



## Response to PacNet #11 “Class, Economy, Monarchy: Thailand’s Multidimensional Malaise”

by Termsak Chalermphanupap

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David Camroux mentioned in “Class, Economy, Monarchy: Thailand’s Multidimensional Malaise” (*PacNet* #11) the paddy/rice pawning scheme, which the IMF says should stop. In fact the scheme deserves much more attention. It is riddled with organized corruption and it shows how much damage the money politics of the “Thaksin Regime” has created in Thailand.

It is much easier to understand the uprising against the “Thaksin Regime” as a fight for national political survival against money politics and abuse of power, which the corruption in the paddy/rice pawning scheme exemplifies.

Western academics are fond of speculating about the Thai monarchy. The “Thaksin Regime” is undoubtedly anti-monarchy. Many “Red Shirt” leaders who are part of the “Thaksin Regime” have openly insulted H.M. the King. But this is not, and I believe it should not be, the main issue in this struggle.

Still, as a Thai, I would insist that this is a fight between a broad-based and growing segment of newly awakened “Silent Thai Majority” against the “Thaksin Regime.” It is growing because now even government officials have openly declared their support for the protest. It is untrue to describe the protesters as mostly Bangkok middle-class or elites or royalists. One just need attend the nightly events in one of the seven protest sites in Bangkok to see who is taking part in this historic uprising. It is also untrue that they are provoking violence and inviting the military to seize power.

I wonder what David means by “soft policing.” Most police leaders have long been “bought” and co-opted into the “Thaksin Regime.” The Bangkok police chief in particular is well-known to have put on his office wall a big photo of Thaksin pinning the stars of a police lieutenant general on his uniform. The Thai caption on the controversial photo says something like “*I have this day because you [my elder brother] gives me.*” Most police leaders are keen to arrest the protest leaders and crush the protesters. But they cannot act just yet because they don’t have support of the Thai military. Thaksin himself was once a police officer (a lieutenant colonel). He even thought about mobilizing the police to resist the military coup against him on Sept. 19-20, 2006.

The so-called “State of Emergency” is a farce. It has neither intimidated the protest leaders nor ended violence

against protesters. Harassment bombings and drive-by shootings (including the use of an M79 grenade launcher) have continued. The police could only say unknown “third hands” were their prime suspects. But there have been no arrests. Recently, a plainclothes police detective was caught by protest guards after he shot two protesters at a rally. He was beaten by guards who didn’t know he was a policeman. He carried an 11mm automatic pistol, four home-made bombs, and dressed in black with a motorcycle taxi vest for disguise. He was seen taking out his pistol and guards came after him. The official police version of the event: the detective was on an intelligence-gathering mission; he refused to be searched and ran; he shot in self-defense when pursued; he had no formal instruction to carry firearms. In the eyes of the protesters, the credibility of the Thai police is now zero. The police are actually behind the “third hands” harassing and hurting the protesters.

Money politics in Thailand has gone from bad to worse. Last year Transparency International ranked Thailand 102<sup>nd</sup> among 177 countries in terms of corruption perception; in 2012, Thailand ranked 88<sup>th</sup> among 174 countries. In 2012, about 370 billion baht (\$12 billion) was spent in the paddy/rice pawning scheme; another 405 billion baht (\$13 billion) in 2013. The government still owes Thai farmers 130 billion baht (about \$4 billion). The protesters want to know how much rice the government actually has (farmers can pawn either paddy or rice; pawned paddy will be milled into rice for storage; if farmers don’t come buy back their rice in four months, the rice belongs to the government; few farmers if any want to buy back their rice because the government price is much higher than the market).

The Yingluck Shinawatra administration stonewalled all attempts, including those of the National Anti-Corruption Commission, to seek information on the rice in government storage on the ground that it is a “national secret.” The real secret, as academics who studied the scheme have reported, is that the government has much less than the estimated 18 million tons of rice that it should have; worse, a sizeable portion of the rice in storage is sub-standard. Politicians on the government side and their cronies used low-quality paddy and rice to cash in on the scheme. This is one reason why the government has failed to unload its growing rice stock in overseas markets. The cost is too high and it cannot compete with Vietnam.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission recently ruled that the government’s claim of a G-to-G contract to sell 5 million tons of rice to China was fictitious, and held a former commerce minister and 15 other senior officials responsible for the lie. Yingluck also faces an inquiry of the Commission for the many irregularities in the paddy/rice pawning scheme.

One former finance minister has put the loss in this shameful scheme at 450 billion baht (\$15 billion)! This is why the IMF says it should stop. Indeed the Yingluck administration had ended the scheme, even though it was one of her party's flagship campaign promises to buy every grain of rice produced in the country to end Thai poverty.

One important point is that rejecting the Feb. 2 general election is not anti-democracy. Rather, it is anti-money politics. This is why the protesters want comprehensive political reform to clean up Thai politics first; then a cleaner general election can be held. If the massive corruption in the paddy/rice pawning scheme can be exposed, then the "Thaksin Regime" will face the wrath of the Thai farmers who form the backbone of the Silent Thai Majority.

Cronies of the "Thaksin Regime" say let the voters decide; respect their votes. This sounds logical. But votes are respectable only when voters cast them responsibly and don't sell their votes. More importantly, voters should try to follow the news to see what their elected representatives in the House of Representatives and their government leaders are doing. Are they serving public and national interests? Or are they enriching themselves and promoting the "Thaksin Regime"?

The "Thaksin Regime" wants to return to power through the Feb 2 general election, so that it can stop or delay all corruption investigations, and feast on two new major government spending schemes: 2 trillion baht (\$67 billion) of infrastructure investments until 2020, and a dubious 350 billion baht (\$11 billion) project of water management and flood prevention. If they can just skim 10 percent from these two, they will be \$7.8 billion richer – more than enough to buy a few more general elections. (The current kickback rate in government projects is reportedly much higher than 10 percent; some would say 20-40 percent because of political instability and increased public scrutiny.) Unscrupulous elected politicians will try to make as much money as quickly as possible.

The protesters are demanding better democracy, not less democracy. Better democracy is when elected representatives and government leaders can be held accountable. Better democracy is when an elected government earns legitimacy by serving public and national interests. Better democracy is when an elected government that has lost legitimacy through abuse of power and violation of the Constitution can be unseated by peaceful means.

Thailand deserves better democracy. Money politics by the "Thaksin Regime" must be stopped for good.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*