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The Conflict in Thailand: Cultural Roots and The Middle Way Solution

By Jeffrey Race

Synopsis

The Thai Government has imposed a state of emergency in Bangkok and its immediate surroundings for 60 days to end the demonstrations and blockade of the city aimed at bringing down Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. A veteran political observer in Bangkok analyses the historical and cultural factors underlying the protests and discusses a possible solution to the imbroglio through the Thai Middle Way. This is the first part of an abridged version of the article first published by the Asia Times Online on 13 January 2014 as 'History Shows Way Out of Thai Conflict'.

Commentary

DEPOSED FORMER prime minister police lieutenant colonel Thaksin Shinawatra brought something new to Thailand. It is what is preventing a peaceful settlement of the conflict now raging in Bangkok's streets, and it is not his political opening to the rural underclass as the press and public commentary superficially explain.

News coverage and editorial comment in the world press are both devoting increasing attention to the current conflict, now headed for a 2 February election which the main opposition party will boycott. Local Bangkok press and public personalities are vigorously critical of much international coverage as ignorant and distorted by the obsessions and political histories of completely different cultures.

Need for deeper understanding of conflict

Unsolicited comments by foreign officials have further inflamed local sentiment. Foreign coverage typically casts the conflict as a struggle for advantage between social classes. While that aspect exists, such superficiality misses other planes of the conflict, obscuring how it might end in a way consistent with Thai culture and history.

The current conflict has brought hundreds of thousands into Bangkok's streets periodically since 2006, coalescing around two great coalitions that are struggling to control the Thai state - a cornucopia of tangible benefits. Within just a few years as prime minister before his 2006 fall from power, Thaksin rose to become one of the richest men in Asia.

In a pattern common to Thai politics, one coalition is thus centered on a party, originally Thai Rak Thai before its judicial dissolution in 2007 for electoral misconduct, then the People's Power Party, and now Puea Thai, or

"For the Thai", as the vehicle to advance the interests of the Shinawatra clan and associates.

Puea Thai and its previous incarnations have attracted many financially and politically influential supporters who have calculated that this tie-up will pay more than the alternatives. This party now dominates the state, more strongly in the civilian ministries, less in the military and quasi-independent agencies. While ornamented with such emotive terms as "democracy", "justice" and "the public welfare", its leaders have no goal other than personal benefit. But this is the norm of politics in every country, though definitions vary from place to place as to what is legitimate and what not.

Thaksin's variously named parties are the only recent political force to push policies bringing substantial and genuine uplift to rural areas. At the same time, many of their policies were and are specious, unsupportable in the long run, and fountains of self-serving corruption.

His party vehicles excite the imagination and galvanise public involvement in political demonstrations of those lower in the social scale often from economically stressed regions. These are the so-called "Red Shirts", who began their 2010 demonstrations in the normally polite Thai mode but ended up torching the World Trade Centre and other buildings in the middle of Bangkok and as victims of state violence.

On the other side are hundreds of thousands of people now occupying central Bangkok, whom the Thais genially call the "mob" although they usually are well behaved. Over the years they have been inspired by figures generally from the business community and in some cases with previous ties to political parties opposing Thaksin's family vehicle. High-level financing is clear to the naked eye, including free meals, sophisticated transport systems for protesters, communications equipment, a satellite TV channel and 72-inch LCD monitors placed throughout the assembly areas.

The financiers are generally those squeezed out by the Shinawatra plan to dominate the local economy through a series of monopolies and concessions, or what informed commentators and Thai academics call "policy corruption". Only occasionally are figures from these financier families seen at the public demonstrations. The bulk of the "mob" consists of people from all walks of life, mainly from Bangkok, surrounding areas and southern provinces. This writer witnessed streaming towards the old palace area on Rajdamnoen Road young and old people, the well dressed and the simply dressed, people walking, riding bikes and scooters or driving expensive SUVs, mostly Thai Buddhists, but many, from their attire, clearly Muslims. They were universally in a jolly mood.

A salient aspect of this "mob" is its high-status leaders, the ones who provide the legitimacy and cover for the lower-status members to occupy public spaces. They are not motivated by material interests but, like volunteers participating in local politics everywhere, by a craving for excitement, fun with friends and involvement in some uplifting public purpose. Understanding the motives and the minimal position of these high-status legitimators is key to perceiving the future of this struggle.

Ruling patterns and the Middle Way

Thais differ culturally from every other people in ways that are important for economics, politics and, above all, personal relations. Every aspect of life is influenced by Theravada Buddhist concepts of the Noble Eightfold Path and the Middle Way.

At the apex of society sits the king, who in a classical Indic pattern but of intense relevance today must reign (formerly rule) according to the Ten Kingly Virtues. His ministers may be imperfect but he sets the moral tone of the community which ensures the survival of the state. Without understanding these matters one will not get far in understanding Thai politics or the possibilities for the present situation.

Control of the modern Thai state has been through a gentlemanly alternation of elites, the composition of which has gradually changed since the end of absolute royal rule in the early 1930s. In keeping with the Middle Way, political figures have been moderately corrupt but with sensitivity to the transience of life (again a Buddhist notion) and thus the need eventually to move on with what one has accumulated, or even give it up.

No one until recently attempted to dominate either the state or the economy. Sometimes the politically powerful required a nudge (public demonstrations, tanks in the streets, a whisper from the king), but Thai politics continued its circulation of elites so everyone had a chance for a piece of the pie.

Thaksin's rise and fall

A clever manipulator but lacking in judgment and common sense, Thaksin left police service while still young to pursue a variety of commercial ventures which fared poorly until he found a winning formula: a series of sweetheart deals with the government. First was the supply of Motorola radios to the police, and then

distribution of Motorola mobile handsets to the Thai market, at a time when Motorola was the industry leader. But Thaksin again had a gimmick to enrich his family: locking the sale of cellular service (via the GSM SIM card) to the sale of the user's handset.

This violated an international agreement but it succeeded in raising local handset prices to three times their international level, with the increment (on Motorola handsets) going to Thaksin's family and yet more captive customer money going to Advanced Information Service (AIS), his family's cellular firm at the time.

This monopoly arrangement from early in Thaksin's political career prefigures the manipulation and abuse of market processes which characterise Thaksin's and his affiliated political party's current approach to public policy. Nonetheless, Thaksin's energy and persuasive demeanour led to political roles of increasing importance in which he clearly distinguished himself as a "can-do" figure capable of energising the then-sluggish state bureaucracy.

After Thaksin's push for bureaucratic streamlining and rejuvenation, Thai citizens experienced a dramatic improvement in daily dealings with officialdom. Thaksin built around himself the Thai Rak Thai Party, a vehicle to enrich his family and associates in a very traditional Thai pattern. But against tradition, this coalition of interests began to squeeze all sectors of the economy and polity. The public wherewithal to do this came from a series of populist policies still paying electoral benefits today.

Some see Thaksin's unwillingness to compromise, unwillingness to move on and "winner takes all" obsessions in both politics and the economy as growing out of his unhappy treatment as a youth in a family of Chinese origin in Northern Thailand. Whatever the source, Thaksin's motivations and resulting actions led to his rejection by powerful elements of Thai society, uneasy with unprecedented corruption and with his tense relationship with the present monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

He was overthrown in a coup d'etat in 2006, following which investigations into misconduct in office led to his criminal conviction for abuse of power and seizure of part of his ill-gotten fortune. His party was deregistered due to extensively documented violations of the law. Thaksin fled abroad in 2008 to avoid imprisonment from where he has financed and directed the reconstruction of policies and political vehicles to continue his rule over Thailand, most recently installing his younger sister, Yingluck, as his proxy prime minister after Puea Thai won mid-2011 elections.

Yingluck's government is working hard using perfected "policy corruption" techniques to maintain a torrent of funding to the Shinawatra family and friends. Tried and true populist policies keep the votes coming in. Many of his Red Shirt followers accept that of course Thaksin is corrupt; that's the whole point of being in office in Thailand. But at least he gives them something in return, not just hope but also substantial life improvements.

Jeffrey Race is a Harvard-trained political analyst and Bangkok-based business consultant. To be continued in Part II. Copyright 2014 Jeffrey Race. Related material appears at <<http://jeffreyrace.com>>