



Looking back at the coup: *Déjà vu* or the end of democracy? by Gary Kawaguchi

Foreigners were surprised that many Thais welcomed the Sept. 19, 2006 coup in Thailand. The slight tension that developed seemed to have dissipated within days and replaced with a feeling of relief and a sense that the country had been given a reprieve. Martial law was announced and enforced, but selectively. There was little restriction of the press and restrictions on assembly for political purposes were not enforced unless the groups were advocates of the ousted regime. Many letters critical of the military government were published. Most people worried about their daily lives and didn't think much about the freedoms being restricted; to be honest, it was difficult to figure out what freedoms were lost.

Discussion of the coup has focused on whether it bodes ill for the budding democratic institutions that the state has been nurturing. In the short run, democracy has been dealt a blow with the takeover and imposition of martial law. But democracy was pretty beaten by the time of the coup. The situation is much more nuanced than the Western press seems to appreciate. Now, the military government is in the process of ceding authority to a civilian government and promised to hold elections, even though many military governments have said the same things. Most people seem optimistic that democracy will return.

One element that has to be factored in is the people's ability to influence the state, outside their role as voters. Extra-electoral actions, such as demonstrations that led to the overthrow of the previous government, are regarded as disruptive and outside the "natural" political – electoral – sphere. In the run up to the coup, outside observers seemed impatient with demonstrators against Thaksin, who seemed unable to accept his landslide victory.

Overlooked was Thaksin's reaction to a hostile opposition: he blocked efforts to oppose, investigate, or censure him. He controlled the police, the legislature, and the courts. He brought criminal defamation lawsuits against persistent opponents. As demonstrations mounted, he dissolved Parliament and called a snap election in which his Thai Rak Thai (Thai love Thai, or Thai people love Thailand) party was nearly unopposed because of a boycott by opposition parties. And despite allegations of electoral fraud, the election commission inexplicably has not found any cases of vote buying or any other illegalities, despite investigations after every election. In the last election, the commission ordered that voting booths be arranged so that it would be easy to tell who people were voting for for the sake of "transparency." To accept the outcome of such an election was unacceptable to many.

Thais are predisposed to respecting and deferring to authority. They will not challenge authority easily or capriciously. They will tolerate repressive regimes for long periods of time before a mass movement rises to resist. But when a tipping point comes, things can happen very quickly. That happened at the beginning of this year when many people woke up to the fact that the Thaksin government had hijacked democratic institutions, obliterating the checks and balances outlined in the 1997 constitution. He had become a velvet-gloved Ferdinand Marcos, a patron from the provinces who became the top patron of the country. Using his deep pockets, he installed cronies in key positions in every institution except for the military, where for various reasons, he was unable to consolidate his power. His family and friends benefited greatly. But when he orchestrated the sale of his telecommunications company in a deal in which he and his family would maximize their profits and incur no tax liabilities, many people, especially among the educated urban elite, realized that they'd been robbed and that things could only get worse if they continued on current path. Possessing few legal or political ways to oppose the prime minister, they took to the streets.

The anti-Thaksin demonstrators were playing a role that they have assumed many times in the past – as critical players in politics who cannot depend on their leaders and their political institutions and need to take matters into their own hands. They have done so mostly nonviolently and most of the violence that has occurred has been perpetrated by the state.

So, while many of the Thais who were giving soldiers flowers, food, and drink might be celebrating their role as shapers of history, they were riding a wave of nostalgia in which they were introducing their kids, who had manned picket lines with them, to their future role. Demonstrations in Thailand are an established means of wresting power from dictators and coups have been a way, even though often violent (and always regrettable), to try to restore balance. The coup brought about the demise of the Thaksin era, and people should gird themselves for change. The future is uncertain, but forced changes in government are nothing new and the Thai people look forward to a future they can invest hope in.

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