



The political morning after the Thai coup

by Donald E. Weatherbee

Like partygoers who have indulged to excess in the spirit of the moment, Thai democrats are waking up the morning after to the realities of the event they had celebrated – the toppling of the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The animus felt by the opposition towards Thaksin was visceral, reminding an American of how bitter-ender Goreites feel towards George W. Bush. To the Bangkokian political cognoscenti, in addition to Thaksin's crass populism, disdain of the conventional bureaucratic-military-royal elite consensus, brush-off of academic critics, and Thai-businessman-like corner-cutting, his worst offense was to use Thailand's democracy to undo democracy by consolidating power, intimidating opponents, and manipulating ignorant voters. So, to save democracy, they applauded a "necessary coup," a "good coup." In the name of democracy, they cheered an unlawful use of illegitimate coercive force to overthrow a lawfully elected, legitimate government. But, perhaps the coup was legitimate – not in a democratic constitutional sense – but wrapped as it was in the aura of the palace. For the military, the most serious charge they laid against Thaksin was the threat to the sanctity of the monarchy. A new chapter can be added to Paul Handley's *The King Never Smiles*. Certainly the Privy Council does.

There is now growing concern outside the military that the "good coup" might be going "bad" and that the "necessary coup" is producing unintended and unwanted consequences. The junta promised to quickly step back and return the country to civilian authority but now two months later has done neither. Martial law and rule essentially by decree persist after two months with no definite end in sight. The public justification is the threat posed by Thaksin sympathizers in the countryside. Divisions within the Army appear also to be playing a role as officers with Thaksin ties are being purged. While the junta, which now calls itself the Council for National Security (CNS), defends its flanks, the government it appointed and instructs drifts with no real direction. The vaunted push for administrative reforms quickly petered out against the resistance of vested interests. The trumpeted attack on corruption has stalled. So far, legally it appears that Thaksin played by the Thai book – a little dog-eared and stained, perhaps – but nothing that other Thai politicians and hustling entrepreneurs have not done. To date there are no charges against him. The junta now stands accused of playing by the same book, naming double-dipping senior officers to directorships of state enterprises. The most important issue, however, is that there is no clear roadmap to the future.

The junta has promised a return to democratic rule – no date given. The question is how the transition will be made. The junta did not just dump Thaksin, they tore up the 1997

constitution that he was accused of abusing. This was the so called "People's Charter," the most democratic constitution in Southeast Asia. Rather than address the abuses, the junta promises a new constitution. The subtext is alarming for democrats; which is to take *poliica* power back from the people, particularly the rural majority, for fear of another Thaksin. So far unanswered is the question that if the existing political party and electoral system is to be junked, what will replace it. One hopes the junta is not taking a leaf out of their western neighbor's book. It already has been mooted that the military might sponsor their own political party.

The toppled Thaksin once, when chided about his end-runs around constitutional democratic safeguards, compared the 1997 constitution to a Rolls-Royce that can't be driven into a rural village to fix problems where a pickup truck or off-road vehicle will do. Meechai Ruchuphan, the junta's man leading the junta-appointed National Legislative Assembly in the initial stages of "restoring democracy," has used the same analogy: a Rolls-Royce that can't be used for farm work. If Thaksin's contempt for the principles of democracy is to be matched by the junta's, it is doubtful that civil society and the countryside will stand aside peacefully. One of Thailand's most respected young political scientists told me that if the junta continues on this track there will be an "explosion." What is most disheartening is the conclusion being drawn by some long-time democracy advocates that perhaps Thailand still is not ready for democracy.

Donald E. Weatherbee (donald.e.weatherbee@verizon.net) is a Donald S. Russell Professor Emeritus at the University of Carolina. This is an abridged version of a presentation made to the Columbia University Southeast Asia Seminar on 2 November 2006 after a post-coup visit to Bangkok.