, the Judiciary and to so-called “Independent Bodies”. The Constitution stated that neo-liberal free market policies must be used in the interests of fiscal discipline, but it also stated that the military budget must be vastly increased. The final clause in the Constitution, which used to state that citizens had the right to oppose military coups, was changed to legitimise the 2006 coup and any future coups.

The courts in Thailand have never been independent or just. The military used the courts to dissolve the *Thai Rak Thai Party* and then they held elections. But again, Taksin’s party (now called *Palang Prachachon*) won a majority. So the courts were used for a second time to dissolve this party. The new Prime Minister was barred from office for appearing on a TV cooking programme. It is clear that the aim was to cripple the most popular party and never to allow it to form a stable government. At the same time the PAD launched their deliberate “campaign of chaos” in order to achieve their “New Order”, a brand of authoritarianism. They violently took over Government House, wrecking the interior. They staged violent actions to try to prevent an elected parliament from opening and then they seized the two international airports with the support of the military and the *Democrat Party*. They cared little about the damage to jobs and the Thai economy, feeling that the elites would always be alright and the poor could just suffer. The Bank of Thailand estimated that the actions of the PAD at the airports caused 290 billion Baht’s worth of damage to the economy¹. No one from the PAD has been punished.

¹ *Bangkok Post* 7/1/2009.

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After the 2006 coup, the P.A.D. descended into a fascist type of organisation. It took on ultra-Royalist and ultra-Nationalist politics. Its supporters wore Royal Yellow Shirts. It nearly caused a war with Cambodia over an ancient hill-top ruin. It built up an armed guard who openly carry and use fire-arms and other weapons on the streets of Bangkok. The P.A.D.'s media outlet, *Manager Group*, has a history of witch hunts against academics and social activists who question the deterioration of democracy and question the use of the lese majeste law. It encourages people to commit acts of violence against those who think differently.

Finally, at the end of 2008, the army bullied and bribed some of the worst, corrupt elements in Taksin's party to change sides and support the *Democrats*. Foremost among them was Newin Chitchorp, named after the Burmese military dictator. He and some *Democrat Party* politicians also set up the paramilitary "Blue Shirts" who carried arms and attacked Red Shirt protestors in April 2009. Abhisit Vejajeva became the Prime Minister. His name sums it all up. It means "privilege". He was educated at Oxford and Eton.

Today, the Thai government, and their elite supporters, are once again using the language of the Cold War and from the era of military dictatorships, in order to throttle free speech and democracy. They are branding the opposition as "Communists" and "enemies and destroyers of Thailand". There is total government control of the mainstream media and widespread censorship of alternative websites and community radio stations. All official TV and radio channels are owned, either by the Army, or by the Government and the print media tycoons are government supporters. As soon as the *Democrats* came to power, they announced that their priority would be to crack down on people who were deemed to have "insulted" the King¹. Lese majeste cases increased dramatically. The law carries a maximum sentence of 15 years in prison. Two thousand three hundred websites were closed down by the ICT Ministry and a further 200 were being reviewed. The ICT Ministry was given a budget of 80

¹ This applied exclusively to those who opposed the 2006 military coup, myself included.

million baht to help its campaign of censorship¹. After the unrest in April 2009, 66 Red Shirt websites were closed for ten days under an Emergency Decree and the police went around various community radio stations to put them off the air². When the ICT unblocked some of these sites, they threatened to use “other laws” to close them again if they stepped out of line. The government also channelled funds into spying activities against their opponents.

Every thing in Thailand is not as it seems. The “*Democrat Party*”, who formed a government in late 2008 and ordered troops to kill protestors, never had the support from the majority of the electorate and are against democracy. The “*Peoples Alliance for Democracy*”, are neither an alliance of the people, nor for democracy. Their membership base is among the extremist middle classes who believe that the previous Taksin government spent “too much” money on welfare and populist policies for the poor. They believe that only *they* are the true guardians of the Monarchy and that the majority of the Thai electorate, who are poor, should not have the right to vote. The army general who staged the 2006 coup, Sonti Boonyaratgalin, gave an interview where he said that: “*I suspect many Thais still lack a proper understanding of democracy. The people have to understand their rights and their duties. Some have yet to learn about discipline. I think it is important to educate the people about true democratic rule*”³.

There are complete double standards in applying the law. The Royalists who used street violence and blocked the airports are still free and unlikely to be put in jail. The Generals who abused their power in a coup are still raking in the money, just like previous Thai generals. There is no transparency and accountability of any major public institutions, including the Monarchy, the Judiciary, the Government and the Army. The judges have their own version of the lese majeste law to stifle any criticism. There can be no justice if judges are not accountable to the public.

¹ *Prachatai* 13/1/2009 www.prachatai.com. The manager of this alternative newspaper was also arrested. See <http://thaipoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com>

² *Prachatai* 16 & 17/4/2009. www.prachatai.com

³ *The Nation* 26/10/2006.

2 Class War

What we have been seeing in Thailand since late 2005, is a growing class war between the urban and rural poor and the old elites. Those who started this class war, only intended it to be an inter-elite dispute, but they have succeeded in unleashing major class forces. On the side of the elites are the Royalist middle classes and the NGOs. It is of course not a pure class war. Due to a vacuum on the Left, millionaire and populist politicians like Taksin Shinawat have managed to provide leadership to the poor. For the last 80 years there have been many movements of the poor and oppressed, throughout the World, who have fought the ruling classes using different ideologies and organisational forms. This does not mean that class is not the fundamental underlying issue. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Bolivarian Movement, various national liberation movements in Asia and Africa or pro-democracy movements in Eastern Europe, may not look like the Bolsheviks of 1917, but they are, never the less, movements of oppressed classes.

The urban and rural poor, who form the majority of the electorate, are the Red Shirts. They want the right to choose their own democratically elected government. They started out as passive supporters of Taksin's *Thai Rak Thai* government. But they have now formed a new citizens' movement for what they call "Real Democracy"¹. For them, "Real Democracy" means an end to the long-accepted "Quiet Dictatorship" of the Army generals and the Palace. This situation allowed the generals, the King's advisors in the Privy Council, and the conservative elites, to act as though they were above the Constitution. Les majeste laws and intermittent repression have been used to silence opposition. Ever since 2006, these elites have blatantly acted against election results by staging a military coup, using the courts and by backing Yellow Shirt mob violence on the streets and at the airports.

¹ This is confirmed by radical academic Niti Eawsiwong in his *Matichon* article in Thai. www.matichon.co.th, 20/4/2009.

Most of those in the Red Shirt movement support Taksin for good reasons. His government put in place many modern pro-poor policies, including Thailand's first ever universal health care system. Yet the Red Shirts are not merely Taksin puppets. There is a dialectical relationship between Taksin (who is exiled outside Thailand) and the Red Shirts. His leadership provides encouragement and confidence to fight. Yet the Red Shirts are also becoming self-organised in community groups and some are showing frustration with Taksin's lack of progressive leadership, especially over his insistence that they continue to be "loyal" to the Crown. Over the past few months, the Red Shirts have shown signs of self-leadership to such an extent that the old *Thai Rak Thai* politicians are running to keep up. A Republican movement is growing, but a large proportion of Red Shirts may still love both Taksin and the King¹. Many left-leaning Thais like myself, are not Taksin supporters. We opposed his human rights abuses. But we are trying to be the left-wing of the citizens' movement for Real Democracy.

The Yellow Shirts are conservative Royalists. Some have fascist tendencies. They supported the 2006 coup, wrecked Government House and blocked the international airports last year. Behind them were the Army and the Palace. That is why troops never shot at the Yellow Shirts while they created chaos. That is why Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajeva from the *Democrat Party*, did nothing to punish the Yellow Shirts. After all, he appointed some to his cabinet. The Foreign Minister was a good example. He took part in the airport seizure and insulted the Cambodians over an infantile border dispute. The aims of the Yellow Shirts are to reduce the voting power of the electorate in order to protect the conservative elites and the "bad old ways" of running Thailand. They see increased citizen empowerment as a threat and propose a "New Order" dictatorship, where people are allowed to vote, but most MPs and public positions are not up for election. Their dishonest excuse is to claim that the poor have all been "bought" and are trapped in a Taksin

¹ See Andrew Walker & Nicholas Farrelly (2009) *Thailand's Royal Sub-plot*. <http://inside.org.au>, 14/4/2009.

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patron-client system. For them, the poor would show “maturity and an understanding of Democracy” if they voted for parties which *did not* provide universal health care!

In April 2009, Sonti Limtongkul, a key leader of the Yellow Shirted PAD, was a victim of an assassination attempt. There were very few people who blamed the Red Shirts. Sonti himself laid the blame with elements inside the *Democrat Party* government. The Army and the government politicians are very distrustful of the PAD’s future intentions. They now have their own Blue Shirt paramilitaries and no longer need the PAD.

3 Monarchy and Military

The Thai conservative elite are playing a dangerous game. They have started a class war between the people and the Royalists. Previously, since the collapse of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the mid 1980s, they had achieved political hegemony of Royalist ideas in society.

This King grew in stature under the corrupt military dictators in the 1950s and 1960s: Generals Sarit, Thanom and Prapass. Earlier, in the 1940s, he had allowed innocent people to be executed after they were falsely accused of killing his older brother. He supported the blood-bath at Thammasart University on 6th October 1976, because he felt that Thailand had “too much democracy”. At the time he was also the patron of the violent fascist gang that were called the “village scouts”. This was a period of deep divisions in society between the Left and Right, following the victory of the Communists in Indo-China.

More recently, the King allowed the army to use his name in staging the coup on the 19th September 2006. Furthermore he allowed his name to be used by the PAD protestors and the *Democrat Party*, in the destruction of democracy. He has been an advocate of economic views which reveal his opposition to state social welfare for the poor and income redistribution. But what is worse, as one of the richest men in the world, the king has the arrogance to

lecture the poor to be sufficient in their poverty, through the notion of the “Sufficiency Economy”¹. This is nothing more than a reactionary right-wing ideology that says that the poor must know their place. Finally, this king allows his supporters to proclaim that he is “the father of the nation,” and yet his own son is not respected by anyone in Thai society! For the millions of Thais who know all this to be true, it is only fear and intimidation that stops us all from speaking this truth out loud.

The elites have for decades ruled Thailand from behind the scenes as if it were their own personal fiefdom. A poisonous patron client network draws in new recruits to this “elite feeding trough”, where fortunes are to be made at the expense of the hard-working poor. This vast parasitic organism maintains its legitimacy by creating a false image that Thailand has an “Absolute Monarchy”, where the King is an all-powerful god. Yet the King is weak and has no “character” and his power is a fiction². The King has always been weak and lacking in any democratic principles. The Palace has been used to legitimise past and present dictatorships. As a “stabilising force”, the Monarchy has only helped to stabilise the interests of the elite. The King has never had the courage to defend democracy or oppose military violence. The Queen is an extreme reactionary who backs any vicious right-wing movement. In 2008 she openly supported the PAD. However the real people with power among the Thai elites are the Army and high-ranking state officials surrounding the Palace.

Army generals, politicians ³, businessmen and privy councillors prostrate themselves, “Thai Style”, on the ground and pay homage to the “powerful” king, while exercising the real power in the land and enriching themselves. But the King is very old and his son is hated, feared or viewed with

¹ Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2007) already quoted, p. 11.

² Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2008) How much power does the Thai King really have? 23 Jan 2008.

http://wpress.blog.co.uk/2008/02/05/how_much_power_does_the_thai_king_really~3681130/

³ Even politicians like Taksin Shinawat and most former *Thai Rak Thai* MPs are loyal to the King.

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contempt. Where will the elite's new meal ticket come from when the King dies?

Like the story of “the Emperor’s New Clothes”, the elites relied on telling the Thai population (and maybe even the King), a pack of lies in order to promote their own agenda. *The King is a God! The King is all powerful! The King is a genius! We serve the King!* And the lese majeste law and other authoritarian measures are used to back up these lies. But the boy has already spoken! Most people in Thailand can see that the Emperor has no clothes! The King hasn’t “held together Thai society”. He hasn’t created justice and equality and he has sided in public with the military and the anti-democrats throughout his reign¹. People are sick and tired of the elite’s privileges. All traffic is stopped for the Royals to pass in Bangkok, while emergency ambulances are stuck in traffic jams. Citizens are forced to crawl on the ground like animals and use special Royal Language when in the company of the Royal Family.

4 The Left

Like most countries throughout the World, Thailand went through a process of mass radicalisation in the late 1960s, early 1970s. The high point was when a mass movement of students and urban workers overthrew the military dictatorship in October 1973². The Maoist Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) was the organisation which gained most from this radicalisation, especially after the ruling elites fought back with a blood bath in October 1976. Throughout 1976 and 1977, thousands of students left the cities and towns to join the communist army in the hills. However, the Maoist strategy failed. This was because of a number of factors. The CPT mainly ignored workers

¹ See Paul Handley (2006) *The King Never Smiles*. Yale University Press. This book has been widely read in Thailand despite the fact that it is banned.

² Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2007) already quoted, Chapter 3. Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2003), contributing editor, *Radicalising Thailand: new political perspectives*. Already quoted, Chapters 1 & 7. Giles Ungpakorn (2001) “The political economy of class struggle in modern Thailand.” *Historical Materialism* 8, Summer, 153-183.

struggles in urban areas, they were shocked by the growing friendship between “Maoist” China and the Thai military government in the late 1970s, and the student activists became disillusioned with the Party’s authoritarian nature. By the mid 1980s, the Party had collapsed. Into this vacuum on the Left, stepped the NGOs. Their early activists were mainly ex-CPT members and supporters, who rejected “Communism” and turned to Community-style Anarchism.

5 Academics and Non-Governmental Organizations on the Side of Conservative Royalists

That the Thai ruling elite, the military and the fascist PAD yellow shirts, together with the *Democrat Party*, should support the murder of pro-democracy protestors, and the destruction of democracy, is not surprising. What should surprise and worry us is that almost the entire Thai NGO movement and almost the entirety of Thai academia have kept silent, or worse, supported this destruction of free speech and democracy.

For decades most academics have shunned political debate, preferring personal squabbles to principled arguments. No one is ever forced to justify or argue for their beliefs. On the occasion when papers are written, they are descriptive and ignore work by those who pose awkward, alternative, explanations. This leads to a climate of arrogance and a lack of debate. So when they defended their middle class interests and supported the 2006 coup, academics felt no need for a serious explanation other than to say that the poor “did not understand democracy”.

Liberal academics like Anek Laotamatat and Tirayut Boonmi, are now promoting the idea of Asia Values in their attempt to justify the coup. For them “Thai-style Democracy” is more suitable for society. Anek argues that Thailand needs a “mixed” system where elected governments share power with the King and *Thai Rak Thai* Populism is replaced by “Third Way” social welfare. Anek is an ardent admirer of Anthony Giddens¹. In 1995 Anek wrote a book, in Thai,

¹ Anek Laotamatat (2006) *Taksina-Populism*. Matichon Press, in Thai.

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called “*The tale of two democratic cities*”, which attempted to analyse the major divide in Thai democratic society as being between the rural and urban areas. In his view, the rural people voted for corrupt politicians because these politicians were “patrons” of the poor. Vote buying was a ceremonial part of this “patron-client” relationship and not seen as “wrong” by the rural voters. Anek believed that rural people did not vote by using “independent thought” about political policies, but were bound by ties of obligation to their patrons. In contrast, the urban middle class were well educated and chose their governments and politicians using independent thought and a strong sense of “political morality”. The middle classes also took part in street demonstrations to bring down corrupt governments.

Law professor Bawornsak Uwanno, used to head a “democracy think tank” named after Thailand’s last absolute monarchy. After having a hand in drawing up the 1997 Constitution, he went to work as a loyal servant of the Taksin government. Later, as things did not look so well, he abandoned the sinking *Thai Rak Thai* ship and became a legal advisor to the military junta in 2006. Middle class intellectuals like Bawornsak certainly understand how to manipulate “democracy” and survive!!

The list of liberal academic collaborators with the junta in 2006, is a list of shame. It includes the following notables: Ammar Siamwala, Kotom Ariya, Sopon Supapong, Chai-anan Samudwanij, Wutipong Priapjeerawat, Sungsit Piriyaarungsan, Sujit Boonbongkarn, Surichai Wankeaw, Chaiyan Chaiyaporn, Surapong Jaiyarnarm and Surat Horakul. Many are from the Faculty of Political Science at Chulalongkorn University, where I used to work. My university banned my book which criticised the 2006 coup¹ and gave it to the Special Branch police, thus starting a process where I was eventually charged with lese majeste.

One wonders what theories these academics use to teach about “Democratisation” and whether those theories have any connection to the real world. But this un-academic

¹ (2007) *A Coup for the Rich*, already quoted.

behaviour has rich rewards, however. Many academics have extra earnings from collaborating with the military and the ruling elites.

6 Nongovernmental Organizations

In the present political crisis in Thailand, it is shocking that most Thai NGOs have disgraced themselves by siding with the Yellow Shirt elites or remaining silent in the face of the general attack on democracy. It is shocking because NGO activists started out by being on the side of the poor and the oppressed in society. To explain this situation, we must go beyond a simple explanation that relies on personal failings of individuals or suggestions that NGOs have “underlying bad intentions”, or that they are “agents of imperialism”¹.

At the start of the anti-Taksin protests, many NGOs joined the PAD demonstrators. This was understandable because the top leadership of the PAD contained people with NGO connections. At the time it was legitimate to protest against the excesses of the government, although it was highly questionable whether the NGOs should have joined forces with Conservative Royalists like Sonti Limtongkul, leader of the PAD. Soon, however, NGO involvement with the PAD, and then the military junta, after the coup of 2006, went far beyond anything that can be classified as a genuine support for freedom and democracy. At every twist and turn in the crisis, the majority of NGOs ended up on the side of the elite and the oppressors.

After the 2006 coup, some Thai NGO leaders, such as Rawadee Parsertjaroensuk (NGO-Coordinating Committee), Nimit Tienudom (AIDS network), Banjong Nasa (Southern Fisher Folk network), Witoon Permpongsajaroen (Ecology movement) and Sayamon Kaiyurawong (Thai Volunteer Service) etc. put themselves forward in the hope that the military would select them as appointed Senators. Earlier, NGO activists such as Rawadee Parsertjaroensuk and Nimit

¹ This latter accusation was levelled at NGOs by Maoist groups in Asia during the 2004 World Social Forum in India.

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Tienudom attended PAD rallies. Nimit claimed at a rally on 23rd March 2006, that most Taksin supporters “did not know the truth” about his government¹. This is patronising to the poor. Many NGO leaders such as Nimit, also told their members not to protest against the military junta at the closing ceremony of the Thai Social Forum in October 2006, although the leadership of the NGO-Coordinating Committee supported this protest. Immediately after the coup, even the Thai staff of Focus on Global South supported the coup², although Walden Bello maintained a principled opposition to dictatorship. Some NGO activists became government appointees under the military junta. Most had illusions that the military would clean up Thai politics with their new constitution. During the Thai Social Forum itself, large Thai NGOs like *Raks Thai Foundation* brought yellow-shirted (Royalist) villagers to the Forum. This NGO receives a large amount of money from the Thai State. The World Social Forum movement was initially founded on the concept of being totally independent from the state, yet The Thai Social Forum received funds from state organisations such as the “Office of the Thai Health Promotion Fund”³.

It is interesting to compare a number of statements made by NGO-COD (the NGO national Coordinating Committee) about the violent PAD protests throughout 2008, with the statements made in April 2009 about Red Shirt protests. The substance of the difference is in the emphasis. In May, June and September 2008, Pairoi Polpet, as NGO-COD chairperson issued statements calling for the pro-Taksin government to respect the right of the PAD to “peaceful protest”. In June 2008, NGO-COD called on the pro-Taksin government to resign. Elected PAD and NGO Senator Rosana Tositrakul stated that the government had no right to disperse the PAD protestors who had seized Government House. It is important to note that the pro-Taksin government did not use the army or live ammunition on the

¹ *Prachatai* 23/3/2006 www.prachatai.com .

² <http://focusweb.org/the-thai-coup-democracy-and-wearing-yellow-on-mondays.html?Itemid=93> by Chanida Chanyapate and Alec Bamford.

³ www.thaihealth.or.th

PAD. Police mis-use of tear-gas, may however have caused one PAD death.

Later, after the *Democrats* had been manoeuvred into power by the Army and PAD, in April 2009, NGO-COD called on the Redshirts to stop “violent protests” against the new government. They later praised the voluntary ending of Redshirt protests as a way to build peace. They called on the *Democrat* government to “only use legal means to disperse protestors”. One day later, the Army and the government used live ammunition to disperse the Redshirts, killing and injuring many. An NGO-COD statement a week later did not call on the government to resign¹. The Consumers’ Association, AIDS networks and Slum Dwellers group, under the leadership of Nimit Tienudom and Saree Ongsomwang, went further and denounced the Redshirt protests on 13th April, but not the actions of the government. A month later, on 8th May 2009, the northern section of NGO-COD issued a statement about the Thai political crisis. This statement claimed that the root cause of the crisis was the way that “politicians had been able to manipulate the system for their own benefit”. There was not one single mention of the role of the army in destroying democracy².

Four days earlier, the chairperson of NGO-COD joined a military sponsored event in front of the statue of King Rama 6, called “Stop Harming Thailand”³. Despite its claim to be about “peace” the event was aimed at opposing further mass protests by Red Shirts. No such activity had ever been organised at the time when armed PAD thugs roamed the streets and shut down the two international airports. In response to this military sponsored event, Niti Eawsriwong, a prominent social critic, pointed to the fact that “Thailand was harming the people” by marginalising the majority from politics and creating great social injustices. Under such

¹ *Prachatai* May, June, September 2008, 13, 15 & 23 April 2009. www.prachatai.com.

² *Prachatai* 12th May 2009 www.prachatai.com.

³ *Matichon* on line 5th May 2009 www.matichon.co.th

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circumstances, he asked, “why should Thailand be safe from the protest of the people?”¹

How did the Thai NGOs become so reactionary, siding with the conservative elites against the poor in the suppression of democracy? There is an urgent need to analyse this problem because NGO activists started out as the champions of the rural poor. Could it happen elsewhere? Is there a general lesson to be learnt?

In the 1980s Thai NGOs worked under the slogan “the answer is in the villages”, reflecting a respect for ordinary villagers. Despite their well-meaning aims, the politics or lack of politics in the NGO movement, and also the lack of democracy and accountability has let them down and they have been increasingly drawn to reactionary right-wing politics.

After the “collapse of Communism” the NGO movement turned its back on “politics” and the primacy of mass movements and political parties in the 1980s². Instead they embraced “lobby politics” and/or Community Anarchism³. Despite the apparent contradiction between lobby politics, which leads NGOs to cooperate with the state, and state-rejecting Community Anarchism, the two go together. This is because they reject any confrontation or competition with the state. Lobbyists cooperate with the state, while Community Anarchists hope to ignore it. They both reject building a big picture political analysis⁴. Instead of building mass movements or political parties, the NGOs concentrated on single-issue campaigns as part of their attempt to avoid confrontation with the state⁵. This method of working also

¹ *Matichon* on line 11th May 2009 www.matichon.co.th Niti Eawsiwong “Thailand Stop Harming the People”.

² Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2003) Challenges to the Thai NGO movement from the dawn of a new opposition to global capital. In Ji Giles Ungpakorn (ed.) *Radicalising Thailand: new political perspectives*. (already quoted).

³ The best explanation of Thai Community Anarchism can be found in Chatthip Nartsupa et al., (1998) *Agricultural Community Economics in Thailand*. Wititit Poompanya 7. In Thai.

⁴ Somchai Phatharathananunth (2006) *Civil Society and Democratization. Social Movements in Northeast Thailand*. NIAS press. p. 84.

⁵ Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2007) already quoted, chapter 3.

dove-tails with grant applications from international funding bodies. It leads to a de-politicisation of the movement. Thus, NGOs have cooperated with both military and elected governments in Thailand since the early 1980s. In 1989 they were invited to be part of the 7th National Economic and Social Development Plan and by 1992 NGOs were receiving budget allocations from the Ministry of Health. The Social Welfare department and the department of Environment also provided funds¹. This raises the issue of “GNGOs” ie., Government funded NGOs. Can they really be called NGOs?

The NGOs also oppose Representative Democracy, along Anarchist lines, because they believe it only leads to dirty money politics. But the Direct Democracy in village communities, which they advocate, is powerless in the face of the all powerful state. It also glorifies traditional and conservative village leaders which are not subject to any democratic mandate. Eventually, the idea goes together with a failure to defend parliamentary democracy. Their anarchistic rejection of representative politics, allowed them to see “no difference” between an elected parliament controlled by *Thai Rak Thai* and a military coup. Instead of bothering to carefully analyse the political situation, the distrust of elections, votes² and Representative Democracy allowed NGOs to align themselves with reactionaries, like the PAD and the military, who advocate more appointed public positions.

Initially, in 2001, the NGOs loved-up to Taksin’s *Thai Rak Thai* government. They believed that it was open to NGO lobbying, which it was. *Thai Rak Thai* (TRT) took on board the idea of a universal health care system from progressive doctors and health-related NGOs. But then, they were wrong-footed by the government’s raft of other pro-poor policies that seemed to prove to villagers that the NGOs had

¹ Shinichi Shigetomi, Kasian Tejapira & Apichart Thongyou, Contributing editors (2004) *The NGO way: Perspectives and Experiences from Thailand*. Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, Chiba, Japan. p.49

² NGOs are opposed to taking votes in meetings, preferring “consensus”. Ji Ungpakorn (2006) *Social Movements in Thailand*. WDPress. p.64, In Thai. Chris Nineham (2006) Anti-capitalism, social forums and the return of politics. *International Socialism* 109, U.K.

only been “playing” at development. What is more, the increased use of the state for providing welfare and benefits by the TRT government, went against the Anarchist-inspired NGO idea that communities should organise their own welfare. After their about-face in attitude to TRT, the NGOs turned towards the Conservative Royalists. This was helped by ignoring political analysis, international lessons and attaching any importance to critical theory. NGO leaders argue proudly that they are the “true activists”, not book worms or theoreticians.

The link between the ideas of Conservative Royalists and the NGOs had been forged earlier in the late 1990s, when NGOs started to take up the Kings theory of the “Sufficiency Economy”, claiming that it was the same as their Anarchist ideas of Community Self-sufficiency, which argued for a separation from market capitalism¹. Both NGO-COD and the Thai Volunteer Service enthusiastically promoted the Sufficiency Economy. The Conservative Royalist and medical doctor, Prawase Wasi, provided the bridge between the NGOs and the conservatives in the state².

Again, despite the apparent contradiction between the conservative elite’s idea of “Sufficiency Economy”, which is really a reactionary ideology aimed at keeping the poor “happy” in their poverty, and the Anarchist Community Self-sufficiency, which is more about villagers becoming independent from the state, the two ideas fit together. Both reject state welfare and using the state as an instrument to redistribute wealth. Both also fail to challenge the power and authority of the ruling elites and the state. Both Community Self-sufficiency and Sufficiency Economy claim to oppose the modern capitalist market, yet the military junta managed to write Sufficiency Economy into their 2007 Constitution alongside extreme neoliberal free-market policies. The utopian nature of both sufficiency theories allows them to be

¹ Yukti Mukdawichit (2005) *Reading Community Culture*. Fa Deaw Kan Press, In Thai.

² Chanida Chitbundid, Chaithawat Thulathon & Thanapol Eawsakul (2004) The Thai Monarchy and NGOs. In Shinichi Shigetomi, Kasian Tejapira & Apichart Thongyou, Contributing editors (2004) *The NGO way: Perspectives and Experiences from Thailand*. Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, Chiba, Japan. pp.131-137.

very flexible and detached from reality. The Anarchistic distrust of state-organised welfare, helped the NGOs to oppose the Thaksin government. For many NGOs, welfare should be organised by communities. But this anti-state position opened the door to accepting a neo-liberal concept of a small state, a view shared by the Conservative Royalists.

Just because Anarchism can fit together with Lobby politics and Conservative Royalist ideas, it does not mean that Anarchist organisations automatically link up with Conservative Elites. The Assembly of the Poor (AOP), a mass movement of poor farmers, which was led by some NGO activists, never supported the 2006 coup and never supported the PAD. However, it was one of the honourable exceptions. The key point about the Assembly of the Poor is that it was a social movement with mass involvement of the poor, unlike most NGOs or NGO networks. Many AOP activists remain extremely hostile to military coups and the strong hand of the state. AOP tactics emphasised mass protests rather than trying to get positions on state-sponsored committees, although they have also adopted lobby tactics as well.

The political situation, before and after the coup, was extremely messy and difficult. In 2006 one had *Thai Rak Thai*, a big business party with a record of Human Rights abuses and corruption. On the other hand one had the Army and the Conservative Royalists, with a history of Human Rights abuses and corruption. There was not much to choose from between the two. But *Thai Rak Thai* held power through the electoral process. In this situation the NGOs should have remained neutral and with the poor and they should have opposed the coup. But they were angry that *Thai Rak Thai* had won over their supporters and were distrustful of *Thai Rak Thai's* use of the state to build welfare programmes and stimulate the economy.

Because Community Self-sufficiency, separated from state and market, are extremely utopian ideas which are not particularly popular with rural people, there is a danger that NGOs which advocate such ideas can become elitist in outlook, seeing villagers as hopelessly misguided. Since the

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poor voted on mass for *Thai Rak Thai*, the NGOs have become viciously patronising towards villagers, claiming that they “lack the right information” to make political decisions. In fact, there was always a patronising element to their practical work. Many Thai NGO leaders are self-appointed middle class activists who shun elections and believe that NGOs should “nanny¹” peasants and workers. They are now fearful and contemptuous of the Red Shirt movement, which is starting a process of self-empowerment of the poor. Of course, the Red Shirts are not angels, but in today’s crisis, they represent the poor and the thirst for freedom and democracy.

The NGO movement’s personal relationship with NGO and trade union leaders in the PAD was also a factor which helped them move to the Right. The top PAD leadership was made up of a coalition between: (1) Sondhi Limtongkul: Conservative Royalist media tycoon and owner of the *Manager Group*. (2) Chamlong Simuang: leading light in the reactionary and anti-abortion Buddhist *Santi Asoke* movement . (3) Somsak Kosaisuk: Retired leader of the Railway workers union. (4) Pipop Tongchai: Advisor to the *Campaign for Popular Democracy* and “N.G.O. elder”. (5) Somkiat Pongpaiboon an activist working with teachers’ groups and farmers. (6) Suriyasai Takasila, ex-student movement bureaucrat.

What the NGO, student and trade union activists in the PAD leadership had in common was a lack of any genuine mass base. People like Pipop did not lead NGO-COD. Somsak never managed to get a strike going on the railways to protect working conditions or oppose privatisation. They were people who had become bureaucratized and distant from ordinary activists. Instead they looked to other forces who could mobilise people and resources, including the Conservative Royalists. Never the less, they were able to call on personal support from many NGO networks and state enterprise unions “for old time sake”.

¹ In Thai they refer to themselves as *Pi Liang*.

In general terms, what we can say about the Thai experience is that the NGO movement is now lined up with the elite against the mass of the population¹. It is no longer possible for progressive people to work with them². Unless serious splits and changes occur, they cannot be regarded as part of any civil society movement for Thai democracy.

What are the international lessons for NGO activists? What we can generalise from Thailand is that NGOs run the risk of taking the wrong side in any serious social conflict. Actually, everyone can make mistakes, including academics and Left-wing parties! But for NGOs, there are three major reasons which might cause mistakes.

1. Funding pressures. NGOs increasingly receive money from local governments and imperialist organisations like the World Bank. They are “GNGOs” and can become reluctant to oppose the elites.
2. Lobby politics mean there is always a tendency to be opportunistic, being prepared to work with authoritarian governments. NGOs need to commit to building mass movements, rather than relying only on lobby politics and “nannying” the poor.
3. Rejection of politics, especially class politics, and a rejection of debate. This lack of politics means that in difficult and messy situations NGOs do not have the necessary theory to be able to choose the side of the poor or democracy. What is needed is more political theorising and more open debate.
4. Adoption of utopian Anarchist ideas about traditional rural communities and small states, can lead NGOs to take up conservative and elitist ideas or align themselves with neo-liberal free-market ideology.

7 Conclusion: The Red Shirts, a new Civil Society?

Mainstream democratisation theories stress the importance of “Civil Society” in expanding the democratic

¹ One honourable exception is the Thai Labour Campaign, which has consistently opposed the coup and any destruction of democracy. <http://www.thailabour.org>

² As I used to believe when I wrote: “NGOs: Enemies or Allies?” *International Socialism Journal 104* Autumn 2004, U.K.

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space in society. However, there are serious problems with looking at Civil Society from a non-class perspective, for it does not enable us to understand the important class dynamics which underpin all social movements, however distorted they may be. There is also a belief that Civil Society is concentrated among the intellectual middle-classes or NGOs¹. This tends to be an elitist view and overlooks the possible anti-democratic nature of the middle classes and intellectuals, who often benefit from unequal societies and authoritarian states². Somchai Phatharathananunth has described how influential people like Prawase Wasi and Chai-anan Samudvanij have been advocating the idea of “elite civil society” in Thailand³. This involves an unequal partnership with the state, where the state dominates Civil Society. It means that the threat to “democracy” is seen as coming from the uneducated masses. This neatly encapsulates the ideology of the Royalist Yellowshirts. In such a mainstream or elite vision of Civil Society, there is no place for the primary school educated small farmer, the urban taxi-driver, street vendor or factory worker.

A new movement for democracy is emerging from the Red Shirts. This movement is made up of the urban and rural poor: small farmers, house wives, street vendors, low-ranking state employees, taxi drivers, students and workers. Many middle class observers will feel uncomfortable that this is a movement of ordinary citizens and not the educated middle class. The Red Shirts are not “refined folk” with experience of activism. But they are rapidly developing

¹ J.L. Cohen & A. Arato, A. (1997) *Civil Society and political theory*. M.I.T. Press, U.S.A. A. Touraine (2001) [Translated by D. Macey] *Beyond Neoliberalism*. Polity Press, Cambridge, U.K. J. Keane (1998) *Civil Society. Old images, new vision*. Polity Press, Cambridge, U.K. R. Robison & D.S.G. Goodman (1996) (eds) *The New Rich in Asia*. Routledge, UK.

Kevin Hewison (1996) Emerging social forces in Thailand. New political and economic roles. In: Robison, R. & Goodman, D. S. G. (eds) *The new rich in Asia*. Routledge, UK.

² Garry Rodan (1997) Civil society and other political possibilities in Southeast Asia. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 27(2),

156-178. Victor T. King, Phuong An Nguyen & Nguyen Huu Minh (2008) Professional Middle Class Youth in Post-Reform Vietnam: Identity, Continuity and Change. *Modern Asian Studies* 42(4), 783-813. J. Pearce (1997) Civil society, the market and democracy in Latin America. *Democratisation*, 4 (2), 57-83.

³ Somchai Phatharathananunth (2006) already quoted, p. 7.

organisational, media and internet skills. In a situation where the NGOs and the middle class intellectuals have turned their backs on democracy and social justice, this is what is really required to build a democratic movement. This is what "People Empowerment" looks like. But one important weakness of the Red Shirts is that they have not so far made serious attempts to organise among the trade unions. They also need to move away from the influence of populist capitalist politicians like Taksin.

We need to cut down the military's influence in society, reform the judiciary and the police and to expand freedom and democracy from this grass-roots movement. And we need to abolish the Monarchy too. For in the minds of millions, it has now become an obstacle to freedom and human dignity. Thais need to create a culture of citizenship rather than being merely "Royal subjects". We need to build a democratic space from where we can move forward to fighting for socialism and that means also building a socialist party among the Red Shirts.

The stakes are very high. Any compromise has the risk of instability because it will satisfy almost no one. The old elites might want to do a deal with Taksin to stop the Red Shirts from becoming totally Republican or Socialist. But whatever happens, Thai society cannot go back to the old days. The Red Shirts represent millions of Thais who are sick and tired of Military and Palace intervention in politics. At the very least they will want a non-political Constitutional Monarchy. It is hoped that the Red Shirts will continue to move to the Left during this round of struggle, but in the real world there are no cast-iron guarantees. As Gramsci once said..... the best way to try to predict the future is to get involved in the struggle.