

# **A Coup For the Rich**

Thailand's political Crisis

**Giles Ji Ungpakorn**



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# Introduction

Dear Reader, if you are expecting a mainstream analysis of Thai politics and society in this book, you need read no further. Close the book and toss it away. But if you want an alternative explanation of events then read on....

Contrary to some views, Thai politics is not a mystery, unfathomable to the international mind. It only requires the right lenses in ones glasses in order to see the various patterns common to politics all over the world.

If you believe in “**elite theory**”, you will see all developments in Thai history and politics as being determined by great leaders and great minds. Such a view sees a slow linear progression of Thai society with little fundamental change. You are encouraged to believe that Thai or Asian societies are uniquely oriental and mysterious. You will support the idea that Democracy is a Western concept, unsuited to Thai society. You will believe that Thais worship Kings and dictators and all political events are due to the manipulation by Kings, Generals, Bosses or rich Politicians. The poor, the workers and peasants, rarely receive a mention, but if they do, it is only to blame them for their “stupidity”, weakness and their backwardness, which only goes to prove that they should never have any rights.

But you cannot clap without using two hands. A one handed clap against thin air is nothing. Equally, an analysis that does not consider the relationship between the rulers and the ruled in a dialectical fashion is worthless.

When Marx and Engels wrote in the Communist Manifesto that the history of humanity is the history of class struggle, they never implied that such a struggle would be pure and undistorted. It is impossible to understand Thai society and politics without a **class struggle** perspective. The 1997 economic crisis cannot be explained without looking at the competition to exploit labour, the fight for increased wages and the over-production in capitalism. The reform

movement that led to the 1997 Constitution was led from below. It started as a struggle by the oppressed against the military dictatorship of 1991. It ended up being hijacked by right-wing liberals and money politicians. The Populism of *Thai Rak Thai* can only be explained by the power of the oppressed and their potential to revolt in times of crisis. But *Thai Rak Thai* Populism is a terrible distortion of class struggle because it is a mechanism to buy social peace by a capitalist party. The coup of 2006 can only be understood as a “Coupe for the Rich” against the interests of the poor. Both Populism and the coup were only possible because of the weakness in politics of the Thai Peoples Movement. This weakness has historical roots in the defeat of a previous cycle of class struggle in the 1970s. Finally, the violence in the South can only be explained by looking at the repression of the Thai State against the Malay Muslim population and how that population is fighting back.

This book attempts a dangerous task. It attempts to analyse and sharply criticise contemporary Thai politics in a time of serious crisis. It deals with the Taksin crisis, the coup, the various sections of the elite, the Peoples Movement and the violence in the South. Many events are unfolding as I write. The potential to make incorrect predictions is high. I live in a dictatorship where open discussion is not encouraged. Yet the climate of censorship and lack of critical debate about current Thai events is precisely why I am forced to publish this book now. Hopefully it will stimulate further debate and discussion which will lead to an even better analysis of events.

You may find that the spelling of many Thai names in this book differs from news reports and other mainstream documents. This is intentional. It is design to help the reader pronounce Thai names correctly.

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January 2007

# A brief Chronology of History

*Sukhotai* period 1200s

*Ayuttaya* period 1350-1767

*Bangkok* period 1782-

Colonial domination of region starts 1800s

End of the *Sakdina* system and establishment of Absolute Monarchy 1870s

Also the establishment of Thailand as a Nation State with borders

Revolution by the *Peoples Party* overthrows Absolute Monarchy 1932

Power struggles among Royalists, the Left (Pridi Panomyong) and Nationalists (Pibun-Songkram) 1930s/40s

Sarit coup leads to 16 years of military dictatorship 1957

Mass uprising against the military 1973

Bloody crack-down against the Left intensifies rural struggle by Communists 1976

Collapse of the Communist Party and return to democracy mid 1980s

Military coup against Chatchai elected government 1991

Mass uprising against the military 1992

Resurgence of strikes and rural protests

Economic crisis and new Constitution 1997

Taksin's *Thai Rak Thai* won first election 2001

*Thai Rak Thai* wages "war on drugs" and instigates massacre at Takbai

*Thai Rak Thai* also introduces universal health care scheme and village funds

*Thai Rak Thai*'s second, and landslide, election victory 2005

*Peoples Alliance for Democracy* protests against Taksin early-mid 2006

*Thai Rak Thai* wins 16 million votes in April election which is boycotted by the opposition 2006

19th September coup topples Taksin, 1997 Constitution destroyed 2006

# Chapter 1

## **The Taksin Crisis and the Coup for the Rich**

Political and economic crises are like powerful storms. They strip away false images and put people, institutions and movements to severe tests. They expose the reality of society which is often hidden in more normal times. The 19<sup>th</sup> September coup, which destroyed Thai democracy and the 1997 Constitution, has exposed the true nature of Thai liberalism and also the weaknesses of the anti-Taksin movement called the “*Peoples Alliance for Democracy*” (P.A.D.).

The major forces behind the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup were anti-democratic groups in the military and civilian elite, disgruntled business leaders and neo-liberal intellectuals and politicians. The coup was also supported by the Monarchy. What all these groups have in common is contempt and hatred for the poor. For them, “too much democracy” gives “too much” power to the poor electorate and encourages governments to “over-spend” on welfare. For them, Thailand is divided between the “enlightened middle-classes who understand democracy” and the “ignorant rural and urban poor”.

In fact, the reverse is the case. It is the poor who understand and are committed to democracy while the so-called middle classes are determined to hang on to their privileges by any means possible.

## **The 19<sup>th</sup> September Coup**

On the evening of 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 a military junta calling itself “*The Reform Committee in the Democratic System with the Monarchy as Head of State*” staged a coup and overthrew the democratically elected, but controversial, Prime Minister Taksin Shinawat. The language of the military junta should remind us of George Orwell’s 1984. “Democracy” means military dictatorship and “Reform” means tearing up the 1997 constitution, abolishing parliament, independent bodies and declaring martial law. After the coup the media was tightly controlled by the military officers placed in all offices and the critical *Midnight University* website was shut down for a while; all in the name of “Democracy”. The junta were so paranoid that they insisted that its full title (above) be read out each time the media made *any* reference to it in Thai. This was to reinforce the “fact” that it was a “Royal and Democratic Coup”. Yet when the junta’s name was mentioned in English by the foreign media, they were asked to cut out the words concerning the monarchy, to avoid any foreign “misunderstanding” that it might be a Royal coup. The BBC and other foreign TV broadcasts were censored, first by shutting down all local transmissions and later by substituting advertisements whenever they mentioned Taksin or showed his picture. In January 2007, the junta summoned media bosses to threaten them with harsh measures if they reported the views of Taksin or *Thai Rak Thai* politicians.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Bangkok Post*. 11 January 2007.



General Sonti Boonyaratgalin, head of the junta which destroyed democracy, ripped up the Constitution and the man who failed to do his duty in protecting democracy<sup>2</sup>, gave an interview in late October 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*”.<sup>3</sup> Such arrogant stupidity is typical of most leaders of Thai coups, past and present. The statement is just a dusting-off of the tired old formula that the poor are not ready for democracy. That lie has been used by the Thai elite since 1910. In December General Sonti admitted that he and other junta members had spent 1 billion baht of public funds, located in the military’s “secret fund”, on the illegal coup.<sup>4</sup> Surely that counts as gross corruption and abuse of public money?

The junta promised to remain in office for only 2 weeks and to appoint a civilian government. They achieved this by staying in power under the new name of “*the Council for National Security*” (C.N.S.) and by appointing a retired army officer, General Surayud Chulanon, to be Prime Minister. This illegitimate government was installed and could be dismissed at any time by the C.N.S.. Like the Burmese generals, though, they thought that a mere name change makes all the difference and people would forget that the junta were still in charge. What is even more astounding is that the Thai junta believed that the international community would think it was “democratic”. The junta’s foreign Minister stated that they would encourage the Burmese generals to take steps towards democracy. One can only

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<sup>2</sup> The 1997 Constitution stated that it was the duty of all citizens to protect democracy and to resist coups.

<sup>3</sup> *The Nation*. 26 October 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *Bangkok Post*. 20 December 2006.

imagine the conversation between the Thai and Burmese dictators on this issue!

The junta claimed that they had appointed a “civilian” Prime Minister. Commentators rushed to suck up to the new Prime Minister, General Surayud, by saying that he was a “good and moral man”. In fact, Surayud, while he was serving in the armed forces in 1992, was partly responsible for the blood bath against unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators.<sup>5</sup> He personally led a group of 16 soldiers into the Royal Hotel which was a temporary field hospital. Here, his soldiers beat and kicked people.<sup>6</sup> News reports from the BBC and CNN at the time show soldiers walking on top of those who were made to lie on the floor. Three months after the 2006 coup, on the 4<sup>th</sup> December, the King praised Prime Minister Surayud in his annual birthday speech.

The new military appointed cabinet was stuffed full of neo-liberals. The Finance Minister, Pridiyatorn Devakul, was a man who believed in “neo-liberal fiscal discipline”. He was opposed to “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%.<sup>7</sup> Pridiyatorn threatened to axe many good mass transit projects which could solve Bangkok's traffic. The elite do not care much for either public health care or public transport. They can pass through traffic jams with police escorts, unlike public ambulances responding to emergencies. The Foreign and Commerce Ministers were supporters of un-popular Free Trade Agreements and the Energy Minister was a fanatical

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<sup>5</sup> See Kevin Hewison (2006) “General Surayud Chulanon: a man and his contradictions”. Carolina Asia Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

<sup>6</sup> Surayud admitted this to *Thai Post*, 22 June 2000.

<sup>7</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 19 & 20 December 2006.

follower of Margaret Thatcher's privatisation policies. Apart from neo-liberals, the illegitimate dictatorship government was staffed by ancient and conservative civil servants and self-serving scientists and technocrats without any integrity or democratic principles. This collection of autocrats ensured that they would not go hungry by paying themselves fat cat salaries<sup>8</sup>, no doubt funded out of savings made by cutting the pro-poor policies of the previous government. Military officers (cronies of the junta) were appointed to boards of state enterprises and received multiple full-time salaries each of which were over 20 times the minimum wage rate.

After appointing the government, the junta then hand-picked a so-called "parliament". One third of this appointed parliament came from the military and police and mixed in with these were liberal academics and some turn-coats who used to be part of the Peoples Movement. These "Tank Liberal" academics believe that democracy comes about by staging military coups and tearing-up constitutions. The question is: will they now burn all their Comparative Politics books and scrap all courses on "democratisation" in favour of teaching military science or tank maintenance?

The members of the military appointed parliament received monthly salaries and benefits of almost 140,000 baht while workers on the minimum wage receive under 5,000 baht per month and many poor farmers in villages live on even less. These parliamentarians often drew on multiple salaries. The government claimed to be following the King's philosophy of "Sufficiency" and the importance of not being greedy. Apparently everyone must be content with their own level of Sufficiency, but as Orwell might have put it, some are more "Sufficient" than others. For the Palace, "Sufficiency" means owning a string of palaces and large capitalist conglomerates like the

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<sup>8</sup> *The Nation* 8 November 2006.

Siam Commercial Bank. For the military junta it means receiving multiple fat cat salaries and for a poor farmer it means scratching a living without modern investment in agriculture. The Finance Minister explained that Sufficiency Economics meant “not too much and not too little”: in other words, getting it just right. No wonder Paul Handley described Sufficiency Economics as “pseudo-economics”!<sup>9</sup> In addition to this, the junta closed the Taksin government’s Poverty Reduction Centre, transferring it to the office of the Internal Security Operations Command and transforming it into a rural development agency using Sufficiency Economics.<sup>10</sup>

In December 2006, the junta, working hand in hand with state university bosses, who it had already appointed to the military legislative parliament, decided to push forward a bill to privatise state universities. The official title was “university autonomy”, but the process involved the usual introduction of market forces, reduced state support and neo-liberal style management.<sup>11</sup> University privatisation is very unpopular among staff and students for good reasons. Student protests erupted and links were quickly made between privatisation, neoliberalism and authoritarianism. Previous attempts at privatisation of universities and state enterprises by elected governments had been stalled by opposition on campuses, workplaces and in the streets.

The junta’s version of immediate “political reform” was to tear up the 1997 Constitution and replace it with a “temporary constitution”. The latter was a worthless piece of scrap paper which basically said that anything the junta decreed must be law. There were no guarantees of any basic rights. The military started the process

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<sup>9</sup> Paul Handley (2006) *The King Never Smiles*. Yale University Press, page 415.

<sup>10</sup> *Bangkok Post* 4 January 2007.

<sup>11</sup> For an international perspective see Alex Callinicos (2006) *Universities in a neo-liberal world*. Bookmarks, London.

of hand-picking their cronies and toadies to form a so-called “Constitution Drafting Committee”. The process of drafting a new military constitution was in stark contrast with what happened during the process of drafting the 1997 Constitution. Despite some of the major flaws in the 1997 Constitution, there was widespread popular participation and debate throughout the period of drafting. The major flaws were that it supported the free-market, encouraged a strong executive and favoured large political parties. This helped to boost *Thai Rak Thai’s* influence in parliament. There were also unacceptable clauses which indirectly disenfranchised workers and peasants. These included the clause which stated that members of parliament should have university degrees. Voting methods which forced urban workers to vote in rural constituencies diluted the working class vote and a reliance on independent bodies, rather than social movements, in order to achieve transparency and accountability, were also problematic. But the junta was an unlikely candidate to deal with any of these issues in a progressive and democratic manner.

Mainly the problems with the 1997 Constitution stemmed from a reliance on liberal academics at the stage of writing the 1997 Constitution. One such academic is Bawornsak Uwanno, who was appointed to the junta’s parliament. 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 junta. Middle-class intellectuals like Bawornsak certainly understand how to manipulate democracy and survive!!

Other liberal academics like Anek Laothamatas, Tirayut Boonmi and Anan Panyarachun, former Prime Minister under the 1991 junta, are now promoting the idea of Asia Values in their attempt to justify

the coup. For them Thai-style democracy is the order of the day. 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 Giddens <sup>12</sup>.

On the issue of the Southern violence, given that the army and the police are the main cause of the problem, it is doubtful whether a military junta is in a position to bring peace and justice. The army and police have long been accused of extra-judicial killings and the Fourth Army was directly responsible for the massacres at *Krue-sa* in April 2004 and at *Takbai* in October 2004. In the case of *Krue-sa*, the army pursued a group of youths who had attacked police stations with knives. They were shot in cold blood in the *Krue-sa* mosque. Another group of youths from a local football team were shot at point blank range at *Saba Yoi*. In October 2004 nearly 90 young men, who had been part of a peaceful demonstration, were deliberately murdered by the army. They were bound with their hands behind their backs and loaded, one on top of the other, into open army trucks. After many hours journey to an army camp many were dead on arrival. It is only right that Taksin, as Prime Minister at the time, should be held responsible for these state crimes, but so too must the army and police commanders. In November 2006 the Prime Minister, General Surayud, “apologised” for the actions of the previous government and said that all charges *against the demonstrators* at *Takbai* would be dropped. However, he made no mention of bringing the army and police commanders to court on charges of murder!

Peace can only come about by political discussions involving the whole of Southern Civil Society, and without any pre-conditions about maintaining the present borders of Thailand. Secret

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<sup>12</sup> Anek Laothamatas (2006) *Taksina-Populism*. Matichon Press, in Thai.

negotiations between the army and separatist groups, who claim to represent the population, such as the *Pattani United Liberation Organisation*, PULO, are not the answer because these separatists do not represent the younger generation of Southern activists. The main problem in the South is the behaviour of the Thai State. The army and police must be withdrawn from the area and martial law and all other repressive laws must be lifted in order to have peaceful discussions. Yet the junta showed no sign of following this path.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of writing, it was not possible to say what the new military sponsored Constitution would look like. Yet there were worrying signs. Some conservatives were talking about the need for a non-elected Prime Minister and Senate and General Sonti suggested that local government should be less democratic by extending the tenure of *Kamnan* and Village Heads who are controlled by the Ministry of Interior.<sup>14</sup> Previously the 1997 Constitution had promoted the role of elected district and provincial councils. In addition to this, the army was being used to patrol the side streets in Bangkok alongside the police and a special “peace-keeping” force under the C.N.S. was established at an initial cost of 500 million baht.<sup>15</sup> The worry is that the junta were trying to promote a greater social role for the army along the lines of the discredited “*dwifungsi*” (dual function) of the Indonesian dictatorship.

In January 2007 the junta’s Constitutional Drafting Council was appointed. Nearly half the 100 members were government officials or conservative politicians, 20% were business people and the rest were academics and media people. There was not a single genuine representative from the social movements, trade unions or N.G.O.s.

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<sup>13</sup> See the special chapter on the South for further details.

<sup>14</sup> *Bangkok Post* 26 December 2006.

<sup>15</sup> *Bangkok Post* 26 and 27 December 2006.

Yet Suriyasai Katasila from the *Campaign for Popular Democracy* and the *Peoples Alliance for Democracy*, was quoted in the *Bangkok Post* as being “optimistic” since various sections of society were “evenly represented” in the Council.<sup>16</sup>

## **The Taksin government**

Taksin Shinawat, a mobile phone and media tycoon, founded the *Thai Rak Thai Party* after the economic crisis of 1997. The party was unique in recent Thai political history in that it actually spent considerable time developing policies.<sup>17</sup> They held meetings with different social groups and came up with real policies at the time of their first election victory in 2001. *Thai Rak Thai* was a “Populist” party which offered pro-poor policies and village level Keynesian economic stimuli, by pumping state money into local projects.<sup>18</sup> The aim was to create social peace after the crisis so that the government could increase Thailand’s economic competitiveness. At the same time this party of big business also pursued neo-liberal policies such as privatisation and the support for free trade agreements (F.T.A.s). This was what *Thai Rak Thai* called a “dual track” policy.

The poor, who form the vast majority of the Thai electorate, voted enthusiastically for the two flagship policies of the party. These were a universal health care scheme (the first ever in Thailand) and a 1 million baht fund loaned to each village to encourage small businesses. *Thai Rak Thai* won a second term of office with an

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<sup>16</sup> *Bangkok Post*. 3 January 2007.

<sup>17</sup> For more details see Pasuk Phongpaichit & Chris Baker (2004) *Thaksin. The business of politics in Thailand*. Silkworm Books.

<sup>18</sup> 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.



overall majority in parliament in 2005. It is easy to see why. The main opposition party, the *Democrats*, spent the whole four years attacking the health care system and other social benefits. They said that it contravened “fiscal discipline” and Tirayut Boonmi and Ammar Siamwalla echoed Margaret Thatcher in talking about “a climate of dependency” built up by “too much” welfare. Previously the Democrat government, which came to power immediately after the 1997 economic crisis, had used taxes paid by the poor to prop up the financial system. The banks were in crisis due to wild speculation by the rich which resulted in non-performing loans. The *Democrats* supported the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup because, according to deputy leader Korn Chatikavanij, “there was no constitutional” method of getting rid of Taksin. Korn then went on to praise Prime Minister Gen. Surayud, saying that the new appointed government was “not a military government”. He also said that he “respected” the junta for trying to establish political “stability”.<sup>19</sup>

After the coup the junta announced that they were scrapping the 30 baht treatment fee in the universal health care scheme. What looked like a progressive measure was really a neoliberal trick. Funding for the health care scheme was cut in real terms, while military spending was drastically increased. It coincided with the policies of the *Democrat Party*. The plan was to make savings on the health budget and this could be achieved in classic neoliberal style by providing a free service (of dubious quality) to only the very poor. In other words they intended to introduce means-testing in the future. For those deemed to be too well-off, a system of “co-payments” ie. health charges, way above 30 baht, would also be introduced at a future date.

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<sup>19</sup> Interviews with *ABC news* 20 September 2006, *International Herald Tribune* 29 September 2006 and with *Bangkok Business Day* 22 September 2006.

There was of course a very nasty side to the Taksin government. During their first term of office they waged a so-called “war on drugs” in which over 3,000 people were shot without ever coming to trial.<sup>20</sup> And as already mentioned, in the three southern-most provinces they waged a campaign of violence against the Muslim Malay-speaking population. The government was also responsible for the murder, by the police, of defence lawyer Somchai Nilapaichit, who was defending people from the south. Yet, the junta which overthrew Taksin made no serious commitment to deal with the 3,000 plus extrajudicial murders of the previous government. All they said was that they would investigate 3 or 4 cases.

In addition to gross abuses of human rights, Taksin and his cronies avoided paying tax. Together they netted 70 billion baht from the sale of their mobile phone company and did not pay a single baht in tax on this sale. This was merely one example of government corruption. The *Thai Rak Thai* government was corrupt, but this was little different from previous elected governments and little different from every single military government.

Before the political crisis in early 2006, the Taksin government had a huge majority in parliament and this allowed the *Thai Rak Thai* party to dominate political society. Taksin’s business corporation could also buy shares in the media and put pressure on the media to support the government through threatening to withdraw advertising revenue. However, the claims that this was a “parliamentary dictatorship” or that there was no democracy under Taksin, are without foundation. His power ultimately rested on the number of votes his party could win from the poor. This is in stark contrast to the power base of the military government which relies solely on the gun.

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<sup>20</sup> 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.

## **Peoples Movement opposition to the Taksin government**

Unlike the business community, the Peoples Movement was not dormant in its criticism of the government throughout the Taksin period. The largest movement mounted by the working class against the Taksin government was the action against electricity privatisation by 200,000 workers in 2004. It helped to delay privatisation plans and energised the labour movement. Despite the protests against the government's human rights abuses, against privatisation and the huge rally against F.T.A. policies by the social movements, the government retained strong support among the poor because there was no credible Left party that could mount an electoral challenge. The right-wing mainstream parties obviously had no appeal to the poor. This weakness in political representation is a symptom of the autonomist and right-wing reformist policies of the social movements. It is not a sign that the Peoples Movement is powerless. It is a problem of politics.<sup>21</sup>

Towards the end of 2005 a large protest movement against the Taksin government arose. But it was a right-wing movement lead by media tycoon Sondhi Limtongkul (not to be confused with General Sonti, the junta head). Sondhi Limtongkul was previously a friend and business partner of Taksin's, but they later became bitter rivals. The movement criticised government corruption and called for "power to be returned to the King", urging the King to appoint a new government under Section 7 of the 1997 Constitution. Unfortunately, the more conservative sections of the Peoples Movement decided to joint this protest movement, creating the "*Peoples Alliance for Democracy*" (P.A.D.). They saw Sondhi's protests as a way to oust Taksin because they believed that the Peoples Movement was too

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<sup>21</sup> See chapter 3.

weak to act independently. They joined this cross-class alliance without any pre-conditions. Many of the protesters wore yellow “Royal” shirts. Undoubtedly the politics of the *Peoples Alliance for Democracy* helped to pave the way towards a military coup. The coup makers could be confident that they would not be opposed by the P.A.D. and its urban Middle-Class supporters. The politics of the P.A.D. will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, but the position of the P.A.D. was a crucial factor in the coup. This means that the Peoples Movement and Civil Society are important actors in modern Thai political struggles. This is often overlooked.

At the height of the crisis, Taksin dissolved parliament and called an election for April 2006. His claim to be “returning power to the people” can be contrasted with the call by the P.A.D. to “return power to the King”. Instead of grasping the opportunity to fight Taksin at the ballot box, the P.A.D. and the opposition right-wing parties boycotted the election. It became a simple referendum on the government. In the event, 16 million people voted for *Thai Rak Thai* and 10 million voted “abstention” against the government.

## **Contempt for the poor**

There is a fundamental political argument at the centre of the current political crisis. On the Right, and this includes the ruling class, some Peoples Movement leaders and most liberal and N.G.O. academics, there is a belief that Taksin cheated in the election, mainly by “tricking or buying the ignorant rural poor”. This is a convenient justification for ignoring the wishes of 16 million people. There is no evidence for any electoral fraud which would have changed the 16 million / 10 million vote result. Together with earlier calls for the King to appoint a new government, this position leads to one which supports the military coup. What most of these people have in common is their contempt for poor farmers and workers, who make

up the majority of the population.<sup>22</sup> These elitist authoritarians even have the gall to state that the poor do not understand Democracy!

The Left-Right split in the Peoples Movement was very clear at the *Thai Social Forum* in October 2006, where the right-wing of the movement put pressure on the *Forum* to abandon the planned pro-democracy march at the end. This march eventually did take place, but it was only after a vigorous argument and the numbers attending were lower than expected. The right-wing of the movement that opposed the march included the *Raks Thai Foundation* (nothing to do with the *Thai Rak Thai Party*). Their strategy was to work with all governments of what ever shade and they attempted to keep the movement in line so that they could get a hearing with the junta. *Raks Thai Foundation* activists working with stateless people on the southern Burmese border argued that these people have a strong case for Thai citizenship because “they are Thais and not like stateless peoples in the north”. At the *Thai Social Forum* they wore yellow Royalist shirts.

However, the majority of the movements in the *Thai Social Forum* had a pro-Democracy position, even if many felt unready to stage open protests against the junta. The *Thai Social Forum* agreed to build an alternative process of political reform by setting up the “Peoples Democratic Forum”. It was stressed that this must be a forum for mass participation, independent of the military. One of the main demands was the building of a welfare state, funded from taxation of the rich. Among this network there was a wide spectrum of views. Some groups reluctantly participated in some of the so-called reform activities initiated by the junta because they had illusions in their abilities to influence events.

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<sup>22</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit in an interview just before the coup, with *Fa Deaw Kan* magazine, printed in the October-December 2006 edition, stated that the Thai ruling class has always had a purely elitist tradition opposed to equality in society.

On the Left, we believe that the poor had good reasons to vote for *Thai Rak Thai*, given that there were no better alternatives on offer. In the past the Left always opposed Taksin, especially for his human rights abuses and neoliberal policies. But a military coup, tearing up the Constitution and trampling on basic democratic rights was never the answer. The answer was, and still is, to build an alternative party which campaigns for a welfare state, progressive taxation and opposition to neoliberalism. This process of building a party was initiated by the "*Peoples' Coalition Party*" nearly two years ago and we now have a modest number of members. The party was centrally involved in helping to build the *Thai Social Forum*, which took place only one month after the coup, under conditions of martial law. We were also involved in the Peoples reform process and various struggles like the anti-privatisation campaign in the universities.

Immediately after the coup, a coalition of young people sprang into action. Only two days after the 19<sup>th</sup> September, while armed troops were still on the streets of Bangkok, the "*19<sup>th</sup> September Network Against the Coup*" organised the first of many illegal public demonstrations. Many people from different groups cooperated with the Network. Our slogans were simple: "No to Taksin and No to the Coup". It is a tribute to the younger generation of Thai activists that such a network sprang into action so rapidly and it is ironic that the various middle-aged activists from the 1970s, who have spent the last twenty years complaining about the lack of social consciousness among youth, were mainly supporting the coup. Yet, the 19<sup>th</sup> September Network was problematic in its outlook. It was too sectarian and refused to work on the issue of political reform or to cooperate with the vast majority of activists in the social movements who were undecided about how to relate to the junta. The network was led by a small group of autonomists who concentrated on repeated demonstrations and daring stunts.

## **The “Tale of Two Democratic Cities” ?**

In 1995 Anek Laothamatas wrote a book 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. These were the “two democratic cities” of Thai politics. According to Anek the divide was not just geographical but it was an issue of class. In his view, the rural electorate were mainly small farmers and the urban electorate were “middle class”. It was the overwhelming dominance of the rural electorate in various constituencies that meant that they had the voting power to elect governments. These governments were mainly corrupt and deeply involved in money politics. In Anek’s view, the rural people voted for these politicians because they were “patrons” of the poor who had to prove themselves by their work record of helping local communities. 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.

For Anek, the urban middle class were well educated and chose their governments and politicians using independent thought and a strong sense of “political morality”. They cast their votes after carefully considering the policies of various parties, and when the governments which were chosen by the rural poor turned out to be corrupt and immoral, they took part in street demonstrations to bring those governments down.

Anek’s solution to this bad state of affairs was to break down the barriers between the two halves of Thai society. This meant that the state had to increase rural development projects so that these areas became more urban-like and linked into the capitalist market through technological advances. Equally important was the need for

political parties to develop clear policies and propose new solutions. Together, such measures would weaken the patron-client system and reduce vote-buying. Examples from Britain, and even Thailand in the 1970s, indicate that vote-buying was reduced by increasing the importance of policy choice at election times.

If we ignore some dubious claims in this book, for example, that all urban people are middle class, or that the patron-client system is deeply rooted in the countryside because it can be traced back to the pre-capitalist “Sakdina” system etc., the book raises some important issues. What is interesting about this book is that it was written before the *Thai Rak Thai Party* was ever established. More than this, it appears that *Thai Rak Thai* followed closely all the major points put forward in the book for developing Thai politics. Not only was *Thai Rak Thai* the only party for over two decades to take the issue of party policies seriously, the party took a keen interest in winning votes from the rural and urban poor on the basis of such policies. The 30 baht universal health care scheme was typical. The Taksin government then proceeded to actually honour its election promises and use state funds to develop rural areas so that they could be linked to the world market. The village funds and “One Tambon One Product” (O.T.O.P.) are a good example. In short, Taksin and *Thai Rak Thai* followed Anek’s prescriptions to the letter and therefore the rural voters started to vote for clear pro-poor policies, while reducing their personal attachment to local political patrons.

Yet during the P.A.D. mass campaign against Taksin, academics and some social activists often quoted Anek’s book to “prove” that the rural poor were too stupid to understand Democracy and that they were tied into Taksin’s new patron-client system via *Thai Rak Thai’s* Populist policies. This is understandable because Anek’s



position today is that *Thai Rak Thai* built a new patron-client system and that this shows that Thailand can never have full democracy.<sup>23</sup>

Never the less, the majority of social activists who were interviewed by my research team, during the P.A.D. campaign against Taksin, admitted that the 16 million or more votes for *Thai Rak Thai* were votes for the party's policies and not merely "bought" by handing out cash in a patron-client system. What is more, the very concept of a "patron-client system" is not about a political party which offers Populist policies to the electorate, carries them out and then gets overwhelmingly re-elected on a national ballot. Political Patron Client systems are about individual relationships between a local political boss and the boss's constituents. It is pure nonsense to state that the *Thai Rak Thai* party was building a new strong patron-client system in the countryside. For those who genuinely believe in democracy, governments and political parties *ought* to carry out policies which the people want. Of course if you are a "Tank Liberal" who thinks that the poor are too stupid to have the right to vote and that state spending on improving the lives of the poor is creating a "culture of dependence" and destroying "fiscal discipline"<sup>24</sup> you will disagree.

## Forces behind the coup

It is ironic that the most obvious and potentially destructive "patron-client system" in Thailand is the old crony network which is constantly created and re-created by the Thai elites. After the 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Anek (2006) already quoted.

<sup>24</sup> These criticisms of *Thai Rak Thai* Populism were made by the *Democrat Party* (see Bangkok Post 17/06/06) and neo-liberals such as Tirayut Boonmee and Ammar Siamwalla (see *Nation* 6/01/03, 28/07/03, *Matichon* daily 25/12/2002, Tirayut Boonmi "Taksinomics" in Jernsak Bintong (ed) *Keeping up with Taksin*, 2004).

September 2006 coup, there was a whirl-wind distribution of “jobs for the boys” with Fat Cat salaries, on the various new committees and boards of state enterprises. This is the true “culture of dependence” on corruption and dictatorship among the elite. What is more, the largest section of the electorate who vote by fashion rather than by reasoned consideration of policies and who cheer military coups, in the hope of receiving some crumbs from the Top Table, without any basic democratic consciousness, is the urban middle class and the liberal academics. This is the key to understanding the interest groups behind the anti-Taksin coup of September 2006.

More than ten years ago, Kraisaak Choonhawan, son of elected Prime Minister Chatchai, who was deposed in the military coup of February 1991, explained that the civilian business politicians represented by his father’s party were challenging the old vested interests of the military and top civil servants by using their new power-base among the electorate. The 1991 coup did not achieve its mission to reinstate the power of the old crony networks, since the military were soon overthrown in the bloody 1992 uprising. The power struggle between the military-bureaucrat cronies and the cronies of elected business politicians continued. Yet it is not a clear cut divide because there is much overlap and the different interest groups have on many occasions come to mutually beneficial deals. People swap sides too. It is an argument among the elite about the road to power and wealth: elections or coups. There was potential for increased confrontation when Taksin and *Thai Rak Thai* upped the stakes and ventured into new waters by offering pro-poor policies in order to win substantial electoral support from among the poor majority.

Added to this confrontation over power and business interests is the fact that the conservative elite and their neoliberal supporters have extreme hatred and contempt for the poor. In the past they had

arrogantly flaunted their wealth in open society without a single glance to the plight of the poor. The *Democrat Party* government immediately after the 1997 economic crisis had blatantly used state funds, raised by taxation on the poor,<sup>25</sup> to pay of the non-performing debts created by the rich during the boom years. One only has to contrast their anti-poor rhetoric with that of Taksin. Before he won his first election Taksin promised that his government would help the poor, not just the rich. In early 2006 when the anti-Taksin elites were accusing the poor of being ignorant and a burden on society, Taksin was able to opportunistically claim that the poor were not a burden, but were citizens without opportunities. The neoliberals were another key group who backed the coup against Taksin.

As already mentioned, Hewison has shown that Taksin's initial aim in introducing pro-poor policies was to buy social peace in post crisis Thailand.<sup>26</sup> This explains why the majority of the business class backed Taksin in the early days. But six years on, when that social peace started to unravel with the mass protests led by the P.A.D., Taksin's business supporters dropped away. They became the third significant group to back the coup.

It should not be taken for granted that the anti-Taksin military-bureaucratic network is a network led by or under the control of the Monarchy, despite any Royal connections that it might have. Paul Handley argues that the Monarchy is all powerful in Thai society and that its aim is to be a just (Thammaracha) and Absolute Monarch.<sup>27</sup> For Handley, Taksin was challenging the Monarchy and seeking to establish himself as "president". There is little evidence to

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<sup>25</sup> The poor in Thailand pay more of their income on tax than the rich, mainly because of regressive indirect taxation.

<sup>26</sup> Kevin Hewison (2003) already quoted.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Handley (2006) already quoted.

support the suggestion that Taksin is a republican. There is also ample evidence in Handley's own book that there are limitations to the Monarchy's power. Never the less, Handley's suggestion that the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup was a Royal Coup, reflects a substantial body of opinion in Thai society.

The Monarchy over the last 150 years has shown itself to be remarkably adaptable to all circumstances and able to gain in stature by making alliances with all sorts of groups, whether they be military dictatorships or elected governments. The Monarchy may have made mild criticisms of the Taksin government, but this did not stop the Siam Commercial Bank, which is the Royal bank, from providing funds for the sale of Taksin's Shin Corporation to Temasek holdings.<sup>28</sup> Nor should it be assumed that Taksin and *Thai Rak Thai* were somehow "anti-Royalist". For over 300 years the capitalist classes in many countries have learnt that conservative Constitutional Monarchies help protect the status quo under capitalism and hence their class interests. However, it is also clear that the Thai King is more comfortable with military dictatorships than with elected governments. This explains why the Monarchy backed the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup.

We must not overlook the fact that the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup was only possible because it opportunistically piggy-backed the anti-Taksin movement organised by the *Peoples Alliance for Democracy*. The junta leaders claim that they used the "Portuguese Model". This is another junta distortion of the truth, encouraged by people like Surapong Jaiyarnarm. The Portuguese military staged a coup in the mid 1970s against a Fascist dictatorship which was waging a series of hopeless colonial wars. The coup was popular because it overthrew Fascism and led to the establishment of

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<sup>28</sup> *Bangkok Post*. 24/01/06.

democracy, but it was not the generals who pushed forward radical reforms. It was a coalition of left-wing parties and junior officers which formed the radical movement. The Thai case could not be more different.

The September coup was not a “simple return” to military rule in a country where the military “remain all powerful”. The actions of the P.A.D. were crucial in paving the way for a coup, even if this was not the specific intention of the leadership of the P.A.D.<sup>29</sup> The important point is that Civil Society forces, popular campaigns and social movements are now leading actors in Thai politics and always have to be written into the equation. One can only understand the post-economic crisis policies of *Thai Rak Thai* by considering the potential power of the Peoples’ Movement. The poor are not merely ignorant and passive subjects who can be manipulated by the elites. A top-down analysis of Thai society, whether it be considering the 1932 revolution, the 1960s period of military rule, the 1970s turmoil between Left and Right, or the present crisis, only provides a misleading conspiracy theory account of events. This also applies to the problems in the three southern provinces because it ignores systematic oppression by the Thai state against the local population and how the population fights back.

The 19<sup>th</sup> September coup was therefore a coup by anti-Taksin elites who hated Taksin’s Populist policies because they were giving Taksin too much power. At a stroke the military junta disenfranchised the poor electorate, the majority of Thai voters, who had responded favourably to *Thai Rak Thai’s* pro-poor policies.

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<sup>29</sup> Except for Sondhi Limtongkul who did want a coup.

## The “Tank Liberals”

Today in Thailand we have the phenomenon of “Tank Liberals”. These are people who for years have claimed to be “liberal democrats”, in favour of democracy. Yet when put to the test during the present crisis, they sided with the military coup rather than side with the poor. As the Left has shown in its public opposition to the coup, whether it be actions by the “19<sup>th</sup> September Network Against the Coup” or the progressive movements in the *Thai Social Forum*, it is possible to oppose Taksin and oppose the coup. The two positions only become mutually exclusive when one wishes to side with the rich and the status quo rather than the poor. The coup can now be seen as a coming together of elite and neoliberal forces who were afraid of the voting power of the poor, and how this power was exploited by *Thai Rak Thai*.

The list of liberal collaborators with the junta in the appointed parliament is a list of shame. Rubbing shoulders with army and police officers and top business people are the following notables: Ammar Siamwalla, Pratumporn Wucharasatien, Kotom Ariya, Sapon Supamong, Chai-anan Samudwanij, Bawornsak Uwanno, Wutipong Priabjariyawat, Sungsit Piriyaungsan, Sujit Boonbongkarn and Surichai Wankeaw. Also of note are Chaiyan Chaiyaporn, Surapong Jaiyarnarm and Prapart Pintobtaeng who have acted either as supporters or advisors to the junta.

In the case of Prapart, he is not a liberal but lacks all faith in the independent power of the Peoples Movement or the ability of the poor to lead themselves. Prapart is an advisor to the *Assembly of the Poor*, but he has capitulated to the elite by joining the “Tank Liberals”. Yet the ordinary villagers in the *Assembly of the Poor* have generally maintained a principled anti-dictatorship position. Long standing social activists such as Chop Yodkeaw, Tuenjai Deetate

and Wiboon Kemchalerm also joined the junta appointed assembly, probably for similar reasons to Prapart. This raises the question, which will be discussed in the next section, about why the “Tank Liberals” should be able to influence some sections of the Peoples’ Movement.

The lessons about liberalism from the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup are clear. It took a military coup to reverse the popular Keynesian and social welfare policies of the *Thai Rak Thai* government. Liberalism and the free-market therefore go hand in hand with militarism and dictatorship. As Arundhati Roy writes: “*What the free market undermines is not national sovereignty, but democracy. As the disparity between the rich and poor grows, the hidden fist has its work cut out for it...Today corporate globalization needs an international confederation of loyal, corrupt, authoritarian governments in poorer countries to push through unpopular reforms and quell mutinies*”.<sup>30</sup>

Liberalism has always claimed to be the protector of democracy, yet when one looks at the evidence it becomes clear that there has always been an issue about the right to vote among the poor majority. That right has only been won in many countries by mass struggle from below.<sup>31</sup> Liberals have constantly argued that the poor are not ready for democracy because they may use democracy to challenge the interests of the rich.

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<sup>30</sup> Arundhati Roy (2004) *The ordinary person's guide to Empire*. Harper Perennial. P. 37

<sup>31</sup> See Paul Foot (2005) *The Vote. How it was won and how it was undermined*. Penguin/Viking.

## Why liberal politics has an influence in the Peoples Movement

In order to understand why the Thai Peoples Movement has been open to influence from liberal politics you have to go back to the collapse of the *Communist Party of Thailand* (C.P.T.) in the early 1980s. All during the two decades of the 1960s and 1970s the C.P.T., with its Stalinist-Maoist politics, was the dominant influence on the Peoples Movement. Like their sisters and brothers around the world, Thai activists reacted to the collapse of *Communist Party* both in terms of its failure and its authoritarian nature. The negative legacy of the C.P.T. meant that there was a dominance of Autonomism, Post-Modernism and Third Way Reformism among the Thai Peoples Movement<sup>32</sup>. These are all theories which lead to an acceptance of the free market and liberalism, either because they reject “theories” and “Grand Narratives” or because they see no alternative to free-market capitalism because the movement from below is doomed to failure. C.P.T Maoism was also a “de-politicising” ideology, given that it did not discuss many important issues such as the free market, gender politics and class issues as opposed to nationalism.<sup>33</sup>

The overall result was a movement which was de-politicised and concentrated on single issue problem solving. The rejection of the need for an independent theory, or theories, of the Peoples’ Movement goes hand in hand with the rejection by many of the need to build a political party of the working class and peasantry. It is this

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<sup>32</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>33</sup> See Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2003) Challenges to the Thai N.G.O. movement from the dawn of a new opposition to global capital. In Ji Giles Ungpakorn (ed.) *Radicalising Thailand: new political perspectives*. Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University. Also Giles Ji Ungpakorn (2006) “The impact of the Thai “Sixties” on the Peoples” Movement today. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 7 (4). Published by Routledge.



vacuum of theory in the Thai Peoples Movement which allowed the liberals to dominate. Examples of this can be seen in support for the free-market as a mechanism to bring about “accountability” and the total acceptance of liberal political ideas about “independent bodies” which were created in the 1997 Constitution.<sup>34</sup> In Europe, the Left sees “independent bodies”, such as the European Central Bank, as being the result of neoliberal mechanisms.

Never the less, the recent *Thai Social Forum* and the massive protests against electricity privatisation and against the Free Trade Agreement with the United States, show that there is a deepening concern about the market and neoliberalism among the Peoples Movement.

The fact that the liberal intellectuals have supported the coup has had two contradictory effects. On the one hand, it has dragged parts of the Peoples Movement into working with bodies set up by the junta, due to the acceptance that there was no democratic alternative. On the other hand it has made many other sections of the movement much more hostile and wary of the liberal intellectuals than before.

## **The Politics of the P.A.D.**

*The Peoples Alliance for Democracy* (P.A.D.) was a popular front movement against the Taksin government, comprising 23 Peoples Organisations in alliance with businessman Sondhi Limtongkul . The bulk of its mass base was among the Bangkok Middle Classes and it organised large rallies against the Taksin government in the period

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<sup>34</sup> See Michael Kelly Connors (2003) *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*. RoutledgeCurzon, and Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2002) From Tragedy to Comedy: Political Reform in Thailand. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 32 (2), 191-205.

February to April 2006. The largest of these rallies was attended by up to 100,000 people.

The P.A.D. chose 5 leaders to lead the movement:

1. Sondhi Limtongkul: Conservative Royalist media tycoon and owner of the *Manager Group*.
2. Chamlong Simuang: Ex-*Palang Tham Party* leader, leading light in the Buddhist *Santi Asoke* movement and one of the leaders of the May 1992 democracy protest.
3. Somsak Kosaisuk: Retired leader of the Railway workers union, Organiser of the *Thai Labour Solidarity Committee* and one of the leaders of the May 1992 democracy movement.
4. Pipop Tongchai: Advisor to the *Campaign for Popular Democracy*, education reform activist and “N.G.O. elder”.
5. Somkiat Pongpaiboon: Lecturer at Korat Rajpat Institute and activist working with teachers’ groups and farmers.

The P.A.D. Spokesperson was Suriyasai Katasila, ex-student activist and head of the *Campaign for Popular Democracy*.

Crudely speaking, businessman Sondhi Limtongkul provided the funds and publicity for the movement, via his media outlets, while the other four leaders helped to draw supporters to the rallies. This was a case of a classical “Cross-Class Popular Front” often favoured by the Stalinist and Maoist Left in the past, including the now defunct *Communist Party of Thailand* (C.P.T.). Some comparisons can be made with the Philippines in the case of the anti-Arroyo movement. The Maoist *Communist Party of the Philippines* chose to build a similar alliance with the so-called “progressive bourgeoisie”, rather than build a working class and peasant movement as advocated by *Laban ng Masa*.<sup>35</sup> In Thailand, both Somsak Kosaisuk and Somkiat

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<sup>35</sup> *Laban ng Masa* (Struggle of the Masses) is an anti-Maoist left-wing coalition made up of people who split from the Communist Party.

Pongpaiboon have been influenced by Stalinist ideas originating from the C.P.T.

A major debate between the Stalinist / Maoist Left and the Trotskyist Left had always been about the issue of forming Cross-Class alliances in Popular Fronts. This emerged very seriously in the debates around the tactics of the Chinese Communist Party in the mid 1920s and the Spanish Communist Party in the 1930s.<sup>36</sup> The major criticism of the Popular Front strategy, which also applies to the case of the P.A.D. in Thailand in 2006, is that the working class and peasantry are forced to hold back on their class demands in such an alliance and the leadership is handed over to the capitalists and middle-classes. Without doing this, the capitalists would not join the alliance in the first place.

In the case of the P.A.D., the sections from the Peoples Movements, Non-Government Organisations (N.G.O.s) and the various Social Movement networks, joined up with Sondhi because they believed that the Peoples Movement was too weak to mobilise against Taksin on an independent class basis. Many activists also believed that it was a wise tactic to team up with Sondhi who had a large media outlet and lots of funds.<sup>37</sup> This explains why Sondhi had real control of all P.A.D. policies.

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<sup>36</sup> See Nigel Harris (1978) *The Mandate of Heaven. Marx and Mao in Modern China*. Quartet Books. And Ian Birchall (1974) *Workers against the monolith. The Communist Parties since 1943*. Pluto Press.

<sup>37</sup> The information in this section on the politics of the P.A.D. comes out of interviews of 31 Peoples' Movement activists, carried out by the author's research team in early to mid 2006, together with surveys of media reports and declarations. The full results have been published in Thai in the book: Ji Ungpakorn et al. (2006) *Social Movements in Thailand*. Workers Democracy Publishers.

The view that the Peoples Movement was too weak to act independently has some truth, given the way that the movement is dominated by the fragmentation of single issue campaigning and an anarchistic refusal to build any unified political theory or political party. Yet it is also a gross exaggeration which overlooks the realities of class struggle on the ground, especially during the Taksin era. Some examples of these struggles have already been mentioned. One important aspect of the problem of seeing the movement as weak, stems from the fact that the Peoples Movement representatives in the P.A.D. lacked a genuine mass base. Somsak, Pipop and Somkiat are good examples. They are figure heads of the movement who rely on others to mobilise people.

Somsak was quite unsuccessful in mobilising workers to P.A.D. rallies, despite the fact that he is an important leader in the *Thai Labour Solidarity Committee*. The reason for Somsak's weakness in the P.A.D. was very much related to the fact that the P.A.D. campaigned solely around the middle-class and business class issue of Taksin's corruption, rather than talking about issues directly relevant to the labour movement and the poor. Of course corruption is an important issue for poor people, but they rightly see that *all* politicians and business elites are corrupt. In the past, the working class and peasantry had been successfully mobilised on issues such as human rights, democracy, land rights and opposition to privatisation and Free Trade Agreements. Yet the P.A.D. hardly mentioned any of these issues and only once mentioned the problem of violence and human rights abuses in the South.

The issue of Taksin's corruption and the conflicts of interest became real issues for those business people who were missing out on the rich pickings which were being made by those in the Taksin loop. The lack of sincerity over this issue could be seen by the fact

that *ex-Thai Rak Thai* M.P. and corrupt politician Sanoh Tientong was welcomed like a hero on to the stage at a P.A.D. rally. The fuss about Taksin's domination of so-called "independent bodies", such as the various bodies over-seeing privatised industries or the media, was not about the fact that these bodies were not representative of the population as a whole (ie the working class and peasantry), but more about the fact that Taksin was shutting out rival capitalist interests.

Pipop Tongchai, although a senior figure in the N.G.O. movement, has no real mass base. Even *the Campaign for Popular democracy*, which was a large campaigning organisation back in the early 1990s is now an empty shell. Pipop relied on asking the various N.G.O. networks to do him a favour by mobilising some people to the rallies. However, they were not that successful in mobilising villagers who are the main constituency of N.G.O.s. This is because most villagers voted for *Thai Rak Thai*. Somkiat Pongpaiboon had long complained that ever since the Taksin government came to power he had been unable to mobilise any rural villagers to protest events.

The tragedy of the cross-class alliance strategy, used by the P.A.D., was that by handing over the political leadership to Sondhi, they further weakened their mass base in the Peoples Movement because of the nature of the P.A.D. demands. They then came to rely more and more on the urban middle classes. Despite claiming that they would be able to "tone-down" Sondhi's Royalist rhetoric, as part of the justification for linking up with him, this never happened. The entire P.A.D. leadership supported the demand for the King to appoint a government, over the heads of the wishes of the poor, by using Section 7 of the 1997 Constitution.<sup>38</sup> *The Assembly of the Poor*

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<sup>38</sup> Somsak maintains that he always opposed the use of Section 7, but had to bow to the wishes of the majority.

and a number of trade unions and rural activists were extremely unhappy with the demand to use section 7 and they stopped supporting P.A.D. rallies.

Worse than this, the P.A.D. leadership positioned itself in opposition to the poor by accusing them of voting for Taksin out of a “lack of information” ie. stupidity. Taksin’s pro-poor policies were portrayed as “bad for the nation’s finances” in classical neoliberal fashion, and the poor people who came to Bangkok to support Taksin in the *Caravan of the Poor* were slandered as being merely “rent a mob”. It may well be the case that *Thai Rak Thai* helped pay the travel expenses of these poor villagers, but Sondhi also paid for the demonstration expenses of the P.A.D. In neither case did it mean that the participants were not genuine volunteers with genuine beliefs.<sup>39</sup>

Eventually the final act of the cross-class alliance was played out. The 19<sup>th</sup> September coup leaders would never have had the confidence to stage the coup if the Peoples Movement had had a clear anti-dictatorship position from the very beginning. That would have meant respecting the poor and trying to pull them away from *Thai Rak Thai* to the Left, with better pro-poor policies.

The P.A.D.’s “Tank Liberal” position was so clear that they showed no interest what so ever in building or taking part in the *Thai Social Forum* in October 2006, despite the fact that Pipop was invited to take part in a plenary debate. Similarly, the *Thai Labour Solidarity Committee* played no part in the Social Forum either, but did try to mobilise some days earlier to meet the military junta in order to make futile suggestions as to who should be the new Minister of Labour.

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<sup>39</sup> Our researchers also interviewed members of the *Caravan of the Poor*.

Added to the problem of the cross-class alliance was the fact that the P.A.D. leadership was entirely middle-aged and male. This reflected the most backward ideas of the Peoples Movement that respects Male Seniority. The P.A.D. leadership appears even more backward in the light of the fact that it is very rare today to find any social movement or N.G.O. in Thailand without significant involvement by women activists and young people. During the anti-Taksin campaigns by the P.A.D., a group of women activists, varying in age, made a serious approach to the leadership to be included. However this was angrily dismissed by Sondhi and seen as a bit of a “joke” by the other male leaders of the P.A.D.

In response to some accusations that the P.A.D. leadership acted in an undemocratic manner over a number of decisions, the P.A.D. leadership complained that the various representatives of the 23 Peoples Organisations never bothered to turn up to meetings. This is probably true. However, the question is why was this so? Was it because they were lazy and un-committed, or was it because they had already been excluded from any real decision-making process?

## **Important questions regarding the Head of State**

In the present Thai political crisis it is vitally important that we debate and discuss the issue of what kind of Head of State is suitable. This is because whether it be the period of the Taksin government, the period of mass demonstrations against Taksin, or the period of Dictatorship after the September military coup, the Monarchy has been directly involved, whether by intention or not. The position of the ultra-conservatives that says that “we do not have the right” to discuss the role of the Head of State is an obstacle to political reform and should be opposed in the name of transparency and accountability of governance.

In considering what type of Head of State we want, we must start from the stand point that Thailand must be a Democracy, not an Absolute Monarchy, which was abolished long ago in the 1932 revolution. The present respect for and status of the Monarchy among many Thais is due to years of campaigning by supporters of the Monarchy. Yet this was not carried out with the aims of returning to the pre-1932 situation of an Absolute Monarchy.<sup>40</sup>

Neither must Thailand be a Military Dictatorship, the days of which should have been over long ago also. It is important to re-affirm this because the Peoples Movement has fought and sacrificed life and limb for rights, freedom and Democracy on many occasions, whether it be in 1932, 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 or in May 1992. Today the Peoples Movement must continue this struggle to open and expand the democratic space from the threats of illegitimate authoritarian power.

In stating that Thailand must be a Democracy, we should not forget that even the junta which staged the coup understood that coups are illegitimate in the eyes of Thai people. They therefore tried to claim that they were “democratic” or that they staged a coup “for Democracy”, even if we know this to be a bare-faced lie. They are little different from previous dictatorships in this respect, for example, the dictatorship of Field Marshall Sarit, who claimed that Thailand was a “Thai-style Democracy”.

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<sup>40</sup> See Tongchai Winichakul (2005) Going beyond the model of democracy after the 14<sup>th</sup> October. *Fa Deawkun* 3(4) October-December. Tongchai argues that the process of promoting the new Constitutional Monarchy started with Prince Dhani soon after 1932. This issue of *Fa Deawkun*, which is devoted to a discussion about the Monarchy, has been the subject of a police ban and an investigation for Lèse Majesté. Tongchai's view is in opposition to the view that the project of promoting the Monarchy was in order to avenge the 1932 revolution and return to an Absolute Monarchy – see Paul Handley (2006) already quoted.



If Thailand must be a Democracy, then should not the role of the Head of State be to defend and protect Democracy?

In Thailand there has been a long historical debate about whether we should have a Constitutional Monarchy or an Elected President. For example, these debates took place in the 1912 “Mo Leng” anti-monarchy revolt during the time of King Vajiravudh<sup>41</sup>, in the successful 1932 Revolution during the next reign, or in the period when the *Communist Party of Thailand* was at its peak in the 1970s. Today the issue is still discussed, but most have to talk in private, due to the strong current of right-wing censorship. It is the view of this author that all public officials should be elected and subjected to public scrutiny, even if this may not be the view of most Thais at present.

In most standard accounts of a Constitutional Monarchy, the duty of a Constitutional Monarchy is to ensure stability and continuation of democratic government. This, the Monarchy can do, if it remains above party politics and personal conflicts, especially among those in the Executive. Mainly the Constitutional Monarchies of this World act in a ceremonial manner with very little power. Occasionally the Monarchy might suggest someone to be a Prime Minister who would attempt to win a vote of confidence, in the case of a tied parliament.

In April 2006 the present Thai Monarch stated on the issue of the use of Section 7<sup>42</sup> that: “*I wish to reaffirm that section 7 does not mean giving unlimited power to the Monarch to do as he wishes...*”

<sup>41</sup> Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead (2004) *The rise and decline of Thai absolutism*. Routledge Curzon.

<sup>42</sup> Section 7 of the 1997 Constitution stated that in time of crisis the King could appoint a Prime Minister. But although this was a demand of the P.A.D. in 2006, there was much debate about whether the period before and after the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2006 elections was an appropriate time to use Section 7.

*Section 7 does not state that the Monarch can make decisions on everything... if that was done people would say that the Monarch had exceeded his duties. I have never asked for this nor exceeded my duties. If this was done it would not be Democracy".*<sup>43</sup> However, by September and certainly by December, the King publicly supported the coup.

For this reason there is a very important question to ask about the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup. Did the Thai Head of State try to defend Democracy from the military coup which destroyed the 1997 Constitution on the 19<sup>th</sup> September? Was the Head of State forced to support the military junta? Did he willingly support those who staged the coup? Did he even plan it himself, as some believe? These are important questions because the military junta who staged the coup and destroyed Democracy have constantly claimed legitimacy from the Head of State. Starting in the early days of the coup they showed pictures of the Monarchy on TV, they tied yellow Royalist ribbons on their guns and uniforms and asked the Head of State to send his representative to open their military appointed parliament. Later in his annual birthday speech in December, the King praised the military Prime Minister. We need the truth in order to have transparency and in order that Civil Society can make all public institutions accountable. What we must never forget is that any institution or organisation which refuses to build transparency can only have conflicts of interest which it wishes to hide.

The conservatives in Thailand want to create an image that the present Monarch is more than human. This is unscientific. The Monarch is only human, no different from other citizens and thus can make human mistakes and must surely have the normal strengths and weaknesses.

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<sup>43</sup> *Matichon* daily newspaper, 26 April 2006. In Thai.

In the early part of his reign the Monarch was young and unprepared for the job. He only became King because of an accident which happened to his elder brother. More than that, the Thai government at the time was headed by Field Marshal Plaek Pibul-Songkram who was an anti-Royalist. Therefore the Monarchy faced many problems in performing its duties as Head of State. This helps perhaps to explain why the Monarchy supported the military dictatorship of Field Marshall Sarit. It is Sarit who was partly responsible for promoting and increasing respect for the Monarchy.<sup>44</sup> But many years have passed. The status and experience of the Thai Head of State have changed. The Monarch has much political experience, more than any politician, due to the length of time on the Throne. Therefore the Monarch today exhibits the confidence of one who has now gained much experience. For example, he chastised elected governments, like that of Prime Minister Taksin. The important question for today therefore is: if the Monarch can chastise the Taksin government over the human rights abuses in the War on Drugs,<sup>45</sup> why cannot the Monarch chastise the military for staging a coup and abusing all democratic rights?

This question leads us back to the main point. In Thailand, do we want a Head of State that has the courage to defend freedom and Democracy or do we want a Head of State that supports the destruction of Democracy, whether whole-heartedly or not? One thing that may help us consider this problem is to ask yet another question. What duties do Thai citizens want the Monarchy as Head of State to perform? Should the Head of State be mainly ceremonial and

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<sup>44</sup> Thak Chaloemtiarana (1979) *Thailand: the politics of despotic paternalism*. Social Science Association of Thailand and Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University. P. 309.

<sup>45</sup> In December 2003 the King called on the government to carry out an investigation into the killings of the 2,245 people.

sometimes seek to solve crises together with society, according to the definition of a Democratic Constitutional Monarchy? If we want a Head of State in this style, then surely we must have the right to make the Head of State publicly accountable. We must have the right to criticise the institution and make suggestions in order that the Head of State can perform his or her duties properly.

Building accountability and transparency is not possible while we still have the custom of people prostrating themselves on the ground to the Monarch. In fact this custom was abolished in the 5<sup>th</sup> reign (mid nineteenth century) but seems to have crept back. It is a custom which indicates inequality of power. But all Thai citizens must be equal. It is just that different people have different duties to perform. Respect and showing respect is a personal choice and can be shown without prostration on the ground.

When considering the transparency of the Monarchy we must expand this to include economic transparency too. The fight against corrupt politicians, the insistence that public figures declare their assets and share ownership and the demand that Taksin's family pay taxes is only right and proper. But we must not have double standards. The same rules must apply to all. Therefore we need to see asset and earnings declarations from the Palace and the Palace should pay taxes like all other citizens.

Most Thais probably believe that the present Head of State is a good man. But humans can be good or bad. To depend merely on the individual goodness of a person to ensure that the Head of State performs the correct duties that are expected by the public is most risky. The era of "public participation" started in Thailand many years ago. The drafting process for the 1997 Constitution is only one example. Surely it is high time that the people should participate in

determining the direction of work and the policies of the Head of State. This should not be left just to the military or a handful of people in the Privy Council. Only with transparency and accountability can we build Democracy and a just society in Thailand.

## **In conclusion**

The 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup was not just a matter of one section of the Thai political elite seizing power from another. It could not have taken place without the passive support from important sections of the Peoples Movement. The various factions which supported the coup shared a common hatred towards the poor and any pro-poor policies, especially because the Taksin government was harnessing the voting power of the poor to stay in power. This indicates that the poor, either as voters or as social movement activists, will remain a vitally important factor in Thai politics. Given that the elites, middle classes and the liberal intellectuals have no democratic ideals, it is to the poor, the working class and the peasantry, and their social movements and parties, whom we must look to in order to expand the democratic space and build social justice.

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## Chapter 2

# Inventing Ancient Thai Traditions

The exact nature of the Thai Monarchy remains a much debated issue among academics. At one extreme is the assertion by conservatives that the Monarchy is an ancient institution dating back to the Sukhothai period and that Thai society is unique in that the people still see the Monarch as God. By all appearances this seems to be true. Yet this conservative description overlooks issues of real power in present day society and conveniently erases much of Thai history from memory, especially the important changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1932 revolution.

At the other end of the spectrum might be the view that the Thai Monarchy is merely a modern Constitutional Monarchy with little power. However the reinvention of the tradition of this institution, after 1932, has created an image of a Monarchy with much influence due to the fact that different factions of the ruling class benefit from the use and promotion of the Palace. Given the choice between these two points of view, the author has a tendency to support the latter position. Yet, the issue of understanding the Thai Monarchy is not

simple, mainly because of state censorship and self censorship by academics. There are a number of “in between” positions which should be taken into account.

Back in the early 1970s the *Communist Party of Thailand* (C.P.T.) argued that Thailand was “semi-feudal, semi-colonial”. This was a classical Maoist analysis. As far as the Monarchy goes, the analysis argued that the feudal or “*Sakdina*” Monarchy had lost half its power to other forces, while still retaining great influence. These other forces included the military and the imperialist power of the U.S. For the C.P.T. and its descendants, especially those in *Thai Rak Thai*, the modernising capitalist class (eg. People like Taksin) needed to be supported because it would reduce the power of the “feudal Monarch”. But there is a problem with viewing the Monarchy as “feudal” or *Sakdina* after the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. As will be shown later in this chapter, the Thai State was transformed in order to pave the way for modern capitalism back in the 1870s and there are no remaining vestiges of a *Sakdina* system in Thailand. There is also a problem in seeing the modern capitalist class as “anti-Royal” or even Republican. Constitutional Monarchs exist in many European capitalist countries as conservative institutions which benefit the capitalist class. But there is another important issue raised by the C.P.T. analysis and that is the idea that the Monarchy still retains “half” its power in society, shared with other factions of the ruling class.

The C.P.T.’s thirty year old analysis of the Monarchy sharing power with other forces is similar to that proposed today by Anek Laothamatas. Anek is an ex-C.P.T. supporter who went to the northern jungles of *Nan* after the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976. Today he is a neoliberal in the style of Anthony Gidden’s “Third Way”. Anek argues that Taksin’s problem was that he did not listen to the Palace and therefore had to be removed by the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup. For

Anek, Thailand is naturally suited to have a mixed political system where elected politicians share power with the Monarchy.<sup>1</sup>

How people seriously analyse the role and power of the Monarchy and what they do or claim is often different to varying degrees. Most intellectuals in Thailand would agree with the analysis that the Monarchy shares power with other sections of the ruling class, yet there are still claims that the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 was a “royal coup” or that the only real power in Thai politics is the Palace.<sup>2</sup>

Often people see the Monarchy as being a faction of the ruling class in conflict with other factions. But the nature of the conflict is seen in “*Sakdina*” versus “modern capitalist” terms. An example is how people talked about the crisis in the South<sup>3</sup> and the February 2005 General Election. Social activists close to *Thai Rak Thai*, especially people who were influenced by the C.P.T., believed that the violence in the South originated from disgruntled elements in the army, who were afraid of losing influence because the government wanted to increase the role of the police in the area at the expense of the army. They believed that the Palace was prepared to back the army because Taksin was challenging the old *Sakdina* order”.

Pipop Tongchai is a leading figure in the Peoples Movement and in the *Campaign for Popular democracy*. He was an important leader of the anti-Taksin *Peoples Alliance for Democracy*. Before the mass movement against Taksin existed, during the 2005 election, he argued that the Peoples Movement should form a united front with

<sup>1</sup> Anek Laothamathas (2006) *Taksina-Populism*. Matichon Press, in Thai.

<sup>2</sup> This view is reflected in Paul Handley’s (2006) *The King Never Smiles*. Yale University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Duncan McCargo (2005) Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand. *The Pacific Review*, 18(4), 499-519, is an important paper which reflects the views of many Thai academics.



conservative *Sakdina* elements in order to oppose the government.<sup>4</sup> Tirayut Boonmi, a liberal academic, criticised the increasing corruption in Thai society, especially under the *Thai Rak Thai* government. He argued that “figures close to (the Palace) had joined forces to disapprove of corruption”.<sup>5</sup> This belief that the Monarchy is trying to end corruption today is despite the fact that corruption in Thai society has been a long standing problem ever since the days of military rule. The Sarit military dictatorship was one of the most corrupt regimes Thailand has ever had, yet the Monarchy made no attempt to oppose corruption in those days. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup Tirayut has talked about the need for “Thai-style” democracy.

The two views about the Monarchy, both from supporters and opponents of *Thai Rak Thai*, are merely the opposite sides of the same coin. What they have in common is the view that the Monarchy is still an ancient *Sakdina* institution with a long standing tradition and that Taksin was transforming Thailand into a new style capitalist economy. For ex- C.P.T. activists the support for *Thai Rak Thai* is merely a new version of the cross-class alliance strategy for a “democratic revolution” used by all Stalinist and Maoist parties in the developing world.<sup>6</sup> For people opposed to *Thai Rak Thai*, they have turned this analysis on its head, attempting to argue that the *Sakdina* institution is now a radical force opposed to the aggressive capitalism of Taksin.

The problem with applying “ruling class conflict theories” to the crisis in the South, or the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup, is that they lead

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<sup>4</sup> Speech by Pipop Thogchai at the *Peoples Assembly* on the 2005 election, held at the Engineering Faculty, Chulalongkorn University, Sunday 23 January 2005.

<sup>5</sup> See *Bangkok Post* 28 February 2005, page 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2003) *Radicalising Thailand. New Political Perspectives*. Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. pp 33 & 204.

people to over-look the real issues of conflict in Thai society between the rulers and the ruled. The obsession with looking for splits and disagreements among the elites also leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of the State. The State is never a unified monolith. It is a collective of the different sections of the ruling capitalist elite and will therefore exhibit both disagreements and agreements within its structure. This gives it the needed flexibility. However, what all the different elements of the present Thai State all have in common is the need to maintain conditions for continued capital accumulation. The present Thai State is not plagued by splits between the pre-capitalist elites and modern aggressive capitalists. The split is about how to divide up the spoils of exploitation and the degree to which the State should intervene in the economy.

It is certainly true that the Taksin government was sensitive to accusations that there were disagreements with the Palace, but this is more about the legitimacy which the Monarchy gives to a government. As will be shown later, this legitimising function has been cultivated by all governments since Sarit. The 10<sup>th</sup> January 2002 issue of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* was banned in Thailand and the editors accused of *lèse majesté* for writing a short article suggesting that the King was becoming irritated by Taksin's "arrogance" and his "meddling in royal family affairs" by having "business links with Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn".<sup>7</sup> The Taksin governments' actions towards the magazine were more about defending the government from negative rumours, than defending the Monarchy. A more recent case of the threatened use of *lèse majesté* involved some election stickers carrying quotes from the King and Queen, used in the February 2005 campaign. In this case *lèse majesté* was used against an opposition party. Later in 2006, both sides in the political conflict over the Taksin government filed *lèse majesté* charges.

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<sup>7</sup> *Far Eastern Economic Review* 10 January 2002, p. 8.

This throws some light on the real function of the *lèse majesté* laws. They are in place in order to protect the conservative establishment and the status quo in the widest possible sense, not just the Royal part of the Thai State. “Nation, Religion and King” have been the three conservative pillars of the Thai state since Rama VI, before the 1932 revolution. “The People” have only been added as a later after thought, especially on public signs outside military bases.

## **The mainstream image of the Monarchy today**

Anyone who has ever visited Thailand cannot fail to notice how this institution is celebrated everywhere. Pictures of the King and Queen and other members of the Royal Family adorn many public buildings, along with the yellow and blue flags of the King and Queen. Royal insignia are liberally used in such diverse settings as the electric sky train to private tower blocks. Bangkok has numerous Royal monuments and there are many public holidays which celebrate this institution. The bookshops are full of books written by and written about the Royal Family, and recently, polo shirts with a picture of the King’s favourite dog “*Tong-Daeng*” sold like hot-cakes. In 2006 huge numbers of Bangkok residents wore yellow shirts in honour of the King’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary on the throne. Civil Servants and private employees were ordered to wear these yellow shirts to work every Monday.

We are all taught at school that “*the Monarchy has always been with Thai society*”, implying that this is an ancient and unchanging institution. When the new 1997 Constitution was drawn up, it was “unanimously accepted” that Section 2, the section concerning the Monarchy, would not be touched.

Today, it is widely accepted that the present King is a benevolent monarch who takes a keen interest in all spheres of

public affairs. Public perception is that he is an accomplished engineer, agriculturalist, photographer, musician, writer and statesman. We are taught that “*Without the King, whom we all love, Thailand would be a crisis-prone banana republic*”. In school, we are also taught that King Rama VII “*gave the Thai people democracy and a Constitution*” and his statue has been placed outside the parliament buildings. The *King Prajadhipok’s* (Rama VII) *Institute* is a political institute dedicated to “democratisation” and political development. Yet it was the revolutionary overthrow of this king in 1932 by the *Peoples Party* that resulted in a Constitution and an end to the Absolute Monarchy.

The present King has huge share-holdings in the Siam Commercial Bank and other capitalist corporations.<sup>8</sup> He is a pillar of elite society. As an institution the Monarchy often behaves like a business corporation, charging fees for public appearances and degree ceremonies. Yet we are told by rural anarchists<sup>9</sup> that the King “invented” the idea of Community- Self Sufficiency Economics or *Setakit Chumchon Por-piang* as an alternative to global capitalism. After the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup the government announced that it would use “Sufficiency Economics”. The legitimising influence of the Monarchy is sought by many people from very different backgrounds.

The Monarchy is undeniably a very important institution in society. But exactly *what* kind of institution is it and how much political power does it really have?

<sup>8</sup> See Suehiro Akira (1996) *Capital accumulation in Thailand 1855-1985*. Silkworm Books. Also Popan Uayyanon “*The Privy Purse Bureau and its role in business investment.*” Paper presented at the Faculty of Economics, Chulalongkorn University, 29/6/2006 (In Thai).

<sup>9</sup> See Chatthip Nartsupha (1998) *Peasant Community Economics in Thailand*. Chapter 5 In Chatthip Nartsupha et al. *Peasant Community Economics*. Wititai. p.272

## Counter Images concerning the Monarchy

On the 24<sup>th</sup> June 1932 the *Peoples Party*, lead by Pridi Phanomyong, Field Marshal Plaek Pibul-Songkram and others, staged a successful revolution against the Absolute Monarchy of Rama VII. Although the political current which demanded an end to absolutism had been growing for many years, the immediate trigger for the revolution was the world economic crisis and the way in which the King's government had handled it. Even King Rama VII admitted himself that the previous King had been very unpopular, especially because of lavish spending by the Royal Household. The following is a section of the first declaration by the Peoples Party after the successful revolution:

*“When the King came to throne, people had hopes...but... suffering...unemployment occurred...Instead of helping the people, the King used taxes for his own personal benefit...If the people are uneducated & stupid as the Monarch claims... it is because our Monarch is stupid and has prevented the people from receiving education...The King and his lot have helped themselves to riches by ploughing furrows on the backs of the people, sucking their blood...”*

Such a political statement in Thai society today would be shocking, but this declaration expressed the views of many Thais in 1932.<sup>10</sup> In fact we know that not only was the Monarchy held in low esteem in this period, but that in many areas it was irrelevant to ordinary peoples lives. Katherine Bowie in her book on the *Village Scout* movement quotes a 1954 Anthropological survey in Thailand that found that 61% of rural people were uncertain about the

<sup>10</sup> Nakarin Mektrairat (1990) *Beliefs, knowledge and political power in the 1932 revolution*. Social Science Association of Thailand, Bangkok. (In Thai).

<sup>11</sup> Bowie, K. A. (1997) *Rituals of national loyalty*. Columbia University Press, U.S.A. p.87.

meaning of the word “Monarchy” and its relevance to their lives.<sup>11</sup> Paul Handley outlines many of the disputes which post-War governments had with the Palace.<sup>12</sup> Only after the Sarit coup in 1957 did we begin to see the systematic promotion of this institution, although such attempts were started back in 1945 by Royalists like Prince Thani.<sup>13</sup> In describing the Sarit regime, Thak Chaloemtiarana wrote that:

*“The Sarit coup had little historical legitimacy compared to 1932 revolution...the development of the Monarchy saw rapid progress after 1957...While the prestige of the king increased, the government’s popularity grew... old ceremonies were reintroduced or reinvented.”*<sup>14</sup>

In fact the present day Thai Monarchy is a dynamic institution which is constantly going through the process of change and reinvention. Today the main driving force for this constant development of “image” is the Palace itself, often through the press. As the prestige of the institution has increased, it is no longer necessary to depend on the promotion of the Monarchy by other political forces. If other political forces do promote the Monarchy today, it is in the hope of gaining credit by attaching themselves to the Monarchy. One way in which the Monarchy has transformed and reinvented itself in the period after Sarit is to promote the “democratic image” of the institution, while retaining much traditional conservative factors.<sup>15</sup> Yet this is contradictory as seen by the Palace’s position on the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup.

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Handley (2006) already quoted.

<sup>13</sup> See Thongchai Winichakul’s article in *Fa Deaw Kan* 3(4) p 147. (In Thai).

<sup>14</sup> See Thak Chaloemtiarana (1979) *Thailand: the politics of despotic paternalism*. Social Science Association of Thailand & Thai Khadi Institute, Thammasat University.

<sup>15</sup> See Connors, M.K. (2003) *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*. Routledge Curzon. Especially Chapter 6.

## Historical Transformations of the Monarchy

Before the major transformation of the Thai state into a centralised capitalist model in the 1870s, “Thailand” as a nation-state did not exist. The back-projection of “Thailand’s history” from the modern era to *Sukhothai* (1270) and *Ayuttaya* (1350-1782) must therefore be seen as rewritings of history by people such as Luang Wichitwatakarn and Prince Damrong, to serve modern nationalistic ideology.

Before the 1870s the dominant economic and political system in the central and northern region can best be described as the “*Sakdina*” system. This was a loose political entity based on clusters of powerful cities, such as *Sukhothai*, *Ayuttaya*, *Chiangmai*, and *Krungtep* (Bangkok), whose political power changed over time and also decreased proportionately to the distance from each city. Not only was there no such thing as a centralised nation-state under an all-powerful king, but political power to control surplus production was also decentralised.

In this *Sakdina* system, control of surplus production, over and above self-sufficiency levels, was based on forced labour and the extraction of tribute. This was a system of direct control over humans, rather than the use of land ownership to control labour, and its importance was due to the low population level. The majority of common people (*Prai*) living near urban centres were forced to perform corvée forced labour for monthly periods. There were also debt slaves (*Taht*) and war slaves (*Chaleay Seuk*). This direct control of labour was decentralised under various *Moon Nai*, nobles and local rulers (*Jao Hua Muang*) who had powers to mobilise labour. The result was that under the *Sakdina* system both economic and political power was decentralised.

Trade played an important part in the economy. Control of river mouths as export centres became more important as long distance trade increased. Local rulers sought a monopoly on this trade in cooperation with Chinese merchants who ran sailing junks as far as China and the Arab world.

Since the *Sakdina* system was decentralised and its coverage was limited to urban settlements, other systems of social organisation also existed in what is now Thailand. In areas far away from large towns and cities people of varying ethnic composition also lived in semi-autonomous villages or small clusters of human habitation in various different ways. Apart from this, before the rise of *Ayuttaya*, there also existed a multitude of different states such the *Khmer* or *Tawarawadi* empires.

Although the increasing penetration of capitalism and the world market into the region had already increased the importance of money and trade, in the early Bangkok period, it was direct pressure from Western imperialism and class struggle, that finally pushed and dragged the Bangkok rulers towards a capitalist political transformation.<sup>16</sup> One piece of evidence for this comes with looking at the effect of the British imposed Bowring Treaty of 1855. This treaty established free trade and the freedom for Western capital penetration into the area without the need for direct colonisation. While the monopoly over trade, enjoyed by the *Sakdina* rulers of Bangkok, was abolished, vast opportunities were created for the capitalist production and trade of rice, sugar, tin, rubber and teak. An opportunity also arose to centralise the state under a powerful ruler. Thailand's Capitalist Revolution was not carried out by the bourgeoisie in the same style as the

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed and well researched account of the struggle to reorganize the state see Kullada Kesboonchoo Mead (2004) *The rise and decline of Thai absolutism*. Routledge Curzon



English or French revolutions. This will be explained in more detail later. In Thailand's case, the ruler of Bangkok, King Rama V or "*Chulalongkorn*" brought about a revolutionary transformation of the political and economic system in response to both pressure from an outside world which was already dominated by capitalism, and the result of class struggle within.

Rama V's revolution was to create a centralised and unified nation-state under the rule of Thailand's first Absolute Monarchy.<sup>17</sup> This involved destroying the power of his *Sakdina* rivals, the *Moon Nai*, nobles and local *Jao Hua Muang*. Politically this was done by appointing a civil service bureaucracy to rule outer regions and economically, by abolishing their power to control forced labour and hence surplus value. Forced labour was also abolished in response to class struggle from below, since *Prai* had a habit of trying to escape corvée labour and both *Prai* and *Taht* would often deliberately work inefficiently. Forced labour was replaced by wage labour and private property in land ownership was introduced for the first time. Furthermore, investment in production of agricultural goods for the world market became more important than the simple use of surplus production for consumption and trade. This can clearly be seen in the various investments in irrigation canals for rice production in the Rungsit area of the central plains. The Absolute Monarchy of Rama V was a thoroughly modern centralised institution, created in order to serve the interests of the ruler of Bangkok in an emerging capitalist "Thai" nation. It is this modern form of capitalist Monarchy which was overthrown only sixty years later in 1932.

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<sup>17</sup> See Rajchagool, Chaiyan (1994) *The rise and fall of the absolute monarchy*. White Lotus, Bangkok. Also, Ungpakorn, Ji Giles (1997) *The struggle for democracy and social justice in Thailand*. Arom Pongpangan Foundation, Bangkok.

In summary, then, the Monarchy as an institution has traveled through a number of major transformations in the last 200 years, from a *Sakdina* institution, through a short phase as an Absolute Monarchy, ending up as the Constitutional Monarchy we see today. Today's Monarchy is therefore neither ancient nor *Sakdina*. So what is its nature and function?

## **Re-establishing the Monarchy after the English Revolution of 1640**

In attempting to understand the contradiction between the Monarchy as an old institution and its modern role in capitalism, it is useful to look at Christopher Hill's 1959 essay on *the English Revolution 1640*.<sup>18</sup> In this essay Hill showed that the English Revolution overthrew feudalism during the course of the civil war, which was fought between the Monarchy, Church and large landowners on one side, and the "Middling sort" or middle level land owners and urban merchants in alliance with the poor, on the other. The revolution threw up a great progressive movement from below, the pinnacle being the rank and file soldiers councils held at Putney.<sup>19</sup> Radical organisations like the *Levellers* and *Diggers* also grew out of the struggle. This radical movement from below was tolerated by Cromwell and the rising capitalists so long as the old feudal order remained a threat. However, after the victory of the revolution the Middle Class moved to crush lower class radicalism before it went too far and threatened their interests. The result of this was that the new ruling class lost its former mass base among the poor. For this reason, only 11 years after the revolution, on Cromwell's death, the

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<sup>18</sup> Hill, Christopher (1959) *The English Revolution 1640*. An Essay. Lawrence & Wishart, London.

<sup>19</sup> See Paul Foot (2005) *The Vote. How it was won and how it was undermined*. Penguin/Viking.

Monarchy was brought back in order to make peace with sections of the old elite and in order to squash any ideas of further radical change. However, the important point was that a social revolution had occurred. The restored Monarchy was not the same as the old Monarchy, feudal laws and the old economic system had been destroyed. Yet the outward trappings of the old system were maintained. As Hill puts it:

*“Charles (the 2<sup>nd</sup>) was King by Grace of God, but really King by the grace of the merchants and squires.”*

Two important points arise from the English Revolution which are relevant to Thailand. Firstly, Monarchies can play a role as institutions in modern capitalist states and secondly that their role is to act as a conservative force, helping to decrease radicalism.

Another essay on the British Monarchy, written by Eric Hobsbawm is about “The Invention of Tradition.”<sup>20</sup> Hobsbawm wrote that nothing has the appearance of ancient tradition like the British Monarchy... but all this was created in 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The outward ancient appearances of the British Monarchy were created, according to Hobsbawm, in order to build a system of social control in the sphere of public life. He also explained further that such “Invented Traditions” have no relevance to private day to day life, as distinct from the case of genuine traditions. They are enforced ceremonies for use in the public sphere only. A prime example is how people are taught to stand up for the National Anthem or Monarch’s song. The practice has all but disappeared from Britain, yet it is still strong in Thailand, but only in the public sphere. No one stands up for these songs in the privacy of their own homes since it has no practical bearing on the ability of individual citizens to conduct their everyday

<sup>20</sup> Hobsbawm, E. (1995) *Inventing Traditions*. In: Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. (eds) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.

Useful comparisons with Thailand can be made on the issue of “invented tradition”. Firstly, that the modern capitalist state in some cases has recreated the Monarchy as a modern figure-head to serve the interests of the capitalist class. But in doing so, the Monarchy has the outward appearance of an ancient institution. This is important in creating the illusion that the modern ruling class, along with the present social order and hierarchies are somehow “natural”. The aim is to undermine revolt from below and the self-confidence of ordinary people to rule themselves. Further more, the role of the Constitutional Monarchy as the “last resort” to protect the rule of the capitalist class in times of crisis, can only be legitimised by its ancient appearance. Without this ancient legitimacy, why not have pop stars or sports heroes opening parliament, signing laws and appointing governments in crises?!

In Thailand, the revolutionary transformation towards a capitalist state did not take the same form as the early Bourgeois Revolutions in England and France. Capitalist transformation occurred in a revolution from above by King Rama V of Bangkok, in order to deal with the threat of Western Imperialism. Neil Davidson explains that the definition of a Bourgeois Revolution, according to Marx, Engels, Deutscher, Tony Cliff and George Lukács is that it is a *revolutionary process which smoothes the way for the development of capitalism*<sup>21</sup>. There are two main kinds of Bourgeois Revolutions: Revolution from Below, as in the case of England and France, and Revolution from Above, led by a section of the old feudal order itself, as in the case of Germany, Italy, Scotland and Japan. Thailand’s revolution can be counted among the latter. But the process did not end with King Rama V’s revolutionary transformations in the 1870s

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<sup>21</sup> Davidson, Neil (2004) *The prophet, his biographer and the watchtower*. *International Socialism Journal* No. 2:104, p. 23.

towards an Absolute Monarchy. This stage proved to be an unstable one<sup>22</sup>, leading to the 1932 revolution and the establishment of a Constitutional Monarchy, which has now lasted longer than the Absolute Monarchy.

The 1932 revolution was led by the *Peoples Party* and carried out with widespread social support.<sup>23</sup> Yet the actual mass base of this party was limited to sections of the civilian and military bureaucracy. In such circumstances, the problems faced by the *Peoples Party* in maintaining power were not the same as the problems faced by the revolutionary capitalist class in England and France. There was not a strong mass movement from below, which needed to be destroyed. Never the less the weakness due to a lack of a mass base meant that the *Peoples Party* was forced to compromise with some sections of the old order. This resulted in the Constitutional Monarchy, despite the fact that many of the radical leaders of the party, such as Pridi and Marshal Pibul-Songkram, had no great love for the Monarchy.

The Monarchy was re-established after the revolution, but it was not the same institution as before June 1932, despite its outward appearance. It certainly was not *Sakdina*. The process of re-establishing the monarchy was not smooth, either. It was not until the Sarit military regime in the late 1950s and early 1960s, that the institution was firmly re-established and its present stature in society took many decades to build.<sup>24</sup> The final mile stone in achieving acceptance among broad sections of society, was the collapse of the *Communist Party of Thailand* in the 1980s. This has led to the unhindered expansion of the monarchy's influence in Thai society.

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<sup>22</sup> See Kullada (2004) already quoted.

<sup>23</sup> Nakarin Mektrairat (1990) already quoted.

<sup>24</sup> See Thak Chaloemtiarana (1979) already quoted.

## **Power or influence of the “institution of last resort”**

Since the 1932 revolution, the Monarchy has had little *formal* constitutional or legal political power. This power as Head of State is defined by the Constitution and is mainly concerned with ratification of laws in a similar manner to most Western Monarchies today. However, unlike Western counterparts, the Thai Monarchy has immense stature. The stature of the present King has been achieved by a combination of different factors. These include the deliberate promotion of the Monarchy since the 1960s and the King’s ability to act as an elder Statesman, given the length of his reign. This makes the Monarchy a potentially very influential institution, despite its lack of formal power.

Some authors exaggerate the power of the monarchy, treating it as a “power block” in Thai politics,<sup>25</sup> without looking at the role of modern monarchies in capitalist societies and their mutually benefiting relationships with other sectors of the ruling class. It would be less exaggerated to refer to the King and the Privy Council acting more as a “power broker”. This would imply a coordinating role in bringing together sections of the ruling class without the institution being a centre of power. What is more, much of the stature of the Monarchy is based upon the nature of the present King as an individual. This shows the weakness of the Monarchy as an institution in modern Thai society.

Despite the immense stature of the Monarchy, it would be wrong to assume that this institution is somehow fundamentally different from normal Constitutional Monarchs in a modern capitalist democracy. The function of such a Monarchy is to be a centre of

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<sup>25</sup> See Connors (2003) already quoted.

national unity, serving as an institution of last resort to protect the stability and status quo of the capitalist state in times of deep crisis and to maintain class rule. In order to be such an institution, the Monarchy must be seen to be above politics.

In Thailand, the Monarchy has stepped into the arena many times in periods of deep political crisis. But the Monarchy has only acted after consultation with elder statesmen and representatives of the elites, much the same as any Monarchy would do in the West. In the era of military rule, the Monarchy supported the military dictatorship. When military coups took place against military governments in the 1980s, the Monarchy waited for an assessment of general ruling class opinion before coming out in favour of anyone. More importantly, when military regimes were confronted and defeated by mass popular uprisings, such as in 1973 and 1992, the Monarchy waited until the outcome was clear before appearing on television to re-establish order and stability. These were times of deep crisis indeed and the Monarchy acted clearly as an institution of last resort for the Thai State when it was no longer possible to use the defeated armed forces in order to maintain the stability of the state. In late April 2006 when the King refused to appoint a new government to take the place of the Taksin government by using section 7 of the Constitution, this reflected the assessment of ruling class opinion.

Part of the function of this institution is also to try and maintain national unity. This is why the Monarch may from time to time make mild criticism of government excesses, which might threaten national unity. The mild criticism of the *Thai Rak Thai* government over the extra-judicial killings in the “war on drugs” or the calls for peaceful solutions in the South can be understood in this context. It is interesting to note that the King has so far been very careful to be

seen to act as the Monarch of all Thais of all ethnic and religious backgrounds when it comes to the Southern unrest. This contrasts sharply with the ultra nationalistic speech made by the Queen in 2004.<sup>26</sup>

Yet despite the need for a modern Monarchy to stay above politics, the Palace has not always done so. This leads to a weakness in the ability to act as a neutral Institution of Last Resort. The Monarchy's defense of the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup may cause problems in the future. It is this mixture of contradictory roles, trying to appear as a neutral Head of State, but also intervening in politics, which causes confusion and instability.

It would be wrong to conclude from the Monarchy's role in the 1973 and 1992 crises that this Monarch was "pro-democracy" and in favour of protecting the Constitution. As Handley points out, the Monarchy is clearly more comfortable with conservative military governments.<sup>27</sup> It is useful to see this institution as basically a conservative and pro-elite force within Thai society.<sup>28</sup> In the mid 1970s, with the rising tide of left-wing radicalism and demands for a more just society, especially after the U.S.A. lost the Vietnam War in 1975, the Monarchy supported the ultra right-wing paramilitary *Village Scouts* and was basically supportive of the right-wing military coup in October 1976.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Post Today* 17 November 2004, pages 1 and A6, in Thai

<sup>27</sup> Paul Handley (2006) already Quoted, pages 8, 134, 144, 337, 341, 360.

<sup>28</sup> Hewison, Kevin (1997) *The Monarchy and democratisation*. In: Hewison, K. (ed.) *Political Change in Thailand*. Routledge, London & New York.

<sup>29</sup> See Bowie, K. A. (1997) *Rituals of national loyalty*. Columbia University Press, U.S.A. p.128. for a discussion about academics' views on the role of the Monarchy in the 6th October 1976 bloodbath.



Finally there is little evidence that the Monarchy has ever intervened against corruption carried out by military rulers or even elected politicians. This, together with the Monarchy's tolerance of military regimes, might lead us to question the degree to which the Palace is prepared or able to intervene on its own as a power block in its own right.

## **The Contradictions arising from the Cult of Personality**

In many ways, as Thomas Paine pointed out in *The Rights of Man*, printed in 1791-2, the idea of any hereditary public positions is as inconsistent and absurd as that of the idea of hereditary mathematicians or poets.<sup>30</sup> It is basically unscientific to think that the ability to be a Head of State is encoded in a person's D.N.A. What is more, Paine argued that hereditary succession presents the office in a most ridiculous light. If the Monarchy can do no wrong, it cannot be held accountable for any actions, much like a young child. Paine went on to write that (it is)... *"an office which could be filled by any child or idiot. It requires some talents to be a common mechanic; but to be a king requires only the animal figure of a man"*.

In Western Europe, those who support the idea of a hereditary Head of State argue that it is a method of ensuring an institution that can rise above politics, unlike an elected President. At the same time, in order to avoid the problems highlighted by Thomas Paine, there is no longer any suggestion that the Monarchs of Western Europe today are somehow super-human. They are regarded as ordinary average citizens who happen to be born to serve a particular purpose and the institution is open to public scrutiny.

<sup>30</sup> Paine, Thomas (1993) *The Rights of Man*. Everyman's Library, J. M. Dent, London.

However, in Thailand, according to Ajarn Sulak, there has been a modern attempt to portray the Monarchy as a magical and holy institution, but any institution that is not based on reality cannot survive for long. For long term stability, Sulak suggests the need to be able to criticise the Monarchy, making this institution open to public scrutiny.<sup>31</sup> There is no doubt that the next reign will find the present Monarch a difficult act to follow. It is impossible to predict how this important institution will evolve in the future, but what is certain is that this ever-changing institution cannot carry on in the same way forever. Such a statement should not be cause for anxiety and fear. It is a challenge and an opportunity for all Thai citizens to participate in reshaping Thai society and politics for the common good.

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<sup>31</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa (2003) The Monarchy and society in the present era. *Pajarayasara Magazine* 29 (2) November-February. p.103. (In Thai).

## Chapter 3

# The Peoples Movement and the “October People”

Given that the politics of the Peoples Movement is just as important as the politics of the elites in the understanding of Thailand’s crisis, this chapter will attempt to analyse the development of this movement.

In order to fully understand the Thai Peoples Movement you need to look at what happened in the so-called Sixties wave of struggles. Internationally, the Sixties Movement was characterised by a general rise in the struggle of oppressed groups on a global scale. Central to this struggle was the role of students and a new generation of activists in labour and peasant organisations. This took the form of movements against racism, sexual oppression and especially imperialism. Activists from this period are now to be found playing important roles in political systems throughout the world. However, their present day role is often in contradiction to their original beliefs during the Sixties. In Thailand the “Sixties” movement has helped to shape both the policies of the *Thai Rak Thai* Party and the nature of the Peoples Movement.

It would be more accurate to talk of the “Seventies Movement” in Thailand, if we actually look at the decade when the struggle for social equality and democracy reached its peak. But it is important to understand that it is not possible to separate this “Seventies Movement” in Thailand from the struggles of the “Sixties” internationally. This link between the Sixties and Seventies occurs in two ways. Firstly, the wave of student revolts and the activism among young people in Western Europe and the United States, the “1968 Movement”, were an inspiration which ignited the left-wing struggles in the early 1970s in Thailand. Libertarian left-wing ideas from the Western movements entered Thai society by way of news reports, articles, books, music and the return of Thai students from the West, especially art students in the first instance. Secondly, the victory of Communist Parties in Indochina after the U.S.A began to lose the war in Vietnam, had a massive impact in igniting struggles for a new society in Thailand. These Asian Communist victories were also directly linked to the “Sixties” movement in the West in a dialectical manner. The radicals in the West were inspired by the local struggles against imperialism and injustice in South-east Asia and other areas of the globe. The anti-Vietnam War movement, which was an important part of the latter period of the “Western Sixties”, helped to destroy the ability of the U.S. to continue with the war.<sup>1</sup>

What did the Thai “Seventies” look like? The first picture in one’s mind should be half a million people, mainly young school and university students, but also ordinary working people, protesting around the Democracy Monument<sup>2</sup> on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973. This

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Neal (2001) *The American War: Vietnam 1960-1975*. London: Bookmarks.

<sup>2</sup> The Democracy Monument was originally built by the anti-Royalist dictator Plaek Pibul-Songkram, but later became a rallying point in the struggle for democracy.

resulted in the overthrow of the military dictatorship. It was the first mass popular uprising in modern Thai history. The 14<sup>th</sup> October and the following struggles, victories, and defeats that make up the “Thai Seventies” have continued to shape the nature of politics and society to this day.

## **The 14<sup>th</sup> October uprising**

The military domination of Thai politics, started soon after the 1932 revolution<sup>3</sup>. But its consolidation of power came with the Sarit military coup in 1957. The economic development during the years of military dictatorship in the 50s and 60s took place in the context of a world economic boom and a localised economic boom created by the Korean and Vietnam wars. This economic growth had a profound impact on the nature of Thai society.<sup>4</sup> Naturally the size of the working class increased as factories and businesses were developed. However, under the dictatorship trade union rights were suppressed and wages and conditions of employment were tightly controlled. By early 1973 the minimum daily wage, fixed at around 10 baht since the early 1950s, remained unchanged while commodity prices had risen by 50%. Illegal strikes had already occurred throughout the period of dictatorship, but strikes increased rapidly due to general economic discontent. The first 9 months of 1973, before the 14<sup>th</sup> October, saw a total of 40 strikes, and a one month strike at the Thai Steel Company resulted in victory due to a high level of solidarity from other workers.

Economic development also resulted in a massive expansion of student numbers and an increased intake of students from working

<sup>3</sup> This was the revolution which overthrew the absolute monarchy. It was carried out by the *Peoples Party*.

<sup>4</sup> Ji Giles Ungpakorn (1997) *The Struggle for Democracy and Social Justice in Thailand*. Bangkok: Arom Pongpangan Foundation.

class backgrounds. The building of the *Ramkamhaeng* Open University in 1969 was a significant factor here. Student numbers in higher education increased from 15,000 in 1961 to 50,000 by 1972. The new generation of students, in the early 1970s, were influenced by the revolts and revolutions which occurred throughout the world in that period, May 1968 in Paris being a prime example. Before that, in 1966 the radical journal, *Social Science Review*, was established by progressive intellectuals. Students started to attend volunteer development camps in the countryside in order to learn about the problems of rural poverty. By 1971 3,500 students had attended a total of 64 camps. In 1972 a movement to boycott Japanese goods was organised as part of the struggle against foreign domination of the economy. Students also agitated against increases in Bangkok bus fares.

In June 1973 the rector of *Ramkamhaeng* University was forced to resign after attempting to expel a student for writing a pamphlet criticising the military dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> Four months later, the arrest of 11 academics and students for handing out leaflets demanding a democratic constitution, resulted in hundreds of thousands of students and workers taking to the streets of Bangkok. As troops with tanks fired on unarmed demonstrators, the people of Bangkok began to fight-back. Bus passengers spontaneously alighted from their vehicles to join the demonstrators. Government buildings were set on fire. The “*Yellow Tigers*”, a militant group of students, sent a jet of high-octane gasoline from a captured fire engine into the police station at *Parn-Fa* bridge, setting it on fire. Earlier they had been fired upon by the police.

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<sup>5</sup> Much later, after the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup, most university rectors again collaborated with the junta.

The successful 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973 mass uprising against the military dictatorship shook the Thai ruling class to its foundations. For the next few days, there was a strange new atmosphere in Bangkok. Uniformed officers of the state disappeared from the streets and ordinary people organised themselves to clean up the city. Boy Scouts directed traffic. It was the first time that the *pu-noi* (little people) had actually started a revolution from below. It was not planned and those that took part had only vague notions about what kind of democracy and society they wanted. But the Thai ruling class could not shoot enough demonstrators to protect their regime. It was not just a student uprising to demand a democratic constitution. It involved thousands of ordinary working class people and occurred on the crest of a rising wave of workers' strikes.

Success in over-throwing the military dictatorship bred increased confidence. Workers, peasants and students began to fight for more than just parliamentary democracy. In the two months following the uprising, the new Royal appointed civilian government of Sanya Tammasak faced a total of 300 workers' strikes. A central trade union federation was formed. New radical student bodies sprang up. On the 1<sup>st</sup> May 1975 a quarter of a million workers rallied in Bangkok and a year later half a million workers took part in a general strike against price increases. In the countryside small farmers began to build organisations and they came to Bangkok to make their voices heard. Workers and peasants wanted social justice and an end to long-held privileges. A *Triple Alliance* between students, workers and small farmers was created. Some activists wanted an end to exploitation and capitalism itself. The influence of the *Communist Party of Thailand* (C.P.T.) increased rapidly, especially among activists in urban areas.

As part of the political reform process, in December 1973, the King presided over a hand-picked National Forum (often referred to

as the “horse track assembly” due to its location). This Forum, which had members chosen from various professions, was tasked with selecting a new parliament. Kukrit Pramoj was chosen as the Chairman of the new parliament when it opened on the 28<sup>th</sup> December, while Sanya Tammasak remained Prime Minister. However, this parliament and the Sanya government could not solve the increasing tensions in society between the Conservatives and the Left or between the rich and the poor.<sup>6</sup>

The first democratic elections, since the October 1973 uprising were held in January 1975. Parliament had a Left colouring and government policies reflected a need to deal with pressing social issues. Left-wing parties, such as the *New Force Party*, the *Socialist Party of Thailand* and the *Socialist Front Party* gained 37 seats (out of a total of 269) but did not join any coalition governments. The first coalition government, made up of the *Democrat Party* and the *Social Agriculture Party*, was established under Seni Pramoj. This Right-leaning government announced that it would follow “Social Democratic” policies. However, the government lost a vote of no confidence in parliament in March 1975 and was replaced by a new coalition government headed by Kukrit Pramoj from the *Social Action Party*. The new government introduced a number of pro-poor policies, including job creation schemes. This government presided over a period of increasing social tensions. Strikes, demonstrations and political assassinations occurred on a regular basis. Eventually parliament was dissolved in January 1976 and elections held in April. The April elections resulted in a swing to the Right. This was due to a combination of factors, such as intimidation of the Left and a Right-ward shift among the Middle Classes who were afraid of radicalism.

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<sup>6</sup> Charnwit Kasetsiri and Thamrongsak Petchlertanun (1998) *From 14 to 6 October*. Bangkok: Social Science and Anthropology Book Foundation. (In Thai).



## The student movement after 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973

It is important to remember that the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973 was the peak of the anti-dictatorship struggle which then developed into a broader struggle for social justice and socialism among students, workers and small farmers. It is interesting to consider the activities of newly radicalised young people who later became known as the October People (*Kon Duan Tula*). It is this generation which has played an important leadership role in both the Peoples Movements and in sections of the establishment political parties in present day Thai society.

### Student activism in society

In the period leading up to the overthrow of the military on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973, many student centres and coalitions were formed in various regions and different educational institutions. However, there were attempts to coordinate the actions of these different groups under a single umbrella: *The National Student Centre of Thailand*. This and other student centres became even more active in various social campaigns, often as part of the *Triple Alliance* with workers and peasants. Never the less, the movement was dogged by personal and political splits. Seksan Prasertkul, one of the 14<sup>th</sup> October student leaders, formed the *Free Thammasart Group* and Tirayut Boonmi,<sup>7</sup> another student leader from the 14<sup>th</sup> October uprising, formed the *People for Democracy Group*.<sup>8</sup> These so-called “independent groups” felt that the *National Student Centre* leadership was too conservative, often refusing to mobilise students on important issues like the successful protest against the return of the ousted dictator Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn in 1974.

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<sup>7</sup> His name is often spelled as Thirayut, but the ‘h’ is silent.

<sup>8</sup> Both Seksan Prasertkul and Tirayut Boonmi joined up with the *Communist Party of Thailand* for a period in 1976. They are now lecturers at Thammasat University.

For this reason these various independent groups formed an alternative centre called the “*National Coalition Against Dictatorship*” with Sutam Sangprathum as secretary.<sup>9</sup>

One important area of activity for students was the struggle against U.S. imperialism and for so-called “Thai independence”. The military dictatorship had been a close ally of the United States during the Cold War, sending token numbers of Thai troops to support the U.S. in both Korea and Vietnam. In 1973 there were 12 U.S. military bases in the country, with 550 war planes and thousands of troops stationed on Thai soil in order to help the U.S. war effort in Indo-China. These bases were legally U.S. territory, a point highlighted by the arrest and execution, by U.S. military court, of a Thai citizen, Tep Kankla, for the murder of an American soldier in December 1973.<sup>10</sup> Apart from this, after the end of the Indo-China war, the U.S. used *U-Tapao* naval base to attack Cambodia on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1975, without consulting the Thai government.

The presence of such a large number of U.S. forces, plus what was seen as the economic dominance of U.S. companies in the local economy, seemed to confirm the Maoist analysis by the *Communist Party of Thailand* that Thailand was a “semi-colony” of the U.S.A. After 1973 there was therefore a growing campaign to kick out U.S. bases. This campaign against U.S. bases, which later received a boost from the defeat of the U.S.A. in Vietnam, and the resulting new geo-political consequences, led to Prime Minister Kukrit’s demand

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<sup>9</sup> Sutam Sangprathum was arrested in Bangkok on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976. Much later he became a junior minister in the first *Thai Rak Thai* government.

<sup>10</sup> Sutachai Yimprasert (2001) ‘How did the 6<sup>th</sup> October incident occur?’ In Ji Ungpakorn and Sutachai Yimprasert (eds.) *State Crime in a period of crisis and change*. Bangkok: The 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 fact-finding and witness interviewing committee. (In Thai).

in March 1975 that the U.S. withdraw. This was backed up by a massive anti-U.S. base demonstration on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1976. The U.S. finally withdrew its troops from Thailand shortly after this.<sup>11</sup>

Another important area where the student movement was active, was in the area of human rights and democracy. Students campaigned to push for more democratic amendments to the 1974 constitution and they led struggles against state repression. On 24<sup>th</sup> January 1974 government security forces attacked and burnt the village of *Na Sai* in the North-Eastern province of *Nong Kai*.<sup>12</sup> Three villagers were killed by government forces. Initially the government claimed that this atrocity was carried out by Communists, but Tirayut Boonmi, was able to prove in public that it was the work of the government. Pressure from the student movement finally forced the government to admit the crime and take steps to pay the villagers compensation. General Saiyut Kertpol, head of the *Communist Suppression Unit*, was also forced to admit that past government policy had been “too harsh”.

The *Na Sai* incident was followed by the exposure of another state crime in the Southern province of *Patalung*. It is estimated that between 1971 and 1973 government forces had systematically arrested and interrogated villagers, resulting in over 3,000 deaths. In what became known as the Red Drum (*Tang Daeng*) incident, villagers were killed and then burnt in petrol drums or pushed out of helicopters.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Since 9-11 the U.S.A. has sought to increase its military presence in South-East Asia under the banner of the War on Terror. However, the real reason behind U.S. military expansion in the area may well be its rivalry with China. The Singapore military recently became the first foreign state to be allowed to station troops permanently on Thai soil since the 1970s U.S. withdrawal.

<sup>12</sup> Sutachai (2001) already quoted.

<sup>13</sup> Yos Juntornkiri (1975) “Kicked down the mountain and burnt in Tang Daeng”, in *Social Science Review* 13 (1), 41-71. Also Prachachart (1975) 21 February, 12. (In Thai).

In addition to exposing state repression, student volunteers were also involved in the rather patronising state-sponsored campaign to “spread democracy to the rural people” in the summer vacation of 1974.<sup>14</sup> However, this campaign did provide an opportunity for thousands of urban students to observe social problems in the villages at first hand, thus strengthening future cooperation between students and small farmers in the *Triple Alliance*. This helped to broaden the activities of students into areas of social justice and they became more left-wing.

On the cultural front, students campaigned for art and literature to be more in tune with the lives of ordinary people. Often this was influenced by narrow and mechanical ideas of Stalinist “socialist realism”, which could be found in the writings of Jit Pumisak.<sup>15</sup> An exhibition titled “burning literature” condemned conservative books which served “feudal” interests. At the same time there was a flourishing of new “literature for the people”, “theatre for the people” and the birth of the “songs for the people” movement, which sometimes added Thai words to tunes from Western protest songs from the same period. A campaign of criticism was also waged against the elitist and competitive education system. This campaign resulted in a government committee being established in 1975 in order to reform education.

One important organisation which came out of these cultural activities was the “Coalition of Thai Artists”, which held a street exhibition of “Peoples Art” along *Rajchadamnern Avenue* in October 1975. These artists and art students were also very important in

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<sup>14</sup> The Middle Classes have always regarded the poor as stupid and lacking in understanding of democracy. This is seen clearly in the case of the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup.

<sup>15</sup> Jit Pumisak (1957) *Art for Life, Art for the People*. Tewawet Publishing Company. (In Thai).

producing agitational posters and banners used in campaigns against the influence of the military and in campaigns against U.S. bases. In many ways the artists movement was more plural than many of the student organisations, being influenced by more radical libertarian ideas from the 1960s movements in the West, alongside the influence of the C.P.T.<sup>16</sup> After the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 bloodbath, many artists went to the jungle, but fought to maintain their free spirit amid the narrow Maoist ideology of the C.P.T.

### **Student politics within universities and colleges**

An important consequence of the successful 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973 uprising against the dictatorship, was the establishment of left-wing student political parties in universities and colleges. These contested elections for the student union. Some won immediate victories, while others gradually increased their influence at the expense of the right-wing. By mid-1976 most universities and colleges had Left student bodies, including *Kasetsart* University, which was previously believed to be a bastion of the Right. Once the victory of the Left parties was complete, the student body was able to unite once more around the *National Student Centre* with Kriangkamol Laohapairote<sup>17</sup> as secretary. One effect of the victory of the Left in universities and colleges was the temporary demise of the seniority (SOTUS) system,<sup>18</sup> as students became more egalitarian and active

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<sup>16</sup> Ji Ungpakorn and Numnuat Yapparatt (2004) *Revival of the struggle. From the old Left to the new Left in Thailand*. Workers' Democracy Publishers, (In Thai).

<sup>17</sup> Kriangkamol Laohapairote later took up a position as a special advisor to the *Thai Rak Thai* government.

<sup>18</sup> The SOTUS system returned with a vengeance after the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 crackdown. Today new first year students at *Chulalongkorn*, *Chiangmai* and *Kasetsart* universities are subjected to systematic mental cruelty so that they conform to the seniority hierarchy and learn to be loyal to their institutions. But with the new green shoots of student activism today it may well be facing another left-wing challenge.

in trying to change society. Student summer camps were organised in the countryside in order to share experiences with poor villagers and less emphasis was placed on inter-university football matches.

Despite the fact that the various left-wing student parties in various institutions were more or less autonomous in formal structure, they shared the same general ideology which was heavily influenced by the Maoism of the C.P.T. This can be seen by their concentration on countryside activity, although many groups also worked among urban workers.<sup>19</sup> The student movement was basically a Socialist movement which shared the C.P.T. analysis of Thailand being a semi-feudal semi-colony of the U.S.A. The armed struggle by the C.P.T. in the countryside was seen as the key to building a better society. Many left-wing student groups also took the side of the C.P.T. leadership in ideological disputes with people like ex-C.P.T. leader Pin Bua-orn. Pin was against the the C.P.T. adopting armed struggle and wanted to continue the original Stalinist/Maoist Cross-Class Alliance policy, which the C.P.T. had advocated during the Pibul-Songkram and early Sarit dictatorship period.<sup>20</sup> Student groups also became involved in taking the side of the C.P.T. leadership over the faction fights taking place in China towards the end of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Seksan Prasertkul was one of many student activist working with trade unions.

<sup>20</sup> Stalinist and Maoist parties throughout the world advocated cross-class alliances with “progressive” leaders and capitalists, including Chiang Kaishek in China, Sukarno in Indonesia and Nasser in Egypt. See Ian Birchall (1986) *Bailing out the system*. London: Bookmarks. Also Charlie Hore(1991) *The road to Tiananmen Square*. London: Bookmarks. In Thailand the C.P.T. pushed for an alliance with the military dictators P. Pibul-Songkram and Sarit. See Somsak Jeamteerasakul (1991) *The Communist Movement in Thailand. PhD thesis, Department of Politics*, Monash University, Australia.

<sup>21</sup> Sutachai (2001) already quoted.

The influence of the C.P.T. within the student movement was no secret conspiracy. It reflected the rise of left-wing ideas among many people in Thai society. In practice this C.P.T. influence in the student body came from 3 main sources. Firstly, the C.P.T. was the only left-wing political party which had a coherent analysis of Thai society and a clear plan of action. This naturally meant that many of those who were looking for answers would turn to the C.P.T., especially after the victory of various Communist Parties in neighbouring Indo-China. Secondly, some C.P.T. youth members (*Yor*) and full members (*Sor*) were activists within the student movement. They had either been recruited while at secondary school or were recruited after they entered universities. Recruitment was a long drawn out process, involving small secret study groups organised among contacts, but it helped to educate activists in C.P.T. ideology. Thirdly, articles explaining C.P.T. political strategy were printed in student newspapers such as *Atipat* and the C.P.T. radio station, *The Voice of the People of Thailand*, was very popular among many people at the time.

It would be quite wrong to assume that student leaders, even those who were party members, were receiving direct orders from the C.P.T. Central Committee. For a start the party leaders were far away in the countryside and also the party never saw the urban struggle as being central to the overall Maoist revolutionary strategy. For this reason, it can be assumed that in the period between 1973 and 1976, student activists exhibited a high degree of self-leadership and organisation, while accepting the overall political analysis of the party. This is confirmed by many student activists from that period.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Thongchai Winichakul and others confirmed this picture in interviews conducted by the author for The 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 fact-finding and witness interviewing committee in 2000.

As already mentioned, between 1973 and 1976 left-wing student parties gradually won elections. At *Thammasart* University the *Palang Tum Party* (Moral Force Party) was established just before the October 1973 uprising and it won a number of subsequent elections, standing Peerapol Triyakasem as its candidate. At the *Ramkamhaeng* Open University, the *Sajja-Tum Party* (Moral Truth Party) made gradual headway against a more middle of the road party, winning leadership of the student body by 1975. At *Chulalongkorn* University the *Chula Prachachon Party* (Chula Peoples Party) won elections in 1976 against a right-wing party and Anek Laothamatas<sup>23</sup> became student president. At *Mahidol* and *Sri-Nakarin* left-wing parties also won elections and at *Chiangmai* Chaturon Chaisaeng<sup>24</sup> from the *Pracha Tum Party* (Peoples Morals Party) won the student union election in 1976.

The gradual shift towards left-wing politics among students throughout the period 1973-1976, until the Left became the main influence, reflected the polarisation between Left and Right that was taking place in wider society. From this we can see why the ruling class became determined to use whatever force necessary in order to destroy the left-wing student movement and their attempts came to fruition with the 6th October 1976 bloodbath at *Thammasart* University.

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<sup>23</sup> Anek is known for his academic writings on the rise of the middle class and the political split between rural and urban Thailand. He went to the jungle to join with the C.P.T. after 1976. Much later he became a party-list M.P. for the *Democrat Party* in 2001. Before the 2005 election he helped to establish the new *Mahachon Party*, which was “bought” from a local gangster-politician using funds from the personal wealth of Sanan Kajornprasart. But the party only won two seats in the 2005 election.

<sup>24</sup> He held cabinet positions in the *Thai Rak Thai* government and became acting party leader after the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 coup.



## The 6th October 1976 bloodbath

In the early hours of 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976, Thai uniformed police, stationed in the grounds of the National Museum, next door to *Thammasat* University,<sup>25</sup> destroyed a peaceful gathering of students and working people on the university campus under a hail of relentless automatic fire.<sup>26</sup> At the same time a large gang of ultra-right-wing “informal forces”, known as the *Village Scouts*,<sup>27</sup> *Krating-Daeng* and *Nawapon*, indulged in an orgy of violence and brutality towards anyone near the front entrance of the university. Students and their supporters were dragged out of the university and hung from the trees around *Sanam Luang*; others were burnt alive in front of the Ministry of “Justice” while the mob danced round the flames. Women and men, dead or alive, were subjected to the utmost degrading and violent behaviour.

From before dawn that morning, students had been prevented from leaving the campus by police who were stationed at each gate. Inside the sealed university campus, violence was carried out by heavily armed police from the *Crime Suppression Division*, the *Border Patrol Police* and the *Special Forces Unit of the Metropolitan Police*. Unarmed women and men students who had fled initial rounds of heavy gunfire to take refuge in the Commerce Faculty building were chased out at gun point and made to lie face down on the grass of the football field, without shirts. Uniformed police fired heavy machine guns over their heads. The hot spent shells burnt the skin on

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<sup>25</sup> Written as “Thammasart” but pronounced as ‘Tammasart’ the ‘h’ is silent.

<sup>26</sup> This account is compiled from witness statements given to ‘The 6 October 1976 fact-finding and witness interviewing committee’ in September 2000. The accounts have been published in Ji Ungpakorn and Sutachai Yimprasert (eds.) (2001) *State Crime in a period of crisis and change*. Bangkok: The 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 fact-finding and witness interviewing committee. (In Thai).

<sup>27</sup> See Katherine Bowie (1997) *Rituals of National Loyalty*. New York: University of Columbia Press.

their bare backs as they lay on the field. Other students who tried to escape from campus buildings via the rear entrance to the university, were hunted down and shot without mercy. State security methods on the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 bear an horrific similarity to methods used by the Taksin government in the 2004 crackdown at *Takbai* in the South, where half a dozen unarmed protesters were shot and 87 prisoners later murdered in the backs of army lorries during transportation to an army camp.

The actions of the police and right-wing mobs on 6<sup>th</sup> October were the culmination of attempts by the ruling class to stop the further development of a socialist movement in Thailand. The events at *Thammasat* University were followed by a military coup which brought to power one of the most right-wing governments Thailand has ever known. In the days that followed, offices and houses of organisations and individuals were raided. Trade unionists were arrested and trade union rights were curtailed. Centre-Left and left-wing newspapers were closed and their offices ransacked. Political parties, student unions and farmer organisations were banned. The new military regime released a list of 204 banned books.<sup>28</sup> University libraries were searched and books were confiscated and publicly burnt. Over 100,000 books were burnt when Sulak Sivarak's book shop and warehouse was ransacked. Apart from obvious "Communists" like Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao or Jit Pumisak, authors such as Pridi Phanomyong, Maxim Gorky, Julius Nyerere, Saneh Chamarik, Chai-anan Samudwanij, Charnvit Kasetsiri and Rangsana Tanapornpan appeared on the list of banned books.

The Thai ruling class' desire to destroy the further development of the socialist movement, especially in urban areas, can be understood by looking at the political climate at the time. Three years

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<sup>28</sup> Samak Sundaravej signed the order as Interior Minister.

earlier, the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1973 mass movement had overthrown the military, which had been in power since 1957. However, the establishment of parliamentary democracy on its own did not begin to solve deep-rooted social problems. Therefore the protests, strikes and factory occupations intensified. At the same time the U.S.A. was losing the war in Vietnam. By 1975 Communist governments were in power in neighbouring Lao, Vietnam and Cambodia and in Thailand rural insurgency by the *Communist Party of Thailand* was on the increase. The events of the 6<sup>th</sup> October and the subsequent coup were not a simple return to military rule. They were an attempt to crush the popular movement for social justice, to eradicate the Left and strengthen the position of the elite. It was not the first or last time that the Thai elite resorted to violence and military coups to protect their interests.

It would be wrong to think that there was a detailed and tightly coordinated plan, by the entire Thai ruling class, which led to the 6<sup>th</sup> October events. Conversely, it would also be wrong to suggest that only one or two individuals or groups were behind the crushing of the Left. What happened on the 6<sup>th</sup> October was a result of a consensus among the entire ruling class that an open democratic system was allowing “too much freedom” for the Left. However, it is likely that there were both areas of agreement and disagreement within ruling circles on exactly how to act and who should act. The general view that “extra-parliamentary methods” would have to be used, led to the uncoordinated establishment of various right-wing semi-fascist groups.

The role of the Monarchy in the 6<sup>th</sup> October events has been discussed by many writers. Most express the view that the Monarchy helped to pave the way for a coup, in a broad sense, by showing open support for the right-wing.<sup>29</sup> What we know is that the Monarchy

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<sup>29</sup> Katherine Bowie (1997) already quoted.

openly supported and encouraged the *Village Scout* movement. In addition, the Monarchy was close to the *Border Patrol Police* who established the *Village Scouts* and also played a central part in the killing at *Thammasat*. Finally the Monarchy supported the return of ex-dictator Thanom by paying him a visit soon after he arrived back in Thailand just before the bloody events.

The general picture of the ruling class that emerges during 1976 is one of a degree of unity on the need to crush the Left, but disunity on how to do so, and, much more importantly, who would rule the country. This had important consequences on the evolution of the dictatorship post-1976. The immediate impact of the bloodbath at *Thammasat* was that thousands of students went to the countryside to join the struggle against the Thai State led by the C.P.T. However, within one year, the extreme right-wing government of Tanin Kraivichien was removed from power. Those gaining the upper hand within the ruling class were convinced, not only that the nature of the 6<sup>th</sup> October crackdown, but also the way the Tanin government was conducting itself, was creating even greater divisions and instability within society and helping the *Communist Party of Thailand* to grow. Not surprisingly, those army officers who advocated a more liberal line were those actually involved in front-line fighting against the C.P.T. They understood, like so many military personnel in this position, that the struggle against the Left must involve some kind of political settlement in addition to the use of force. As General Prem Tinsulanon, Prime Minister from 1980-1988, observed in an ITV programme in 1999: “*The students joined the Communists because they were brutally suppressed. The way to undermine the Communists was to establish justice in society.*”

Three years after 1976, the government decreed an “amnesty” for those who had left to fight alongside the communists. This

coincided with splits and arguments between the student activists and the conservative C.P.T. leaders. By 1988 the student activists had all returned to the city as the C.P.T collapsed. Thailand returned to an almost full parliamentary democracy, but with one special condition: it was a parliamentary democracy without the Left or any political parties representing workers or small farmers. Previously, left-wing political parties, such as the *Socialist Party*, the *Socialist Front* and *Palang Mai* (New Force) had won 14.4% or 2.5 million votes in the 1975 General Election. These parties won many seats in the north and north-east of the country and outside the arena of legal politics, the *Communist Party of Thailand* also used to have enormous influence. Now the organised Left was destroyed.

The problem with the C.P.T.'s Maoist strategy was that it more or less abandoned the city to the ruling class. The C.P.T. argued that since the cities were the centre of ruling class power, a communist victory in Thailand would only come about by surrounding the cities with "liberated zones". The fact that the ruling class was planning some kind of urban crack-down against the Left before 6<sup>th</sup> October was not a secret. The C.P.T. started to remove key activists out of Bangkok well before the crack-down actually occurred. Their Maoist strategy meant that they never at any time planned to resist a right-wing backlash in Bangkok. Not only did the C.P.T.'s politics fail to defend the Left in Bangkok in 1976, it also ensured massive demoralisation among the Left when international events began to undermine Stalinism and Maoism as a world current. On the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 6<sup>th</sup> October, a large gathering of former students and former Communists came together at *Thammasat* for the first time since the massacre. Not one speaker from the platform at any of the meetings believed that there was still a future for socialism. The present green shoots which mark the revival of the Thai Left today have had to depend on an anti-Stalinist, Trotskyist, tradition which

sees the various “Communist” regimes which once existed as being the opposite to Socialism and Marxism.

### **The experience of students in the jungle with the C.P.T.**

There are many explanations for the exodus of the urban students from the C.P.T. strong holds in the jungle in the early 1980s, which eventually contributed to the collapse of the party. C.P.T. old-timers argue that the students were not “true revolutionaries”, that they “had petty-bourgeois tendencies” and that they only went to the jungle to flee the crack down in the city. The Thai establishment argues something quite similar. It claims that the students were forced to flee the city and that most of them were not really Communists (because presumably, no sane, educated person would be a Communist). It also argues that the C.P.T. was an “alien” organisation, dominated by “Chinese ideology”. According to the mainstream explanation, the students only flirted with left-wing ideas in their misguided youth. This idea seems to be supported by student activists themselves, especially those who now hold important positions in society and wish to renounce their past. However, these explanations for the collapse of the C.P.T. are very superficial.

Communist ideas from the C.P.T. had a huge impact among young urban activists in the period 1973-1976. This is hardly surprising for two reasons. Firstly, the conservative ideology of “Nation, Religion and Monarchy” had been the mainstay of the military dictatorships for decades. It went hand in hand with corruption at the top and poverty at the bottom of society. Anyone wanting to build a better world would hardly be looking towards ruling class ideology for solutions. Secondly, the 1970s were a period when Communist Parties throughout the world were achieving victories against imperialism and it seemed that alternative societies were being built

by Communists in many countries. Therefore, despite later denials, the vast majority of students and young activists of the 1970s regard themselves as left-wing and they were dedicated to taking part in the Socialist transformation of Thai society.

Thousands do not leave their homes and families to take up the armed struggle for justice in the countryside just for the excitement or as part of a fashion. Life in the jungle strong-holds of the C.P.T. was tough. They had to fight the army, to grow their own food and to live in primitive conditions. In the rainy season, often their clothes would never dry, gradually growing moldy. Food was monotonous<sup>30</sup> and fraternisation between the sexes was frowned upon.<sup>31</sup> For this reason it is fair to say that the students who joined the C.P.T. ranks after 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 were totally committed to the struggle for Socialism. Naturally, this meant different things to different people. Those who were less committed, or had pressing personal reasons, stayed behind in the cities. Despite the terrible events of 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976, it would have been possible for most students to just keep their heads down and cease to engage in politics. Many did precisely this and very few students were rounded-up and killed in Bangkok after 6<sup>th</sup> October.

The real reason for the exodus from the C.P.T. camps a few years later was not a lack of commitment on the part of the students. It was the failure of the C.P.T. to develop a credible strategy for the Thai Socialist Revolution and a failure to relate to the new generation of young activists who joined in the 1970s. This has everything to do with the Stalinist-Maoist politics of the party. Firstly the emphasis on rural armed struggle in Thailand did not fit reality. Since 1932 all

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<sup>30</sup> See Seksan Prasertkul's account in the film *The Moonhunter*.

<sup>31</sup> See Vipa Daomanee, writing under her nom de guerre 'Sung' (2003) 'Looking back to when I first wanted to be a Communist'. In Ji Giles Ungpakorn (ed.) *Radicalising Thailand. New Political Perspectives*. Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University.

significant social changes have taken place in the cities. Even rural movements come to the city to demonstrate. In addition to this, the struggle by small farmers was and still is important in terms of defending social justice for the poor, but it is fundamentally a defensive and conservative struggle to survive, not a struggle for a future society. Secondly, the authoritarian nature of Stalinist and Maoist parties meant that the C.P.T. leadership were afraid to agitate among students in such a way as to let them lead their own struggles. The students were certainly capable of self-leadership. After all, they were key actors in overthrowing the military dictatorship in 1973. The main experience of student activists in the jungle with the C.P.T. was a stifling of all original ideas and a lack of any freedom to debate.<sup>32</sup> This helped to destroy the momentum of the urban movement that went to the jungle after the initial honey-moon period following October 1976. Finally, the C.P.T.'s Maoism backfired when the Chinese government turned its back on the party in order to build a relationship with the Thai ruling class. The resulting demoralisation among activists has helped to shape the politics of the October People and the Thai social movements today.

As the C.P.T. collapsed and the October People returned to open society, the political regime in Thailand was gradually liberalised throughout the 1980s. Partly this was carried out from above under pressure from the revolts of the 1970s, but a mass uprising against a new military dictatorship in 1992 helped to hasten the process. The 1997 Economic Crisis was a further stimulus for change. Two

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<sup>32</sup> Kasian Tejapira stated that the C.P.T. leadership managed to 'destroy intellectuals who went to the jungle'. See his article in 1996 published in My University. Somsak Jeamtirasakul and co (eds). Thammasat University Student Union. (In Thai). Even Udom Srisuwan from the C.P.T. Central Committee, writing under the pen name Po Muangchompoo acknowledges that the C.P.T. made mistakes in handling students. See Po Muangchompoo (2000) *To the battlefield of Pu-Parn*. Matichon Press. (In Thai).



important results of this change were the Constitution of 1997 and the rise of the *Thai Rak Thai Party*.

### **The “Post Communism” shift in ideology**

The collapse of the C.P.T. resulted in a shift in ideology within the Peoples Movement towards Third Way Reformism, Autonomism and Post-Modernism. This happened throughout the world, to a greater or lesser degree, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Yet, very few people in the Thai Peoples Movement would admit to being Autonomists or Post-Modernists. This is because the rejection of theory by these two political currents encourages people to deny any political affiliation. Thai activists often articulate various international ideologies while believing that they are uniquely Thai.

### **Autonomism**

Autonomism, as practiced in Thailand, is a form of “Localist” Anarchism (*Chumchon-Niyom*).<sup>33</sup> It is dominant among the leadership of the *Assembly of the Poor* and among other rural social movements. It is a political ideology that rejects the state, not by smashing it or overthrowing it, but by ignoring the state in the hope that it will become irrelevant. The aim is self-organisation at community level. Autonomists reject the building of political parties and place activity above political theory. It has many similarities with the ideas expressed by Autonomist in other continents, such as John Holloway, Toni Negri and Michael Hardt.<sup>34</sup>

The British Marxist Chris Harman explains that the strength of Autonomism is that it celebrates initiative and creativity from below

<sup>33</sup> One good example in the Thai literature is Chattip Nartsupa et al. (1998) *The Theory of Peasant Community Economics*. Witeetat 7.

<sup>34</sup> John Holloway (2002) *Change the world without taking power*. Pluto Press. Michael Hardt & Toni Negri (2000) *Empire*. Harvard University Press.

and it seeks to reject compromise with the system. This was seen very clearly in the fact that the *Assembly of the Poor* refused to take a clear stand in support of the *Peoples Alliance for Democracy* (P.A.D.) The main reason was that they were worried about being dominated by conservative forces inside the P.A.D, while still being willing to oppose Taksin. They were also against the call by the P.A.D., in April 2006, for the King to appoint a new government under section 7 of the 1997 Constitution. After the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup, the *Assembly of the Poor* also took a principled position against the junta.

On the negative side, Autonomists rarely express their views theoretically and this is a weakness in fighting neo-liberalism. The *Assembly of the Poor* is a prime example. When Autonomists do use theory, such as in the case of Michael Hardt, Toni Negri and John Holloway, they are often highly abstract or they claim their theories are uniquely local. Either way, in the end, many Autonomists capitulate to right-wing reformism, which in practice means compromising with neoliberalism and the market.<sup>35</sup>

The capitulation of Autonomists to neoliberalism and right-wing reformism is due to its de-politicising effect. An important factor is the under estimation of the power of the state. The refusal to build a party of activists, with a united theory and programme, means that they turn their back on political agitation and debate within the movement. Nor is it deemed necessary to challenge the prevailing ideology of the ruling class, since each group merely acts autonomously in its community. Without a serious Peoples Movement political challenge to *Thai Rak Thai*, the “tank Liberal”<sup>36</sup> argument that there was no alternative to the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup, appears more attractive.

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<sup>35</sup> Chris Harman (2004) Spontaneity, strategy and politics. *International Socialism Journal* # 104, U.K. p 8.

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 1 in this book.

## Post-Modernism

Post-Modernism is still popular in Thai universities, despite its decline in other parts of the world. Post-Modernism rejects all “Grand Narratives” or ideologies and is therefore also de-politicising. For Post-Modernists, individual liberation comes about in the mind, at abstract levels. Post-Modernism is the academic sister of Autonomism, a theoretical expression of it. Thai Post-Modernists are found mixing easily with Northern Localists in the *Midnight University*.<sup>37</sup>

Like Autonomism, the rise of Post-Modernism is a product of disillusionment with Stalinism plus a severe demoralisation about the possibilities of struggle, but it can only really exist among academics due to its highly abstract nature.<sup>38</sup> Post-Modernism claims to “liberate” humanity by the constant questioning and rejection of Grand Narratives or big political theories. They therefore reject a class analysis of society and reject Marxism, while also claiming to reject neoliberalism and capitalism. In practice, however, they often end up by accepting the dominant ideology of the market.

However, like Autonomists, Post-Modernists have their plus sides. Rejection of authoritarianism and Grand Narratives by the *Midnight University* has meant that they rejected the call for the King to appoint a government under Section 7 and that they opposed the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup, just like the *Assembly of the Poor*. The *Midnight University* website was temporarily closed down by the junta because of this. Both the *Assembly of the Poor* and the *Midnight University* have also consistently opposed Thai State repression in the South. This is because they reject narrow-minded nationalism.

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<sup>37</sup> The *Midnight University* is a grouping of Peoples Movement intellectuals based in Chiangmai. <http://www.midnightuniv.org>

<sup>38</sup> See Alex Callinicos (1992) *Against Post-Modernism*. Polity Press.

### **Third Way Reformism**

Third Way Reformism is the dominant ideology of the Thai N.G.O. movement. It is an acceptance of neoliberalism and the free-market and the rejection of the state's ability to transform society for the benefit of the poor.<sup>39</sup> The reasoning behind this belief is the collapse of "Communism" and the rapid development of globalisation. In fact it is a rejection of the possibilities of serious reforms by those who would like to reform society. Internationally we see examples in the neoliberal policies of the British "New" Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party or the Workers Party in Brazil.

Most people working in the N.G.O. movement want to see equality, peace and social justice. But they reject radical transformations of society and choose to work within the system using the dominant ideology of the state. This means creating links with government departments, even under military juntas. It means not rejecting the free market in its entirety, but hoping to find a just and fair market system. In Thailand it also means paying lip service to "Sufficiency Economics" and even wearing Royalist yellow shirts.<sup>40</sup> Third Way Reformists avoided confrontation with the junta after the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup, seeking cooperation instead. They also tried to prevent the *Thai Social Forum* from organizing a pro-democracy march. Yet it would be wrong to believe that the "Third Way" N.G.O. activists were just the same as Tony Blair or other Third Way national leaders. This is because, unlike Blair, they are still well-meaning social activists who have chosen to use ruling class ideology and structures because they see no other alternative.

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<sup>39</sup> Anthony Giddens (1998) *The Third Way*. The Renewal of Social Democracy. Polity Press, Cambridge.

<sup>40</sup> See Chapters 1 & 2.

## Democracy and the State

In most cases the rise of Autonomism in Thailand was a response to the past authoritarianism of the C.P.T. It was also a response to the authoritarianism and brutality of right-wing military regimes. Wanida Tantiwittayapitak from the *Assembly of the Poor* is a good example of an Autonomous activist with bad experiences from the C.P.T.

Autonomist and Post-Modernist currents in the movement today support “Direct Democracy”, such as self-organised local community action.<sup>41</sup> This is preferred to the failed “Representative Democracy” of the parliamentary process. Autonomists claim that “Direct Democracy” or “Direct Action” can pressurise the state without the need to go through parliamentary representatives or political parties.<sup>42</sup> They also reject the building of political parties and reject the aim of seizing state power, preferring instead to organise networks of autonomous single-issue movements which can turn their back on the state.<sup>43</sup>

The problem is that by rejecting a more democratic model of exercising “Representative Peoples’ Power”, autonomists are

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<sup>41</sup> See Pitaya Wongkul (2002) *Direct Democracy*. Witeetat Publications (In Thai). Also D. Morland & J. Carter (2004) *Anarchism and democracy*. In: M.J. Todd & G. Taylor *Democracy and participation*. Merlin Press, U.K.

<sup>42</sup> see John Holloway in “*Can we change the world without taking power?*,” a debate with Alex Callinicos at the 2005 World social Forum. *International Socialism Journal*, 106, Spring 2005, p. 114.

<sup>43</sup> Seksan (2005) *The politics of the peoples movement in Thai democracy*, Amarin Press, does not use the term “autonomist” to describe this kind of politics in the Thai movement. Instead he calls them part of a “Radical Democratic Movement”, p. 173. While seeming to agree with much of autonomist-community politics, Seksan is not an autonomist himself, since he supports a form of nationalism and the importance of using the state to counter the free market, p.83 & 211.

forced to accept the class power of the capitalist state in practice.<sup>44</sup> They reject the model of participatory democracy built into the recallable representative systems invented by the international working class movement in times of struggle. The Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Soviets before the rise of Stalin, or the various workers and community councils built through struggle in Poland, Iran and Latin America over the last 40 years are good examples. In the early days of *Thai Rak Thai*, Wanida and the *Assembly of the Poor* had some illusions in Taksin's party, welcoming its election victory. Nithi Eawsriwong<sup>45</sup> is one of many Peoples Movement academics who rejects "Representative Democracy", or the present parliamentary system. Instead he favours "Direct Democracy". However, in January 2005 Nithi argued for a vote for capitalist opposition parties against *Thai Rak Thai*.<sup>46</sup> The lesson is that "Direct Democracy" cannot be applied in practice without first dealing with the class power of the capitalist state. To do this we need political parties of workers and peasants. This has been a constant Marxist criticism of Anarchism.

By rejecting a formal political party in favour of loose networks, they also fail to build internal democratic structures for their own organisations. The *Assembly of the Poor* is thus led by unelected N.G.O. activists rather than by poor farmers themselves.<sup>47</sup> The rejection of "Representative Democracy", is applied to the internal

<sup>44</sup> The Assembly of the poor advertises that it has no wish to take state power, being content to negotiate directly with the government to solve villagers' problems. Also, recently in the debate over the European Union's new neo-liberal Constitution Toni Negri called for the left in France to vote for the constitution so that the E.U. super-state could counter U.S. imperialism.

<sup>45</sup> Nithi was one of the founders of the *Midnight University*.

<sup>46</sup> *Matichon* daily. 31 January 2005.

<sup>47</sup> See Bruce Missingham (2003) *The Assembly of the Poor in Thailand*. Silkworm Books. p.187. and Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2003) Challenges to the Thai N.G.O. Movement from the dawn of a new opposition to global capital. In: Ji Giles Ungpakorn (ed) *Radicalising Thailand*. (already quoted).

workings of the movement with dire consequences. Social movements in Thailand are dominated by unelected *Pi-liang* (N.G.O. “nannies” or advisors) and *Pu-yai* (N.G.O. “elders”). There is a real problem with the lack of self-leadership among activists and a lack of internal democracy. Young people are expected to respect and listen to their elders in the movement and positions are never up for election. In addition to this, there is the problem of over funding by N.G.O.s, which discourages the building of self-reliant movements which collect membership fees.<sup>48</sup> Individuals who hold the purse strings also dominate the movement by threatening to cut off funds. Many of the participants at the *Thai Social Forum* received funds to attend.<sup>49</sup>

### Rejection of a class analysis

Autonomism, Post-Modernism and Third Way Reformism all discourage a class analysis of society. Because of this, there is a great deal of misunderstanding and under-estimation of *Thai Rak Thai* “Populism” among the Peoples Movement. This stems from a rejection of a class analysis of Populism. Such an analysis explains that it arises, both from pressure from below, and from the needs of the capitalist class simultaneously. Many in the Peoples Movement saw the Populist measures, such as the 30 baht health care scheme and the various village funds, as a cruel hoax.<sup>50</sup> Many also claim that such policies lead to a “patron-client” type of dependency by villagers upon the state. This is nothing more than the old neo-liberal criticism made against “nanny state” welfare projects made by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and others. In short, the Peoples

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<sup>48</sup> See Ji Giles Ungpakorn (2003) *Radicalising Thailand*. (already quoted) p. 311.

<sup>49</sup> There is a dilemma here because rural activists are often extremely poor, but even the *Assembly of the Poor* has often managed to mobilise using villagers’ own resources.

<sup>50</sup> Statement by Wanida Tantiwittayapitak, advisor to the *Assembly of the Poor*, Peoples Assembly meeting 23 January 2005.

Movement criticism of *Thai Rak Thai* Populism was made from the right-wing free-market position adopted by such neo-liberals as Ammar Siamwalla and Tirayut Boonmi, rather than from a left-wing pro-poor position.<sup>51</sup> This kind of analysis fails to grasp that *Thai Rak Thai* Populism actually delivers real benefits to the poor. Low-cost health care for all, is a real concrete benefit for millions who were previously uninsured and who faced huge financial worries about sickness and ill health. Populism, carried out by a blatantly capitalist party like *Thai Rak Thai* could not work otherwise. It was designed to buy social peace in times of crisis and has been used in various forms before. Peron's Argentina and the New Deal in the U.S.A. are good examples. Kevin Hewison has called the Thai version of Populism a "Social Contract" in order to help domestic capitalism face up to the challenge of neoliberal globalisation.<sup>52</sup>

## **The failure to critique neo-liberalism and the free market**

At a Peoples Movement Forum in Bangkok, the Post-Modernist academic Somchai Preechasilapakul, from the *Midnight University*, stated the following on the issue of electricity privatisation. "*Given that the Electricity Generating Authority Workers Union has beaten-up villagers at Pak Moon Dam in the past, why should*

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<sup>51</sup> See Tirayut Boonmi "*analysis of Thai society*" 5 January 2003. Also Tirayut Boonmi and Ammar Siamwalla, *Nation* 4 page specials, 9 May and 28 July 2003. Ammar Siamwalla was also an invited guest speaker at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Peoples Assembly held at Thammasart University in October 2003.

<sup>52</sup> 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, Bangkok, Thailand.



*villagers support their struggle against privatisation?*”<sup>53</sup> There are two points to make about the above sentence. Firstly the Electricity Workers Union has never beaten up villagers or had a union policy of attacking villagers. Instead, thugs hired by the Electricity Generating Authority bosses are believed to have attacked villagers. A total disregard for a class analysis means that Somchai Preechasilapakul and his colleagues at the *Midnight University* cannot distinguish between an organisation, its employees and a trade union.

Secondly, an acceptance of the free-market and privatisation leads Somchai to the conclusion that the fight against electricity privatisation is nothing to do with the interests of villagers. Yet villagers use electricity and suffer from neoliberalism in other forms. In Bolivia villagers who took part in anti-government uprisings against water privatisation and the sale of natural gas to multinationals, seem to have a better understand of the issues.

Another example of the acceptance of the free-market can be seen in publications by the *N.G.O.-Coordinating Committee* which accept that free trade could be beneficial.<sup>54</sup> Publications circulating at *Peoples Forums* also advocate separation of electricity generation and distribution in the interests of competition. Even worse was the illusion that an “independent” commercial television company could be genuinely independent of powerful interests. This was the dominant belief in the Peoples Movement in the mid 1990s when I.T.V. was established. These illusions were shattered when large capitalist corporations took over the television station.

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<sup>53</sup> Speech made on 6<sup>th</sup> February 2005 at a Peoples Movement Forum, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok.

<sup>54</sup> NGO-COD (2002a) Thai Working Group on the People’s Agenda for Sustainable Development, N.G.O. Coordinating Committee on Development. Alternative Country Report. Thailand’s Progress on Agenda 21 Proposals for Sustainable Development. p. 25.

Thai Autonomists and Post-Modernists cannot put their theories into practice when confronted by the capitalist state and the capitalist free-market. When Autonomism and Post-Modernism prove to be powerless in defending the interests of the poor, in the face of attacks from the free-market and the state, Autonomists and Post-Modernists fall back into pessimism and lose all faith in fighting for *any* reforms. Squeezing modest concessions out of the capitalist class becomes an “impossible dream”. This is the same justification for right-wing social democracy adopting the “Third Way” or the capitulation to neo-liberalism by Lula’s government in Brazil.

## **Pessimism of the Peoples Movement**

Confidence and pessimism are important factors which contribute to the choices of political strategies. One major problem of the Thai Peoples Movement is an under-estimation of its own strengths, which is naturally encouraged by mainstream ideology, which places much emphasis on the *Pu-yai* (Big People) in society. The result is a tendency to rely on “friendly governments” like *Thai Rak Thai*, or “progressive businessmen” like Sondhi Limtongkul, or even “progressive” military coups!!

### **“Get the dogs to bite each other”: the 2005 election**

At the time of the 2005 election the *Midnight University* and people like Pipop Thongchai<sup>55</sup> could only offer a strategy to vote for thoroughly capitalist, neo-liberal “opposition” parties. The vain hope in this abstract strategy was that it would dilute the expected parliamentary majority of the governing *Thai Rak Thai* Party. There was no concrete explanation about why the dilution of *Thai Rak Thai*’s majority would benefit ordinary people other than abstract talk about the need for “checks and balances” in order to

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<sup>55</sup> He later became a leader of the anti-Taksin P.A.D.

create government “transparency” and “accountability”. This claim that the opposition right-wing parties would “monitor” the government, was also made despite the fact that during the last parliament they did no such thing. The simple explanation for the weakness of opposition parties was that they had no concrete policies, let alone any alternatives for the poor. On occasions they talked, in neoliberal fashion, about the loss of “fiscal discipline” as a result of Populist government spending. But as the election approached, they changed their tune and claimed to offer similar Populist policies to the government.

The voting strategy proposed by the Thai social movements was called “*voting to get the dogs to bite each other*”, which is in fact, nothing but a pale reflection of the failed “tactical voting strategy” proposed by demoralised Labour Party voters in the U.K. in the 1980s. It is similar too to the unsuccessful “Anyone But Bush” campaign in the 2004 U.S. presidential election. These tactics have failed in other countries because people are not encouraged to vote positively “for” a party or candidate because of their qualities. Instead, they are asked to vote for one bad choice to try and block another bad choice, which is hardly an incentive to vote. What is more, in the Thai context, a call to vote to destabilise the *Thai Rak Thai* government amounted to a vote to destabilise many of the government’s Populist policies, including low cost health care and financial help to villages. This was not an attractive proposition for the poor. No wonder the strategy failed to gain any support.

An article in the Thai national daily newspaper *Matichon*<sup>56</sup>, explained what lay behind the pessimistic “strategy” of the *Midnight University*, and many of the N.G.O. networks, in relying on voting for opposition parties during the 2005 General Election. The article,

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<sup>56</sup> *Matichon* daily, 17 January 2005.

written by the *Midnight University*, described how the peasants and workers and social movements all over the world had suffered from neoliberal attacks and been defeated. It then went on to explain how the *Thai Rak Thai* government had undermined the strengths of the social movements in Thailand by a combination of repressive measures and Populist policies. There was not one sentence about the global anti-capitalist movement, which arose out of the anti- W.T.O. protests in Seattle in 1999. There was no mention of the largest international demonstration ever held in human history: the anti-war marches of 15<sup>th</sup> February 2003, and no mention of the growing *World Social Forum* movement. Neither was there any mention of the massive anti-privatisation struggle conducted by the Electricity Generating Authority workers in Thailand in 2004. It was as if none of these events had ever happened. No wave of revolts or strikes against neoliberalism in Latin America, no General Strikes in Western Europe to defend the Welfare State, no wave of struggles in South Korea...

One of the most powerful challenges to the *Thai Rak Thai* government occurred in 2004 when the Electricity Generating Authority workers union staged a long drawn out protest, including unofficial work stoppages of non-essential workers, at the E.G.A.T headquarters just north of Bangkok. This protest was supported by other trade unions in the public sector and many activists from the Peoples Movement. It was unique in drawing together the rural movements and the State Enterprise Unions. The annual May Day march in 2004 was much more militant than previous years, with the majority of workers splitting away from the usual government sponsored event to form a clear political protest. Apart from the issue of anti-privatisation, other issues, such as opposition to the war in Iraq and demands for a woman's right to choose abortion were also raised, mainly by textile workers. The protest had a longer effect on

the trade union movement because the May Day marches in 2005 and 2006 were also dominated by anti-government unions.

Apart from the electricity workers, pressure from the *Assembly of the Poor* forced the *Thai Rak Thai* government to open the sluice gates of the Pak Moon dam for limited periods of time. A massive anti-F.T.A. protest in early 2006, involving thousands of well organised and highly motivated HIV+ activists, forced the negotiations between Thailand and the U.S.A. to be postponed. Finally, it should not be forgotten that many aspects of the *Thai Rak Thai* government's Populist programme reflected pressure from below from the Peoples Movement.

Political ideologies, such as Third Way Reformism, which reject a class analysis or ideologies such as Autonomism and Post-Modernism, which reject the need to build political parties of workers and peasants, can have a weakening effect on the movement. It is not just about refusing to build alternative parties, it involves a refusal to build a body of theory independent of the capitalist ruling class. In practice, in Thailand, this leads to single issue activism and a blinkered view of the world.

## **Single Issue Activism**

Single issue activism is one of the main weaknesses of the Thai Peoples Movement. In nearly every major forum or grouping, the social movements and N.G.O.s are organised into separate "issue networks". N.G.O.s also encourage single issue struggles as they fit with project funding. No funding body is likely to give money to projects encouraging a generalised fight against the system. Single issue activism also arose in the 1980s as a method of appearing to operate in a "non-political" way under military dictatorships, although the activists of that period were well aware that their work was very political. Never the less, appearing to be

non-political also fits with some aspects of Autonomism. The *Assembly of the Poor* often has banners which say “we are not trying to seize state power”, implying that they merely want the government to solve their problems and then leave them alone to run their own communities.

Autonomism goes hand in glove with the single issue politics of the N.G.O. movement. They mobilise their own groups to attend meetings and to carry out actions without publicity. This can be seen in the way that the *Assembly of the Poor* never tries to agitate for solidarity action among other groups and the way in which *Peoples Assembly* meetings are organised without any publicity. The result is that new groups of people are not drawn into activity and little political education takes place among the movement. What is more, the mass base of many Autonomist social movements and N.G.O.s in Thailand is often built solely on trying to solve single issue problems in the short-term. When the *Thai Rak Thai* government stepped in to solve some of these problems, in a much more efficient manner and with the resources of the state behind it, the social movements and N.G.O.s lost much their non-political mass base.<sup>57</sup> Today the *Assembly of the Poor* is a mere shadow of what it was in the mid 1990s.

The fragmentation of social analysis, which goes hand in hand with single issue activism, is also a reflection of the way in which knowledge and consciousness is fragmented under capitalism in order to hide class power relations.<sup>58</sup> Advocates of the so-called “New Social Movements” argued that non-class single issue campaigns were the modern, post-Cold War methods of struggle.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>57</sup> A view also shared by Seksan (2005) already quoted, p. 185.

<sup>58</sup> George Lukács (1971) *History and Class Consciousness*. Merlin, London. p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> See J.L. Cohen & A. Arato (1997) *Civil Society and political theory*. M.I.T. Press, U.S.A and A. Touraine (2001) Translated by D. Macey. *Beyond Neoliberalism*. Polity Press, Cambridge, U.K.

Yet today's international anti-capitalist movements and Social Forums realise that overcoming narrow single issue struggles is central to strengthening the movement as a whole. Only by having a full political picture of society can we build a new and better World.

Single issue activism can have benefits in temporarily uniting large numbers of people of different political beliefs behind a particular campaign, such as opposition to war or opposition to dictatorship. However, sooner or later political analyses and debates come to the fore when discussing the strategies and tactics to push the movement forward. Unfortunately single issue activism in the Thai Peoples Movement is not generally about large temporary campaigns, the anti- F.T.A. campaign being an exception. Most of the time single issue activism is about long term struggles by social movements dealing with HIV, dams, land, power plants or indigenous rights etc. Each "problem network" (*Krua-kai Bunha*) acts independently and has no overall analysis that can link all the Peoples Movement issues together. Cross-issue solidarity does take place, but it is weak because it is based on "good will", stemming from putting all the issues together in meetings without actually linking them. Good will is different from joint struggles based on an understanding of the common political roots of most problems. It is rather like placing each group's problem files on one table together, rather than explaining that the various problems share the same root cause. A good example of this is the fact that HIV campaigners do not understand why the workings of capitalism, which make HIV/AIDS a problem due to low health funding and drug patents, can also oppress gays, drug users and young peoples' sexuality, through family morality.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> The pamphlet "*Why capitalism makes AIDS a serious disease*", published by this author for the *Peoples' Coalition Party*, received some interest because it showed how capitalism linked various problems about HIV together. This had not been previously considered by single issue activists.

The *Thai Social Forum* (T.S.F.) in October 2006 attempted to go some way in correcting the problem of single issue activism by organising “cross-issue plenary meetings”. The organising committee of the T.S.F. made a verbal commitment to encouraging cross-issue discussions. The *Peoples Democracy Forum* which was later built out of the T.S.F., in order to push forward political reform, was also verbally committed to such discussions. Yet, most meetings at the T.S.F. were still organised by “issue networks” where activists came to listen to discussions on their own problems without any attempts at building a wider political analysis which could cover all issues together.

One meeting at the TSF which highlighted the political link between various “issue networks” was the meeting organised by the *Peoples Coalition Party* on the threat of a human flu pandemic from bird flu (H5N1). The meeting drew speakers from rural alternative agriculture networks, trade unions in the food processing industry and left-wing activists. However, the meeting was only a very small part of the *Thai Social Forum* and the party’s influence among the Peoples Movement was minimal.

## **Maoism: its “de-politicising” effect and its defeat**

Maoism is another reason why the Thai movement is politically weak. Maoism is a de-politicising force. It discourages self organisation, political analysis and education. Members of the C.P.T. were encouraged to read only a few texts written by Mao. Marxist works were ignored. The urban working class was also ignored as a force to change society. After the students went to the jungle, urban-based politics with its intellectual debate, open struggle and experimentation were exchanged for the mind-numbing politics of the most politically backward sections peasantry. Political thought and analysis were the preserve of a handful of top cadres. Theory



was therefore down-played. When the C.P.T. collapsed, and later, when the authoritarian Thai state was liberalised, the Left was slow to recover. The booming Thai economy in the 1990s also played a part in keeping the Left weak. Until the economic crisis of 1997, things just seemed to be getting better all the time. The overall effect was that the more the Peoples Movement rejected theory, the more it came to rely on ruling class ideology. Acceptance of the market and nationalism are examples.

## **Outside the traditional movement: the GLBT groups and the disabled activists**

The effect of Maoism on the Peoples Movement is seen in the separation between traditional social movements and N.G.O.s and gender and disabled activists.

Despite the fact that many people see Thai society and culture as being liberal and tolerant towards alternative sexual life styles, a deeper study of the experiences of Gays, Lesbians and *Katoeys* shows the real need for a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) Movement.<sup>61</sup> Such a movement began to emerge in the late 1980s as a result of AIDS. The reason why a Gay or Lesbian Liberation movement never arose in Thailand in the early 1970s, like in many other countries, is mainly explained by the fact that the Maoist *Communist Party of Thailand*, which had ideological domination over the Peoples Movement, never supported Gays or Lesbians. The C.P.T., like most Maoist organisations, had a very

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<sup>61</sup> See Peter A. Jackson (1999) Tolerant but unaccepting: the myth of a Thai “Gay Paradise”. In Peter A. Jackson & Nerida M. Cook –Eds *Genders & Sexualities in Modern Thailand*. Silkworm Books. Megan Sinnott (2000) Masculinity and “Tom” identity in Thailand. In Peter A. Jackson & Gerard Sullivan –Eds *Lady Boys, Tom Boys and Rent Boys*. Silkworm Books.

conservative and moralistic attitude to sex.<sup>62</sup> For example, Jit Pumisak, a leading C.P.T. intellectual, in his book about the Thai *Sakdina* system, wrote about the “abnormalities of homosexuality” arising among women in the harems of the Royal Palace.<sup>63</sup>

Because the “1968” wave of international struggle failed to ignite a GLBT movement in Thailand in the 1970s, it was not until the spread of AIDS that a GLBT movement began to emerge, especially among gay men. Examples of Gay and *Katoey* organisations today are *Fa Sri Rung* (Rainbow Sky) and *Bangkok Rainbow*, established in 2000 and 2002, respectively. *Anjaree* and *Sapaan* (Bridge) are examples of Lesbian movements set up in the same period, but these Lesbian organisations were established as Lesbian websites.<sup>64</sup> These GLBT movements, which gradually emerged throughout the 1990s, exhibit the problems and contradictions of identity politics after the international defeats of the 1980s. Identity Politics in that era, especially among GLBT movements, often emphasised building spaces for consumption and entertainment. While politics was reduced, the influence of Pink Businesses increased. Another issue was “Virtual Struggle” emphasising the use of the internet and websites.

Some people in the GLBT scene claim that *Fa Sri Rung* is less Pink Business orientated than *Bangkok Rainbow* because it is

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<sup>62</sup> See Vipa Daomanee (Comrade “Sung”) (2003) Looking back to when I first wanted to be a Communist (already quoted). See also, the attitude of the Communist Party of the Philippines, which only adopted a more liberal attitude to gays and lesbians in 1998 –Patricio N. Abinales (2004) *Love, Sex and the Filipino Communist*. Anvil.

<sup>63</sup> Jit Pumisak (*Somsmai SriSootrapan*) (1996) reprint of *Chome Na Sakdina Thai*. Nok Hook Press, p. 376.

<sup>64</sup> *Anjaree* has now folded. The main remaining political Lesbian website being *Sapaan*.

dominated by health professionals and N.G.O. activists rather than business people. This may be true to some extent, but *Bangkok Rainbow* is more political if you consider the fact that it organises seminars and political discussions and backed a gay candidate for the Senate elections in 2006. The business-backed people who established the *Anjaree* website for lesbians were also more overtly political than the rather conservative health professionals working in *Fa Sri Rung*. However, a social movement cannot be built solely round a website or seminars. Without a real supporting membership, *Anjaree* collapsed. In contrast, the educational advice and welfare provided by *Fa Sri Rung* has resulted in a real membership or mass base. These members have exerted pressure on the leaderships of the organisation to push them into becoming more political. Today any blatant homophobic acts or public policies, such as barring gays from teacher training colleges or the media, are immediately countered by the GLBT movement. Recently there were complaints against an obnoxious advertisement showing a “straight” man slapping a *katoey*.

Despite these positive developments, the C.P.T. past still haunts the Peoples Movement on the issue of gender. GLBT organisations are still not regarded by the traditional Peoples Movement as a normal part of the movement. Peoples Assemblies and Peoples Movement publications do not raise the GLBT issue. But there is an indication that a new generation of social activists, some of whom are gays, lesbians or socialists, will force a liberalisation of attitudes among the traditional movement. Evidence of this was seen in the fact that the *Thai Social Forum* included GLBT organizations.

What was even more impressive about the T.S.F. was the participation by disabled activists. This was the first time that the Peoples Movement as a whole had joined forces with disabled organisations and the highlight of the event was when activists in

wheel chairs led the T.S.F. anti-coup demonstration in the centre of Bangkok.

Moving away from single issue activism is a complex process. The politics of the movement has to develop through trade unions and peasant organisations taking up each other's issues and fighting for all the oppressed in society. But equally, gender rights and GLBT activists as well as disabled organisations need to take up the issues of the wider movement. A political party can act as a bridge to connect struggles and build solidarity. But the present generation of activists do not want a party that would give orders from above.

The legacy of the C.P.T. is not the only obstacle to fighting for gender rights in the Peoples Movement. Autonomist Localism (*Chumchon-niyom*) both rejects universal political theories and places "local wisdom" above all else, irrespective of the nature of that local wisdom. A recent debate over signs barring women from Buddhist pagodas in the north is a prime example. Northern Localists, such as Thanet Charoenmuang, argued against socialists and feminists who want the signs removed. Thanet's argument was that the feminists and socialists were "outsiders" who should learn to respect Northern local wisdom, which he claimed did not oppress women. This is despite the fact that most religious experts admit that the barring of women from pagodas, is done on the basis of the belief that women are "unclean" due to their menstrual cycles. However, Nithi Eawsriwong, who is also a localist from the *Midnight University*, argued that it was pointless to say this local belief did not oppress women. For Nithi, the way to change such local beliefs was for northerners to argue for change from within, not to rely on forces from the outside.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The debates around this issue are collected in a book edited by Supakorn Apawatcharut (2004) *Women and Prathat*. Urban Development Institute Foundation. (In Thai).

## The October People in the era of *Thai Rak Thai*

The *Thai Rak Thai* government came to power in 2001 with a raft of Populist policies ranging from universal health care to grass-roots Keynesianism, in the form of village funds and small business loans. The policies of *Thai Rak Thai* arose from a number of factors, mainly the 1997 economic crisis and the influence of both big-business and some ex-student activists from the Seventies within the party. There has been much debate over the nature of this Populism,<sup>66</sup> but what is clear is these government policies accounted for the landslide election victory of the party in the February 2005 elections. The opposition *Democrat* and *Mahachon* parties, failed to mount a convincing alternative. Despite (or some might say, *parallel to*) the Populism of *Thai Rak Thai*, the government had an appalling record of systematic human rights abuses and attacks against social movements, the massacre at *Takbai* and the war on drugs being the most extreme examples.<sup>67</sup> The government was also determined to implement free-market policies by signing Free Trade Agreements and expanding privatisation. For these reasons the Peoples Movement was faced with the challenges of government Populism, the threat of neoliberalism and government repression.<sup>68</sup>

The total failure of opposition parties to mount a serious democratic challenge to *Thai Rak Thai* in various elections, plus

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion on the various interpretations of the nature of the *Thai Rak Thai* government and its Populism, see Kengkij Kitirianglarp (2005) 'Thai Rak Thai Populism. Capitalist crisis, the state and class struggle'. Paper presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Thai Studies Conference, University of Northern Illinois, April 2005. (In Thai). Also see Kevin Hewison (2003) 'Crafting a new social contract: domestic capitalist responses to the challenge of neoliberalism' (already quoted). Also Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2004) *Thaksin: The business of politics in Thailand*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.

<sup>67</sup> Nearly 90 young Muslim men were murdered by government security forces at *Takbai* in the South on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2004 and over 3,000 people were shot in the government war on drugs.

<sup>68</sup> This view is shared by Seksan Prasertkul in his 2005 book (already quoted).

the military coup in 2006, means that the central role of Thai social movements in defending civil rights, democracy and social justice has become even more important. It is clear that the attitude to an authoritarian government change among leaders of the *Peoples Alliance for Democracy* (P.A.D.) allowed the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup to take place. How did the P.A.D. get into this position? The answer is that Autonomism, Post-Modernism and “Third Way” Reformism failed to equip activists with the tools needed to compete politically with *Thai Rak Thai* in the interests of the poor.

When considering the “October People” today, it is necessary to divide them into two groups according to the trajectory of their political and social careers. On the one hand many activists became part of the Peoples Movement that we see today, leading social movements and Non-Government Organisations which flourished from the 1980s onwards. The Peoples Movement continues to be a vital political force representing the poor and exploited in society. On the other hand, sections of the ruling class also managed to co-opt a number of ex-activists into the political elite in order to help police the movement or in order to produce Populist policies, which won the hearts and minds of the people. This process started with Prime Minister Chavalit Yongjaiyut and his *New Inspirations Party* but later rose to a fine art under Taksin’s *Thai Rak Thai* government. There are also “October People” who have taken up neo-liberal policies, either as academics or as members of the *Democrat Party*.

### **“October People” who entered the *Thai Rak Thai* government**

Before the first election victory of *Thai Rak Thai*, the party made very serious attempts to canvas a wide range of views in Thai society in order to come up with serious policies to modernise the country and deal with a number of social evils, such as poverty.<sup>69</sup>

There was a growing sense of frustration and unease about the complacency of the *Democrat Party* government to act in decisive and imaginative ways in order to pull the country out of the 1997 economic crisis. Ex-student and N.G.O. activists, such as Phumtham Wechayachai<sup>70</sup> were recruited to the party and became important links with the Peoples movement. Dr Sanguan Nitayarumphong, who had for a long time been an advocate of a universal health care policy, became an important designer of the new 30 baht health care scheme. October People encouraged the Prime Minister to meet with social movements like the *Assembly of the Poor* and they coordinated with movement and N.G.O. leaders in order to solve disputes or dampen down protest actions against the government.<sup>71</sup>

Phumtham Wechayachai argued that Thailand needed a “Dual Track” development policy, where “Capitalism” and the “Peoples Economy” (Community based activities) went hand in hand.<sup>72</sup> He believed that you could not use one single economic development or political theory and criticised many on the Left who he claimed were “unable to adapt their thinking to the modern world”. He attacked

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<sup>69</sup> Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker (2004) already quoted.

<sup>70</sup> Phumtham was the director of the Thai Volunteer Service, which trained young people to become N.G.O. workers. He became an important leader of *Thai Rak Thai* and held cabinet posts. He is very close to Thaksin. “October People” like Phumtham used their previous involvement with social movements to the benefit of the government. For example, in June 2005, he intervened to demobilise a protest by 5,000 farmers who were angry about debt relief. On the other hand, some N.G.O. activists felt that by talking to him they had the ear of the government.

<sup>71</sup> In 2002, when leading N.G.O. organisers found themselves under investigation by the Anti-Money Laundering Office on orders from the *Thai Rak Thai* government, some N.G.O. leaders complained that they had previously worked hard to dissolve demonstrations by farmers groups at the request of the government and were now being attacked! (*Bangkok Post* 3 October 2002).

<sup>72</sup> See interview in *A Dayweekly* (2005).

the old Left for clinging to idealism, thinking, for example, that capitalists automatically exploited the poor. For such people he had a simple suggestion: go back and live in the jungle like in the old C.P.T. days! Echoing the terminology of “Direct Democracy” used by the Peoples Movement, he argued that *Thai Rak Thai* was using a “Direct (sales) Approach” to dealing with the problems of villagers, without having to pass through Middle Men ie. political or state representatives. For Phumtham the various government schemes to encourage community entrepreneurs were designed to allow villagers to raise themselves out of poverty. He concluded that N.G.O.s needed to adapt themselves in order to cooperate fully with the government and not hinder its work, because, unlike the government, N.G.O.s cannot claim to be elected representatives of the people.

October People argued that by entering the *Thai Rak Thai* government they had seized state power “without having to eat taro and sweet potatoes in the jungle”, a reference to the previous hardships of life with the C.P.T. Despite serious accusations of betrayal and turning their backs on the Movement, in some ways their alliance with what they regarded as the “progressives and modernising capitalists in *Thai Rak Thai*”, was not much of a departure from the old C.P.T. cross-class alliance strategy. Many old C.P.T. leaders even suggested that it was necessary to back *Thai Rak Thai* in order to confront the “old feudal power” in society (ie. the influence of the Palace). Of course, we must not forget that this Stalinist/Maoist cross-class strategy has been a proven failure in such diverse countries as China, Indonesia and Iraq.

Most October People in *Thai Rak Thai* probably sincerely believed that their actions were benefiting society, but as with trade union bureaucrats throughout the world, as their live-styles became more and more like the capitalists and high-ranking ministers, with



whom they rubbed shoulders, they became ever more distant from the Peoples Movement. Even more importantly, the strategy of co-opting left-wingers into government had the aim of policing the social movements for the benefit of capital. It is widespread throughout the world. The Philippines after Marcos and various Labour and Social Democratic governments in the West are good examples. No matter what they may believe about being close to the corridors of power, they become more of an instrument of the ruling class than advocates for the poor. *Thai Rak Thai* was no exception. It was a party of the rich capitalists for the rich capitalists and any reasonable social policies it might have had were designed to buy social peace at the cheapest possible price. For example, the government had no intention of taxing the rich and the large corporations in order to properly fund the health care scheme and its support for the rights of drug multinationals in the Thai-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, undermined the efficiency of the 30 baht health care scheme.

## **The Student movement today**

There is much evidence that there is interest in politics and social issues among students and young people today. This can be seen in the flowering of new critical magazines produced by small independent student societies. Student groups spontaneously organised protests against government violence in the South and there have been large student protests against privatisation (or corporatisation) of universities at *Chulalongkorn*, *Pranakorn Nua*, *Kasetsart*, *Mahasarakarm*, *Burapa*, and *Pattani* Universities.

Today the *Student Federation of Thailand* and its “*Pi-Liang*” from the older generation of Peoples Movement activists is extremely weak. In the past the *Student Federation of Thailand* was an important coordinating body, but today it has withered at the vine

and become a bureaucracy without a mass movement. In the past its leadership refused to take a position on university privatisation while thousands of students in a number of universities were organising protests. It was scared to link university privatisation with the issue of state enterprise privatisation, out of fear that the protests would “get out of hand”. The leadership also admitted that they were extremely lacking in political theory and analysis and that was why they shied away from debates with Left-wing student groups.

The *Student Federation* was the training ground for office holders in organisations like the *Campaign for Popular Democracy*. Ex-student leaders in the Peoples Movement then became “advisors” to new generations of *Federation* leaders. Meetings of the *Student Federation* took the usual form found in many Peoples Movement meetings. Political debate and voting were discouraged in favour of “consensus”. Funding was obtained from N.G.O.s or outside organisations, rather than from the student body itself. This led to a culture of dependency and a seniority system.

## **In conclusion**

The dominance of ideologies which encourage fragmentation and single issue activism in the Peoples Movement have meant that it is not well equipped to pose serious political alternatives to the Populism of *Thai Rak Thai* or the neoliberalism of the military government. The long standing and strong commitment to “community participation”, democracy and social justice within the movement must be encouraged to grow into a serious attempt to develop an independent political perspective for the movement. This political perspective, together with a party and other forms of mobilisation, can then strengthen the political impact of the movement. The energy of young activists today, together with a

gradual rejection of fragmented politics, which began at the *Thai Social Forum* are the hope for the future. The Thai ruling class is barbaric, exploitative and unfit to govern. The poor and the oppressed must therefore become strong actors in the struggle for social change.

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## Chapter 4

# Southern Woes

The South of what is now called “Thailand” is a land of abundant natural resources and beauty. Many holiday makers know the area well for its beautiful beaches. It is also an area rich in history, with an abundance of multicultural traditions. In recent years, the area has been hit by two tragedies: the resurgence of political violence and the Tsunami of 2004.

### **1. The Thai State is the root cause of violence in Southern Thailand**

On the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2004 Thai government security forces broke up a demonstration at *Takbai* in the Southern province of *Naratiwat*. Apart from using water cannon and tear gas, troops opened fire with live ammunition above the heads of protesters, but some fired directly into the crowd, killing 7 people and wounding many others, including a 14 year old boy. There were villagers of all ages and sexes in the crowd. After this, the troops moved in to capture young Muslim Malay men. While women and children huddled in one corner,

the men were stripped to the waist and their hands were tied behind their backs. The prisoners were made to crawl along the ground while troops rained kicks down upon their heads and bodies and beat them with sticks. Many of the prisoners were roped together in a long line and made to lie face down on the ground. The local military commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Area Army<sup>1</sup> told a reporter on television that this action should be a lesson to anyone who dared to defy the government. “*We will do this again every time*”, he said. The whole event was captured on video, which only goes to show how arrogant and self-confident the security forces were.

Finally the bound prisoners were thrown into the backs of open-top army lorries, and made to lie, layer upon layer, on top of each other. Troops stood on top of their human cargo occasionally stamping on those who cried out for water or air and telling them that soon they would “*know what real hell was like*”. Many hours later the first lorry arrived at its destination, *Inkayut* army camp. A number of prisoners who had been at the bottom of this lorry were found to have died in transit, probably from suffocation and kidney damage. Six hours later the last lorry arrived with almost all those on the bottom layers found to be dead. During those six hours between the arrival of the first lorry and the last one, no attempt was made by the authorities to change the methods of transporting prisoners. Nearly 80 prisoners died. A senate report<sup>2</sup> on the incident concluded that this amounted to “deliberate criminal actions likely to cause deaths” by the security forces. Prime Minister Taksin’s first response to the incident was to praise the security forces for their “good work”. Later the government claimed that the deaths of over 80 demonstrators were a regretful “accident”.

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<sup>1</sup> Lt-General Pisarn Wattanawongkiri was the Fourth Army Region Commander at the time.

<sup>2</sup> Thai Senate Committee on Social Development and Human Security December 2004.

Anyone in the West watching the *Takbai* incident would be reminded of Nazi methods of transporting Jewish people to concentration camps. Anyone familiar with Thai history would be reminded of the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 massacre of students in *Thammasart* University. In 1976, after attacking a peaceful gathering of students with automatic weapons, men and women were stripped to the waist and made by the police to crawl along the ground under a hail of kicks and beatings. Some students were dragged out of the campus and hung from trees, others were burn alive in make-shift bonfires, mainly by right-wing thugs, some of whom were members of the ultra right-wing *Village Scout Movement*<sup>3</sup>.

The Thai ruling class hate the poor and hate left-wing radicals, but they hate people of different ethnicity and religion even more.

After both *Takbai* 2004 and the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976, government spokespersons told deliberate lies. One lie was that the security forces were “forced to act as the situation was getting out of hand”. In fact this was never the case. At *Takbai*, Senator Chermesak Pintong reported that the security forces admitted to a team of investigating Senators that they broke up the demonstration in order to arrest 100 ring-leaders, the names and photographs of whom were on a government black-list. Under the 1997 Constitution, Thai citizens were supposed to have the right to peaceful protest. Under the 1997 Constitution, citizens were supposed to be innocent before trial. The actions of the police and army at *Takbai* show that they did not regard the villagers as citizens. The demonstration was more or less peaceful until it was broken up violently by security forces. In the minds of the troops and their commanders, the *Takbai* prisoners were captured prisoners of war, “nasty foreigners” or “enemies of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Katherine Bowie (1997) *Rituals of National Loyalty. An Anthropology of the State and Village Scout Movement in Thailand*. Columbia University Press.

state” who needed to be punished. So were the students at Thammasart in 1976...

After the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1976 and *Takbai* 2004, government spokespeople also claimed that the trouble-makers were foreigners and couldn't speak Thai. In 1976 they were supposed to be Vietnamese.<sup>4</sup> In 2004 the state claimed that they were Arabs or Malays. All prisoners killed or captured in 1976, and at *Takbai* in 2004, were Thai speaking Thai citizens. Government spokespeople also told lies that the students in 1976 and the demonstrators at *Takbai* in 2004 were well-armed and posed a threat to security forces. There is no evidence to support this. No Weapons of Mass Destruction were found at either site. At *Takbai* a rusty rifle, which had been lying in the river for years, was paraded as “evidence”.

After the military coup of 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006, the junta's Prime Minister traveled down to the South to apologise for what the Taksin government had done.<sup>5</sup> He announced that charges against some demonstrators would be lifted. Yet, his government, and the previous Taksin government, have not prosecuted a single member of the security forces for the *Takbai* incident. The junta has continued to emphasise the military “solution” in the South. In January 2007 the junta renewed the Taksin government's southern emergency decree, which gives all security forces sweeping powers and immunity from prosecution.

So what are the causes of the violence in the Southern provinces of Thailand? Before 2004 there were isolated shootings and bombing incidents and arsonists regularly set fire to state schools.

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<sup>4</sup> A claim made by Samak Suntarawej and others.

<sup>5</sup> Prime Minister Surayud needs to apologise for what he did in the May 1992 crack-down on unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators!

One academic described to this author that locals call the situation a “Rice mixed-salad” (*Kao-yum*). In other words there appeared to be many confusing causes. For example, could it be that disgruntled army officers, afraid of losing a share of the lucrative cross-border black-market trade, sponsored the violence in order to “prove” that the army is still needed? After all, the Taksin government tried to reduce the role of the army in the South and replace it with the police. There was some evidence to support this theory.

Is it the long-standing discontent in the region ever since Bangkok and London captured and divided the Sultanate of *Pattani* between Siam and British Malaya that is the cause of the conflict? Yes, people do talk about this history, but 200 year-old events only ignite passions when there is systematic oppression taking place today.

Is it just the work of “foreign Islamic fanatics”, who have managed to brain-wash some local youths into supporting a separatist movement? This is what Thai governments claim. George Bush and Tony Blair’s encouragement of Islamophobia to support their invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, stirred-up such views and allowed human rights abuses against Muslims world-wide. But why would local youths just allow themselves to be brain-washed if there wasn’t just cause?

More far-fetched rumours circulated among some people. Mainly they were those who needed an excuse to say that Prime Minister Taksin “wasn’t all that bad”... They were old supporters of the *Communist Party of Thailand* (C.P.T.), now siding with Taksin’s *Thai Rak Thai* government. Claims were made that the Southern violence was planned by the C.I.A. in order to increase U.S. government involvement in the region. These conspiracy theorists also believed that the C.I.A. planned the September 11 attacks in New York.



Could it be a dispute between the Palace, with the support of the army, on one side and the “too powerful” Taksin government on the other? Duncan McCargo<sup>6</sup> suggested that the Southern Violence could be explained as conflict between “Network Monarchy” and “Network Taksin”. The attempt to increase the role of the police was not a “normalisation” procedure, according to this view. The police were believed to be aligned to Taksin. Thus the oppression of the Thai state against the local population is totally ignored in this theory. As with most other “elite theories” history and conflict are confined to sections of the ruling class while the population are passive spectators. According to this theory even the separatists or insurgents were just paid gangsters hired by the military to discredit Taksin’ government.

When considering the violence in the South, we need to listen to what local people are saying. Local Islamic people do not generally hate their Buddhist neighbours. This is not “Communal Violence”. This is still the case now, despite the fact that some Buddhist monks have been killed and the Thai state has tried to turn it into a religious conflict. Local traders, rubber tappers, religious teachers, ordinary villagers, school teachers and government officials have all been victims of violence. Most of those killed may have died at the hands of the security forces. In the late 1990s most local people were not really demanding a separate state, despite the fact that Thai government violence may now have pushed people towards supporting separation. The Southern border provinces have been neglected economically and when there has been development it has not been the majority of local Malay Muslims who have benefited. There is a high level of unemployment in the area.

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<sup>6</sup> Duncan McCargo (2005) Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand. *The Pacific Review* 18 (4) December, 499-519.

What local people are saying more than anything is that they do not feel respected. Their religion, language and culture are not respected by the Thai State. The state education system emphasises Thai, Bangkok, history and culture. This is why schools are often burnt. In the past 60 years successive Thai governments have arrested religious leaders, banned the teaching of *yawee* (the local dialect of Malay spoken in the area), closed religious schools, forced students to learn the Thai language, forced them also to say Buddhist prayers in schools, forced students to wear Thai style clothes, encouraged people to change their names to “Thai” names and forcibly changed the names of local districts to “Thai-sounding” names. All this has been carried out by Bangkok governments which maintain an occupying army in the Southern border provinces.<sup>7</sup> Apart from this there is no justice. Adil<sup>8</sup> has catalogued a list of 19 major court cases concerning political crimes since 1990, where there have been serious miscarriages of justice. No justice, no peace!

The occupying army and the police are feared and hated. Opponents of Taksin like to claim that the locals hate the police and love the army. It is simply not true. Local people know that their sons, brothers and fathers have been taken away at night, then tortured and killed by the Thai army and police, often in plain clothes<sup>9</sup>. In 2004, the defence lawyer Somchai Nilapaichit, who was a key human rights activist on this issue of torture, was kidnapped in Bangkok and killed by police from different units. He was trying to expose police tactics

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<sup>7</sup> Ahmad Somboon Bualuang (2006) Malay, the basic culture. In *The situation on the Southern border*. The views of Civil Society. Published by the Coordinating Committee of the Peoples Sector for the Southern Border Provinces. (In Thai).

<sup>8</sup> Adil (2006) Violence in the Southern border provinces and bringing cases to court. In *The situation on the Southern border*. The views of Civil Society. (already quoted).

<sup>9</sup> Akerin Tuansiri (2006) student activities in the violent areas of the Southern border provinces. In *The situation on the Southern border*. The views of Civil Society. (already quoted).

in torturing suspects into confessions about stealing guns from an army camp in early 2004. The involvement of police from different units in his murder indicates a green light from above: from Prime Minister Taksin. At time of writing, no one has been charged with Somchai's murder and his body has not been found.

It isn't hard to find green lights, right at the top, for Thai state violence. No one has been punished for the 1976 bloodbath at Thammasart, the May 1992 massacre, or for the killings at *Takbai* in 2004. The Taksin government also sanctioned the extra-judiciary murder of over 3,000 "drug suspects" in its war on drugs. Many were killed in the South, others were among northern ethnic minorities. Somchai's daughter Pratapchit Nilapaichit says that Thai society has a tradition of never bringing state criminals to justice<sup>10</sup>. What is more, she maintains that Martial Law or Emergency Decrees only make it easier for the security forces to commit crimes. The laws are not about protecting locals.

There were disgruntled soldiers in the south; it is true. There were also some disputes among the Thai ruling class. The 19<sup>th</sup> September coup shows this. And there are small groups of youngsters who now believe in separatism. But until recently no separatist organisation claimed responsibility for any actions.

In April 2004 about a hundred youths, wearing "magical" Islamic headbands, attacked police stations. But they were only armed with swords and rusty knives. They were all shot down. Discontent was certainly being articulated through religion. But this was not the actions of a well organised resistance. The progressive academic Niti Eawsriwong<sup>11</sup> explained that this was an old-style "Millenarian"

<sup>10</sup> Pratapchit Nilapaichit (2006) The disappeared in Thailand. In *The situation on the Southern border. The views of Civil Society*. (already quoted).

<sup>11</sup> See article in *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*, March 2005.

type revolt, where people attack symbols of authority without a well-planned strategy. The youths in the April incident were shot down by the police and army. In one of the worst incidents, the army attacked the ancient *Krue-Sa* mosque with heavy weapons after the youths fled into the building. Senator Kraisaak Choonhavan maintains that apart from the excessive force shown by the state, the prisoners from this event were bound and then executed in cold blood. Another group of youths from a local football team were also shot at point blank range at *Saba Yoi*. The army officer in charge of the blood bath at *Krue-Sa* was General Punlop Pinmanee. In 2002 he told a local newspaper that in the old days the army simply used to shoot rural dissidents and Communists. Now they just send people round to intimidate their wives.<sup>12</sup> Before the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup, Taksin's people accused Punlop of being behind the plot to bomb the Prime Minister. Such is the ethical nature of the Thai security forces.

When discussing the Southern insurgency, one difficult question is.. why do no separatist organisations identify themselves by claiming responsibility for their actions? Back in the 1970s a clear separatist movement existed, cooperating in its struggle against the Thai state with the *Communist Parties* of Thailand and Malaysia. The *Barisan Revolusi Nasional* (B.R.N.) was established in 1963 and the *Pattani United Liberation Organisation* (PULO) was founded in 1968. PULO are not in a position to control much of what is happening on the ground today. One PULO activists admitted to the B.B.C. that "*Right now there is a group which has a lot of young blood. They're quick and fast and they don't worry what will happen after they do something. They don't care because they want the government to have a big reaction, which will cause more problems*".<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See Pasuk Phongpaichit & Chris Baker (2004) Thaksin. *The business of politics in Thailand*. Silkworm. Page 19.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with the B.B.C.'s Kate McGeown posted on the B.B.C. website 7 August 2006. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/>

By 1984 the B.R.N. had split into three. One organisation which originated from the B.R.N., is the *Barisan Revolusi Nasional-Koordinasi* (B.R.N.-C). By 2005 the *Runda Kumpulan Kecil* (R.K.K. or Pattani State Restoration Unit) was becoming more prominent in the insurgency. It is believed to be made up of B.R.N.-C people who trained in Indonesia. There seem to be many organisations operating today with some coordination between them. One explanation of why they do not claim responsibility for their actions in recent years, is that they may be too loosely organised and unsophisticated. But alternatively, some experts believe that by deliberately not claiming responsibility they make it extremely hard for the Thai Intelligence services to understand who is who and which of the various organisations is taking what action.<sup>14</sup>

The resistance is not just about planting bombs and shooting state officials. Communities act in a united way to protect themselves from the security forces who constantly abduct and kill people. Women and children block the roads and stop soldiers or police from entering villagers. On 4<sup>th</sup> September 2005 they blocked the entrance to *Ban Lahan* in *Naratiwat* and told the Provincial Governor that he and his soldiers were not welcome in their village.<sup>15</sup> Two weeks later villagers blocked the road to *Tanyong Limo*. Earlier two marines had been captured by villagers and then killed by unknown militants. Villagers suspect that the marines were members of a death squad sent in to kill local people.<sup>16</sup> The villagers held up posters aimed at the authorities, saying: “*You are the real terrorists*”. In November 2006, six weeks after the coup, villagers protested at a school in *Yala*, demanding that troops leave the area. One of their posters read:

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<sup>14</sup> Zachary Abuza. Terrorism Monitor 8 September 2006 James Town Foundation  
<http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2370>

<sup>15</sup> *Bangkok Post* 5 September 2005.

<sup>16</sup> *Bangkok Post* 22 September 2005.

“All you wicked soldiers... get out of our village. You come here and destroy our village by killing innocent people. Get out!”.<sup>17</sup> The same tactics, involving mass mobilisations of women are used by the Palestinian resistance.

The single thread that runs through the “rice mixed-salad” jumble of explanations is the brutality of the Thai State and the fact that the Thai State has occupied the 3 Southern border provinces for 200 years like a colony. In the 1960s the military dictatorship settled some Buddhist north-easterners in the area in order to “strengthen” the occupation. It reminds one of the British role in Northern Ireland or Palestine. Buddhist temples were built in predominantly Muslim areas. In this period there were times when Muslims were made to bow down before Buddha images. Even now they are made to bow down before pictures of the King, which is an offence to their religion. There are house searches by troops using dogs. Again this is an insult to Muslims. Today soldiers are conscripted to become monks in these temples and the temples have army guards. State schools teach history, which emphasises Thai Buddhist national superiority. They don’t teach Islamic values or the history of Pattani. They don’t teach classes in the local *Yawee* language. The far South is the only area where troops are stationed long-term in such an occupying fashion. Police stations are surrounded by sand bags and barbed wire. So the link between soldiers’ illegal activities, disputes between factions of the occupying forces, and the local peoples’ sense of being disrespected and abused, is the Thai State’s occupation of the South and its violence and oppression.

The anti-war writer Arundhati Roy<sup>18</sup> stated that any government’s condemnation of “terrorism” is only justified if the

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<sup>17</sup> *Nation* 6 November 2006.

<sup>18</sup> In her book *The ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*. 2004. Harper Perennial.

government can prove that it is responsive to non-violent dissent. The Thai government has ignored the feelings of local people in the South for decades. It turns a deaf ear to their pleas that they want respect. It laughs in the face of those who advocate human rights when people are tortured. Under the emergency laws, no one in the south has the democratic space to hold political discussions. What choice do people have other than turning to violent resistance?

In another article, Roy explained that, we, in the Peoples Movement, cannot condemn terrorism if we do nothing to campaign against state terror ourselves. The Thai social movements have for far too long been engrossed in single issue campaigns. Peoples minds are made smaller by Thai nationalism. They don't see Muslims as Thai citizens. They think all Muslims are Southerners, when in fact there are ancient Muslim Chinese communities in the North and people descended from Persians in the Central region. This is encouraged by the manic flag-waving and nationalism of all governments. It is also encouraged by people at the top. Recently the Queen spoke of her concern for Thai Buddhists in the South. No mention was made of our Muslim brothers or sisters. No mention was made of *Takbai* and worse still, the Queen called on the *Village Scout* movement to mobilise once again to save the country.<sup>19</sup> Luckily most *Village Scouts* are Middle-aged and unlikely to commit violent acts anymore.

The Thai Peoples Movement, has not paid enough attention to oppression in the south. Some in the Peoples Movement *are* concerned and have spoken out, but usually it is done separately, as individuals, as academics, or as Senators, but not in a united and forceful campaign. Good examples of those organisations which haven taken this issue seriously are the *Midnight University*, the *Assembly of the Poor*, the *Prachatai* website newspaper, new student groups and the *Peoples Coalition Party*.

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<sup>19</sup> *Post Today* 17 Nov 2004, In Thai.

In early December 2004, the Taksin government organised a campaign for millions of Thais to fold paper “peace birds”. Many Thais took part because they genuinely wanted peace. That is an encouraging factor. But for the government this was a public relations exercise in very poor taste. Originally, peace birds were folded in Japan by victims of violence to forgive those who had oppressed or wronged them. So the government campaign sent the message that the Muslims in the south were the violent wrong-doers and “we were forgiving them”. The air force dropped tons of paper bird litter on towns and villages in the South. And just in case locals were tempted to set fire to this insult, the government announced that paper birds could be collected and exchanged at government offices for free gifts. At the same time the government announced that it would strengthen the security forces and crackdown on “militants”.

After the February 2005 election *Thai Rak Thai* lost almost all seats in the South because of its policies. But it gained a huge overall majority nationally. The government established the *National Reconciliation Commission* under ex-Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun. He had served as a civilian PM under the military junta in 1991. Most people in the South doubted whether this commission would solve their problems. Anand was quoted in the press as saying that self-rule and autonomy were “out of the question” and that people should “forget” the *Takbai* masscre.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Anand’s remarks, the report of the *National Reconciliation Commission* came up with some progressive statements and suggestions.<sup>21</sup> Firstly, it stated that the problems in the South stemmed from the fact that there was a lack of justice and

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<sup>20</sup> *Bangkok Post* 10 August 2005, 9 May 2005.

<sup>21</sup> See the report by the *National Reconciliation Commission*, 16 May 2006. In Thai.



respect and that the government was not pursuing a peaceful solution. It went on to describe how the government had systematically abused human rights and was engaged in extrajudicial killings. The Commission suggested that local communities in the South be empowered to control their own natural resources, that Civil Society play a central part in creating justice and that the local *Yawee* language be used as a working language, alongside Thai, in all government departments. The latter suggestion on language is vital if local people are not to be discriminated against, especially by government bodies. Yet it was quickly rejected by both Taksin and Privy Council Chairman General Prem Tinsulanon.<sup>22</sup>

The only long-term solution to the violence in the south of Thailand is to address the genuine concerns of local people and to set up structures where people can determine their own future. People must have the right to self-determination in whatever form they choose. They have the right to establish a separate state if that is what they want. A solution can only be achieved by open democratic discussion. But nothing can be achieved at all so long as there is a repressive security law, an armed occupation of the area by the police and army and a continuing atmosphere of state violence. The military coup in September 2006 only made matters worse.

We cannot build peace when there is lack of punishment for politicians, senior army and police officers who commit state crimes. Many important issues have to be addressed about culture and nationalism. Attempts to destroy local identities and beliefs because of narrow minded nationalism are an obstacle to peace. Nationalism must be undermined.

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<sup>22</sup> *Bangkok Post* 26 and 27 June 2006.

The main-stream political parties offer no choice. Throughout the World the cause of peace must be taken up by the social movements and the political organisations of the Left. This is true of Thailand, we have a long way to go to build a strong united movement.

The southern violence must be solved by:<sup>23</sup>

1. Immediately scrapping repressive security laws and a return to democracy.
2. Withdrawal of troops and police from the area.
3. Setting up of political forums where local people can discuss what form of governance they wish to have. There must be no pre-conditions here, like saying that the boundaries of the present Thai border cannot be up for discussion.
4. The Thai state should recognise Islam as a religion with equal status to other beliefs, including Buddhism. Major Islamic festivals should be made national holidays and *yawee* should be recognised as an important language to be taught in schools and used in official institutions along side other minority languages.
5. There should be a public recognition of all state crimes and an independent investigation into state violence.

## **2. The New Years Eve 2006 Bombings**

On 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006 a number of bombs exploded in public places around Bangkok, killing 3 people and wounding a number of others. The military government immediately concluded that it “must” be the work of Taksin’s people. If their intelligence was that good that they needed no investigation, the question is: why did the junta do

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<sup>23</sup> See the *Workers’ Democracy Group* pamphlet “*Why the Thai State is the source of violence in the 3 Southern provinces.*” June 2005. (In Thai).

nothing to protect the population? The obvious answer is that they didn't care about ordinary people. One state security official was quoted as saying that compared to December 2005, when rubbish bins were removed from public spots and there was tight security, in 2006 hardly any measures were taken. In 2005 the threat was perceived to be from Southern militants. The lack of action and the immediate conclusion by the junta that the bombs were not the work of Southern militants is surprising, given that there were 73 violent incidents associated with the South in the first 25 days of December 2006, compared to 45 incidents in the whole month of December 2005. In addition to this, state agencies in the South had been quietly warning that there would be increased militant activity between 27<sup>th</sup> December 2006 and 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2007.

At time of writing it was not possible to know for sure who was behind the bombings. Judging by the previous record of Thai governments we may never know. However, there was an important reason why the junta denied the Southern connection. They had been wanting to create the image that they were solving the problem of the Southern violence by staging the coup.

At time of writing there were 3 theories about who might have planted the bombs.

- 1. Taksin's supporters?** Naturally the junta wanted to blame Taksin and his supporters. Its sole legitimising factor for the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup was the "evil" of Taksin. They also wanted to "prove" that they had "solved" the Southern violence by sending Prime Minister Surayud down South to say "sorry". The question to be addressed regarding this theory is why would *Thai Rak Thai* plant bombs? One reason might be to discredit the present government's ability in providing law and order and stability. But they would need to be able to

benefit from discrediting the junta. T.R.T.'s strategy in the past was always about winning votes. They could not even organise villagers to stage anti-coup demonstrations. The bombs were much more likely to push the electorate, especially the Bangkok middle classes, further into the arms of the junta. It might well harm their votes in other areas as well. TRT would gain nothing unless it could organise a counter-coup. Yet if it had that ability, why did it not use military force to resist the 19<sup>th</sup> September coup in the first place? Without a clear idea about how *Thai Rak Thai* people would benefit, one could only justify the theory that Taksin's supporters were behind the bombs purely for "revenge" by believing that Taksin and his cronies were evil madmen.

- 2. The Junta planted the bombs themselves?** Certainly it was a prime opportunity to further slander Taksin and also an excuse to increase their dictatorial powers, possibly extending the junta's rule. But it made the junta government look very bad because it couldn't control law and order and protect the population. Some people claimed it was an "internal dispute" among the military junta itself over positions and economic interests. Discrediting the junta appointed government would be an excuse for a second coup, according to this view. This might make sense, but why should it be more plausible than the Southern insurgency?

Supporters of the "elite theory" believe that only elite disputes explain changes in society. They claimed that the Southerners would not be able to find their way round Bangkok! They also said that technically they were not up to making such bombs. But there was little evidence to support this. Junta head Sonti Boonyaratgalin himself claimed that Southern militants would get lost in Bangkok.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Bangkok Post* 11 January 2007.

He is obviously unaware of the huge Muslim community, which includes many Southerners, around *Ramkamhaeng* University.

What is interesting and appalling about both the first two theories is not only that they are *equally* plausible, but that if one was actually correct, the bombs would have been planted by soldiers or ex-soldiers. This says something very important about the terrible nature of the army in Thai society.

**3. The Southern insurgents?** The junta immediately claimed that the bombs were nothing to do with the South. How can they have possibly known so soon? After the coup, the junta continued with a violent military solution in the South, rather than a peaceful political one. Therefore the Southern insurgents, and the population as a whole, had every reason to hate both the T.R.T. and military governments. The politics of the Southern militants also make them see the Bangkok population as “oppressing Thais”. That the Southern Insurgency should spread to Bangkok would not have surprised many who have been concerned about state oppression in the Southern border region for many years. What about the official denial by PULO that they were behind the bombs? PULO were probably not behind the bombings, but as explained earlier, PULO do not have control over many of the young insurgents. Some commentators believe that the Southern insurgents have a specific style which involves planting a number of low powered coordinated bombs attacks aimed at killing small numbers of people and creating fear. This would fit with the Bangkok bombings.<sup>25</sup> The R.K.K. certainly have a record of planting multiple coordinated bomb blasts in the South.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> B.Raman, South Asia Analysis Group Papers No. 1958 & 2080 <http://www.saag.org/>

<sup>26</sup> The B.B.C. report by Kate McGeown, posted on the B.B.C. website 7 August 2006. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/>

At time of writing, the Southern Insurgency was the most likely explanation for the bombings. But without more evidence it can only remain a guess and could be wrong. Yet what is clear from the bombs is the long-running crisis of violence in Thai society. Despite being a so-called Buddhist society, Thailand has a very violent history.

The *Sakdina* period, before Capitalism, was a period of permanent war and slavery in the pursuit of labour power. This ended with the arrival of Capitalism and Western Imperialism. But the New Order of the Nation State destroyed old communities and forced a diverse population into national conformity. It destroyed the *Pattani* Sultanate. The violence of the military dictatorships in the 1960s and 1970s is the subject of other chapters in this book. The coup of 19<sup>th</sup> September 2006 was yet another violent act. The junta has connections with the violence committed by the military in 1992. Taksin's response to the December 2006 bombings was to condemn the junta for being "too soft" on the Southern Militants.<sup>27</sup> The Thai State continues to use violence in the South. On the issue of the War on Drugs, where Taksin had previously ordered the extra-judicial killing of over 3,000 people, the junta suggested that court cases for drug crimes be "speeded up" in the interests of "efficiency".<sup>28</sup> The bombings arose from this cycle of state violence. What it means is that we must fight against state violence in all forms. We must campaign against coups. We have to reduce the size and role of the army. We must promote peace and social justice, and what is extremely important is, that we must prevent the state further curtailing freedom and democracy.

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Taksin, written on 2 January 2007 in Beijing, posted on *Prachatai* website newspaper.[http:// www.prachatai.com](http://www.prachatai.com)

<sup>28</sup> *Bangkok Post* 3/1/07.

If the direct violence of the Thai State were not enough, its disregard for public safety, in the interests of profit, further subjected people to the violence of nature.

### **3. The Tsunami was natural, but its effects were not**

Natural disasters, such as violent storms, earthquakes and tsunamis may have natural causes, but the effects are never just the results of natural accidents. The effects of nature on humans are determined by class society and the priorities given to ordinary peoples' lives, both in the short term and long term. In the case of the Asian Tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, there are at least half a dozen human-made factors which helped to determine the impact of this tragedy.

Firstly, and most importantly, the tsunami would have killed far less people if a proper early-warning system had been put in place like in the Pacific. On one Indonesian island off Sumatra local people remembered tales told to them by their ancestors of the effects of earthquakes on the sea. On feeling the tremors they ran to the hills and many survived the tsunami. But most other people in the region did not have this information. Unlike the Pacific, which has regular tsunamis, the last one in the Indian Ocean around Sumatra was over a hundred years ago. However, only one year before the tsunami, Asian leaders collectively rejected a proposal from meteorologists and geologists to set up a tsunami warning system due to the "high cost". A leading meteorologist in Thailand had been warning for years that the island of Phuket faced the danger of a tsunami. No one listened to him. This is yet another example of neoliberal fiscal discipline where state funding for the benefit of people is cut back, often at a very high cost to everyone.

Even without a modern warning system, the authorities in all countries were in a position to send out calls for evacuation. The tsunami centre in Hawaii knew about the danger but claimed it “did not know whom to contact”. Lists of international government telephone numbers cannot be hard to find on the Internet. Sri Lanka and India would have had 3 hours notice to evacuate. Worst still, the Thai meteorological office also had about 1 hours notice of a tsunami threat, but after an emergency meeting, they decided to down play the danger and failed to inform the authorities. Upper-most in their minds was “the risk” of a negative impact of a “false alarm” on the lucrative tourist industry.

The second factor determining the impact of such a disaster is the development of global capitalism. This has both positive and negative impacts. Part of the reason why Thailand suffered less than Aceh or Sri Lanka, despite the appalling losses in Thailand, was the fact that the Thai economy was more developed. The damage to infrastructure was less. People can withstand the impact of disasters better if they live in stronger houses and do not need to scrape for a living in small boats, living in flimsy huts on the coast. Nearby towns can come to the rescue much faster. However, despite capitalism’s potential to help humans withstand disasters, the problem is that globalisation does not bring development to all parts of society. Much inequality remains and the poor suffer most. Not only this, the rapid development of tourism meant that many more tourists and workers in the tourist industry were placed in the path of danger. Does this mean, as some would argue, that we shouldn’t develop the economy and shouldn’t develop tourism? The answer isn’t that simple. Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra was the worst hit. It has no developed tourist industry. Tourism is not just about profit, it is about leisure and happiness. Ordinary people, if they have a decent life style, can enjoy the benefits of holidays. Global Warming and the



rise in the level of the sea could be critical in some instances of a tsunami. That is why the actions of Western governments in rejecting serious measures to curb global warming are criminal. But Global Warming was not the main issue in the recent Asian Tsunami. Building standards have to be improved for both local housing and tourist resorts and early-warning systems and proper evacuation and emergency procedures are important.

Global capitalism has given us the means to reduce the impact of natural disasters, but left to itself, left to the free market and left to the priorities of capitalist governments, the huge potential of capitalism will never be used for the benefit of the majority of humans. Therefore, our struggles from below do matter.

The third factor which determines the impact of disasters is class struggle, or the level of resistance against the state by ordinary people. Many of the countries which were affected by the tsunami are not poor. India is a nuclear super-power. Thailand is a rapidly developing nation. The problem is the distribution of wealth and power in class society. Where class struggle has been more successful we have managed to force the bosses to allocate more resources for human development. Decent emergency services and welfare states are in place because ordinary working people have demanded and fought for a better quality of life. This is not yet the case in Asia. No country in the area has a welfare state or a properly organised emergency service. There are almost no public ambulances.

The Thai government spends millions on the military, yet this huge military is there to guard the interests of the ruling class, not to protect the ordinary population. In the past it has gunned-down pro-democracy protesters. The military was not fully mobilised to deal with this disaster. For example, three navy ships remained

guarding the King's palace at Hua Hin, rather than urgently steaming round to the West coast to help with the disaster. The massive number of Thai troops stationed in the three Southern border provinces, "to fight terrorism", were not moved. The government did not properly coordinating relief for villagers which survived the tsunami. There were tales of Muslim communities receiving pork rations. Huge piles of unsorted donated second hand clothes lay in tents un-touched.

Indonesia has one of the largest armies in the world, yet it did not urgently and fully mobilise to help those in Sumatra. Instead of heavy machinery, people were forced to use elephants to clear wreckage. Governments increase the tax burden on the poor in order to pay for reconstruction. There were proposals in Indonesia to scrap government subsidies on fuel and petrol. The I.M.F. had long been demanding this. In fact, attempts to scrap fuel subsidies led to the movement which overthrew the Suharto dictatorship in the late 1990s. In Burma, the repressive military dictatorship claimed that only a "handful" of people had died. The defeat of the pro-democracy movement in 1988 meant that the Burmese government not only does nothing to help the majority of the population, but it can seal off the country behind a wall of silence. Racism in Thailand meant that many of the hundreds of Burmese fishermen, working on Thai boats and the hundreds of hotel workers who were killed in the tsunami, were never identified. Their families back home never received news of their loved ones.

After the tsunami struck, the human vultures moved in. Capitalists stepped in to steal land from villagers who had lost their homes. The forces of the state were behind the capitalists. The tsunami was a further excuse to dispossess the sea-going ethnic minorities who lived along the coast. The power of money has no moral conscience or pity.

Imperialism was a fourth factor affecting the impact of the tsunami. Imperialism has many levels. Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand are “mini-imperialists”. The central governments in these countries must “prove” to the world that they can “control and govern” all areas within their borders. This is vital to the interests of their small local companies on a world stage and vital in attracting foreign investment in an era of globalisation. No foreign capitalists will take a small state seriously if they can’t control their own borders. This is why the Indonesia state cannot allow real independence for Aceh, the Sri Lankan state cannot allow independence for the Tamils and the Thai state cannot allow autonomy or independence for the Southern Muslim provinces. Civil wars in these regions waste important resources, just like the U.S. and British imperialist war in Iraq. The local conditions become an excuse for government inaction in Aceh and Sri Lanka. And the tsunami was used by the Indonesian state to force a compromise out of the Free Aceh Movement.

This brings us to consider what our attitude should be to the U.S. military’s humanitarian efforts after the tsunami and other disasters. Not surprisingly, many socialists and anti-imperialists saw this as “hypocrisy” and wanted their governments not to cooperate with such efforts. But just stop to think for one second what we would feel if U.S. military shipments of clean water, medicines and food made the difference between life and death for our children and loved ones. Naturally, we should not go overboard and heap praise on U.S. imperialism for this action. We have to point out that more should have been done and that the U.S., as the richest and most powerful nation on earth should have contributed the most. But we should never call for a rejection of such urgently needed aid.

The same attitude goes for the big corporations, many of which tried to show their generosity in public relations exercises. When death

and destruction come, the corporations are quick to take advantage. In Thailand, TV news about the disaster carried advertisements for products in the corner of the screen. Private airlines rushed to advertise themselves by announcing that they were offering free flights for the victims or doctors. Big companies were quick to advertise their unusual generosity, not normally shown when it comes to paying wages or destroying local peoples' lives in the pursuit of profit. Political parties and local bosses fought over the use of aid as a methods of increasing their influence. The dead were not yet in the ground, but the business news reports discussed the ups and downs of stock markets and the effects on the tourist industry. We must demand that the corporations give more in the long term. They must pay higher wages, improve conditions and be taxed at a much higher rate.

We can take heart in looking at the true spirit of humanity. After the tsunami millions of ordinary people around the world were overwhelmed with grief and sympathy for fellow human beings of all races, nationalities and religions. The British R.A.F. crew, which flew relief supplies into Aceh, felt that their missions were "the most worthwhile things that they had ever done". It is difficult to recall any military personnel saying this about war. People from the town of Beslan, who previously lost their children in a terrorist attack, donated all they could. Millions of ordinary people rush to help their fellow humans when disaster strikes. Donations of blood, food, medicines pour in. So do offers of help. All this flies in the face of those who mock us when we talk about a new world of human solidarity. Yes, ordinary people together can build a better world. But first we have to get rid of the blood-suckers who rule us and force us to fight wars and often make us behave in a selfish and hateful manner to our fellow human beings.

But confronting our ruling classes and changing the system means challenging the ruling ideology and the power of the ruling class.

Without challenging ruling class ideas, the anger of those who suffer will be turned in on ourselves. Local Thai villagers said that the government helped foreign tourists more than local Thais. This might have been true, but it was not the fault of the tourists. Some started to hate foreigners. Racists and nationalists will always attempt to divert anger from the real target; class society. Others will be impressed by the apparent generosity of people at the top, and that will reinforce the idea that “we are all in this together” and that the Great and Powerful are our saviours. Yet others will sink into despair and unnecessary guilt, often seeking supernatural solutions to their sorrow. That is why we must continue political debate, discussion and strengthen organisations and our determination to struggle for a better World.

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