

Considering a holiday to the most recently established military dictatorship in the world? Don't forget your sunscreen. The reaction to the military coup that ousted ex Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from his position in the Thailand government, and placed the nation into the hands of a military dictatorship could not have been any less as citizens and tourists alike emerged from their houses, hotels and bars on September 19 to find the army - featuring tanks wearing large yellow bows - had taken power.

The bloodless coup was met with confusion & slight amusement from the Thai's in Bangkok, most of them relatively pleased to see the hugely unpopular Thaksin ousted. The interest levels were even lower in many provinces of Thailand, and almost non-existent in the tourist area of Phuket, where many newspapers and other media outlets didn't even bother to report the incident. It seemed that it had been long knowledge that Thaksin was on his way out, and many were simply surprised that he wasn't assassinated in the process. During his five years of reign in Thailand, Thaksin shifted from being the popularly elected businessman that promised to pull Thailand onto the path of economic recovery in the wake of the Asian Economic Crisis, to the hated tyrant who refused to step down from power, despite nationwide boycotts of the most recent election (from which the results were eventually declared invalid).

Thaksin's government, whilst in power became central to some of the toughest attacks on civil liberties Thailand has ever seen. Thaksin oversaw many policies that at first glance read like checkboxes of any western imperialist nation in the last ten years – war on drugs, radical changes to education & health, and war on terror. But unlike Thailand – particularly the southern provinces - the difference was that we in western nations didn't have these policies delivered to us at the business end of a gun. Since 2004, thousands have died in the southern provinces, Pattani, in Thailand. It's in this region that the Muslim & Hindi populations are based, but more importantly, and historically, this is an area of land populated by Malay Muslims once ruled by the British, and eventually annexed by the Kingdom of Thailand. The Pattani's ongoing struggle for independence was systematically portrayed as extremist Islam by Thaksin, and they suffered horrendously at his government's hands, and withstood several massacres in the name of 'war on drugs', 'war on terror' and oddly, 'war on communism'. It was these actions that led Thaksin to committing Thai troops to Iraq in alliance with the UK & US troops, reinforcing the ideals of fighting 'terrorists' to the Thai population.

Thaksin had some early successes in this campaign of discrimination, but when his other popular policies of universal healthcare and loan repayment freezes to the northern regions started to collapse under the economic impracticality of such implementations, criticism from the population mounted. The icing on the cake, so to speak, for Thaksin's governance was his sale of his controlling share of telco Shin Corporation to the Singapore government. This was seen as further evidence of the corrupt Thaksin's business dealings which were seen as being in conflict with furthering Thailand as a nation. The workers of Thailand were systematically placed under attack by the Thaksin government, particularly those in health and education. Thaksin's policy on universal healthcare left medical care centres poorly funded and staffed, and actually increased the amount the average Thai would pay to receive adequate healthcare, as they would have to seek external, private healthcare to cater for their needs. On the education front, Thaksin's policies would see schools decentralised to regions in a way that forced some schools to overextend themselves to meet legislation, and threw some 700,000 teachers out of the civil service, into private employment. Management of the schools was transferred from the Ministry of Education to the regional Tambon Administrative Organisations; underfunded, not adequately trained or resourced, and with little experience in managing education.

The fightback against Thaksin had begun, and took on many forms. Student and worker groups widely acknowledged the freedom fight taking place in the south, and supported the Pattani people, while criticizing the Thaksin government more broadly for their anti-worker, anti-student, and economically irresponsible and conflicted governance. These groups called on the Thaksin government to step down from power and for normal elections to be called sans Thaksin and his party. The other, more dominant and vocal wing of the anti-Thaksin movement was broadly co-ordinated by the PAD (People Alliance for Democracy), who called upon the vastly popular royal family to intervene, to throw out Thaksin and take power for themselves – reverting Thailand to an absolute monarchy. The King of Thailand publicly rejected this idea, yet the PAD continued to campaign for Royal power. Prior to the coup, the demonstrations of people from both of these wings, often united, had reached a peak and were occurring constantly - the PAD alone organised over 35 'Thaksin Out' rallies in 2006.

But it was not these groups that sparked the September coup that did finally oust Thaksin. It was the army general Sondhi Boonyaratglin who had long been in critical opposition to Thaksin. Counting on some support from leading PAD members, Sonthi seized power only to find that many of the PAD, and other progressive figures lined up to become government officials did not approve of the coup, and considered it anti-democratic.

Today, student and workers organisations are organising rallies to call for the coup relinquish power and call for democratic elections as early as possible, along with the restoration of the constitution. The people of Thailand need to make it heard that they do not accept the ruling of a self imposed military dictatorship, no matter the popularity of the preceding government. It's time for the people of Thailand to organise with the students and workers and claim Thailand for their own – Thaksin out, king out, and military dictatorship out for freedom.

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