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The Conflict in Thailand: Conditions for a Middle Way Solution

By Jeffrey Race

Synopsis

In the search for a Thai Middle Way solution to the current political crisis, two key conditions have to be fulfilled. In this second of a two-part commentary, the author, a Bangkok-based political consultant, explains the possible way out.

Commentary

SOME VIEW Thailand's entrenched conflict as no more than two business coalitions competing to plunder the nation. In fact, they operate by very different rule sets. These differences make the present situation intractable but they are seldom captured in press analysis.

The forces now in opposition to the Shinawatra family machine have been generally content over the years to go through democratic forms, to liberalise the economy, to maintain the openness of the press, public life and public debate, and slowly to improve the reliability of the judicial system. Culturally, they follow the Middle Way, including its corollary - taking only so much while leaving something for others, and when it's time to go, going gracefully. In practice, they are indifferent to the cause of rural uplift.

Thaksin's 'My Way'

In addition to its opening to those lower in the social scale, the Shinawatra family machine has introduced a new rule set to Thailand, not the Middle Way but 'My Way', in which they have shown they do not know when enough is enough - something most Thais sense is important and have no difficulty accepting.

During the 2001-2006 period of solid electoral power, the Thai Rak Thai machine began a programme of dominating every sector of the economy and state on behalf of Thaksin's family and friends: banking, communications, media, foreign affairs, the courts, the police. At the end they were moving on the military and the last bastion of resistance - the royal palace. While they did not reach the depths of present-day Argentina, the direction was clear.

No "people's council" or agreement on "democratic procedures" is going to end or even mitigate the present turbulence in Bangkok. The legitimators of today's protests, indeed of the opposition to Thaksin since the start of the civil unrest leading to his overthrow, have lived with rebalancing of economic interests between classes in the kingdom and could again. They can do deals with Red Shirt leaders, as they have in the past.

Legitimizers' minimum obsession

The legitimizers of the current protest movement have one minimum obsession. For them, the idea that a fugitive criminal, and indeed a perceived enemy of the king, should by remote control run Thailand for himself and his family is not just unacceptable but inconceivable. Thaksin's approach to rule is so alien to Thai cultural values. It has little to do with economic interests or the division of political power. Ideas of "sharing power" or "a clear reform plan" or "democratic processes" are irrelevant to the core of the present conflict.

But for Thaksin it is arguably all about money and control. His corruption conviction in 2008 was actually quite even-handed: the court seized the equivalent of US\$1.5 billion of his funds as ill-gotten gains (the legal basis for the judgment is factually unassailable) but left him almost another billion as not clearly the result of abuse of power. It was a typically Thai-style invitation to move abroad, where he maintains substantial financial assets.

Therein lies the rub of today's struggle in Bangkok: Stable politics assumes some fit between public political behaviour and strongly-held cultural expectations. Thaksin's behaviour does not conform. One can see anger on his face in his TV appearances - a no-no in Thai culture; he wants power back personally; he wants his billion dollars back; and he does not want to go to prison, even though the court ruled he earned much of his money from abuse of power.

Thaksin argues that the legal cases against him were politically motivated, certainly correct in the sense that he had squeezed so many people and institutions (the press, banks, military and royal palace) that he had lots of political enemies. And it is certainly true that judicial proceedings against him resulted directly from the 2006 coup d'etat ending his prime ministership.

But that hardly delegitimizes the prosecutions: while in power, Thaksin and his family were above the law, and the convictions themselves were immaculate. This writer has reviewed the full Thai texts of the judgments against him and his Thai Rak Thai party which show they are not just beyond reasonable doubt but beyond any conceivable doubt.

It is Thaksin's refusal to follow the cultural pattern of sharing and moving on - which accounts for the relatively gentle nature of power transfers in Thailand over many decades - that makes him intolerable to those in the streets today. For them, Thaksin is a "foreign" object, to be rejected, and if that requires a temporary breach with democratic formalisms, that is a regrettable necessity to preserve the special agreeableness of Thai community life and the relative lack of viciousness of Thai politics which so distinguish the country.

Conditions for Middle Way solution

The legitimizers hope to preserve the Thailand they know from Thaksin's import of alien values. And for them this matter is supremely urgent, because coming changes at the apex of Thai society may make their goal impossible. Thus a condition for ending the present turmoil is that Thaksin agree to remain permanently in exile, that his family agree to abjure power, and that his coalition abandons its innovative "winner takes all" political rule set.

But that's only one of two conditions to enable Thailand to resume a safe and healthy path to national development. Watch for this first key development, however unlikely though it might seem at present.

Serious conflicts over ideology, power and money have regularly occurred in Thailand over much of the past century. But because of its Buddhist norms, Thailand has never experienced the horrendous violence of its neighbours or of many other countries in the world faced with similar conflicts. Instead of fights to the death in the streets of Bangkok, those whose moment has begun to pass have often left the country - starting in 1935 when King Prajadhipok abdicated and moved to the United Kingdom to die in exile.

In turn, Pridi Phanomyong, the famous leader of the political movement that forced Prajadhipok's exile, thrice exiled himself, in 1934, 1947, and definitively in 1949. He later died in Paris in 1983. Pridi's nemesis, Police General Phao Sriyanond, lost out in a power struggle in 1957 and moved with his fortune to Geneva, finally dying there without seeing his homeland again.

In 1973, Field Marshals Thanom Kitthachorn and Prapat Charusathien went into temporary exile in Taiwan and the United States, eventually returning to quiet lives in Bangkok. In 1976, respected economist Dr Puey Ungphakorn, on the wrong side of political currents of the day, moved to exile in London.

Thaksin's opponents also have some very practical reasons to wish him away, starting with his poor judgment. For example, any person in Thailand of normal judgment knows one thing before all else: one cannot advance

in the kingdom acting, or even thinking, against the king. But Thaksin is widely perceived as flouting this iron rule, with inevitable bad consequences for himself and for the country. The same poor judgment was apparent in many economic policy choices.

What is needed for genuine stability

A second element is Thaksin's aversion to the substance of democracy, despite his party's appeals to this ideal in its conflicts with those now in the streets. Ironically, Thaksin himself was the beneficiary of the gradual strengthening of democratic institutions in the decades since the first flowering in the mid-1970s, being the first elected prime minister to complete his full term of office.

But Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party, even as such a beneficiary, was dismantling democracy's supporting elements as fast as it could through threats and strong-arming of the press, use of bank credit for commercial blackmail, prejudicial use of the police, and intimidation and bribery of the courts. For the Shinawatra family, ruling the state is a business, similar to running a telecom firm. Elections, blackmail and bribes are all tactics their affiliated political parties use to keep the money coming in. The opening to the lower classes is just another tactic that will be abandoned as soon as it is safe, and plenty of Red Shirt leaders are worried about just this.

Understanding the possibilities for the future may be clearer with this explanation of the real motives of the participants. Most Thais are exquisitely sensitive to the feelings of others and respond appropriately. But they have a charming expression for what must be done to social deviants: *aw may tii hua* or, "you have to hit them on the head with a club". That's what the people in the streets of Bangkok are now trying to do.

The immediate turmoil in the streets will stop when Thaksin and his family figure out that they can make no lesser sacrifice than did their predecessors, everyone from royalty on down. But even with this sacrifice, the social stresses that the Shinawatra family so cynically exploit will continue until some as yet unidentified fragment of the elite develops a competing - but honest, practical and durable - programme for rural uplift.

This actually happened during a preceding period of great domestic conflict in Thailand, in 1973 with the collapse of the amiable but out-of-touch military dictatorship. A group of bankers and aristocrats joined to found the Social Action Party, which went on to implement a series of policy innovations, dramatically changing the rural-urban terms of trade through alterations in rice taxation policy and import duties on agricultural inputs.

The remarkable puzzle today is why no group of political entrepreneurs has emerged to compete against Thaksin in this great empty space in the Thai political marketplace. That is (as it was in the 1970s) the second condition for genuine stability. If and when that happens, outsiders might begin to feel confident again about the future of Thailand.

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