

After the Uprising by Thitinan Pongsudhirak

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BANGKOK – For a fortnight before Thailand's rebellion was put down, the brutal axiom of Thai politics that the countryside elects governments but Bangkok gets to overthrow them was put to its litmus test. Tens of thousands of red-shirt protesters under the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) espousing upcountry messages and grievances against what they saw as systemic injustices and double standards had encircled Government House to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and members of the King's Privy Council who were deemed to have violated the constitution by masterminding the military coup in September 2006 and blatantly taking sides since.

But just as their opponents underestimated their pent-up rage and strength in numbers, the UDD leaders overestimated their ability to wage a spontaneous people's revolt and bring down not just the Abhisit government but also the establishment that traditionally rests on the monarchy, military, and bureaucracy, the holy trinity that has called the shots in Thailand for decades. After forcing the cancellation of the Asian summits, the red shirts ran amok on the Thai New Year on April 13, rioting, blocking traffic, commandeering buses, and torching public facilities in Bangkok in an effort to provoke the government and the army into an overreaction that would mobilize more reds into the streets, reinforced by UDD columns in major provinces in the north and northeast regions

The anarchy and mayhem doomed their months-long movement. Their moral high ground and the righteousness of their cause were quickly lost, replaced by public anger and backlash. As soldiers closed in on the desperate and cornered red shirts outside Government House, UDD leaders turned themselves into police custody on the following day. The physical toll included 123 injuries and two deaths, the latter involving local residents' clash with protesters.

This recent drama and brinkmanship was not unprecedented in Thailand's three-year crisis. A starkly opposed set of circumstances last year featured the pro-establishment yellow-shirt demonstrators under the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) who railed against two elected governments favored by the red shirts and aligned to Thaksin Shinawatra, a former premier turned fugitive now wanted by the Thai authorities. The army decidedly stayed on the sidelines while the PAD had its way with seizures of Government House and Bangkok's international airport last December. The army chief publicly suggested that the pro-

UDD prime minister at the time should resign in view of street protesters.

Ultimately, the Constitution Court dissolved the ruling party and left a vacuum for Abhisit to fill. To the reds, Abhisit's coalition government may have constitutionally coalesced in Parliament through the power brokerage of his Democrat Party's backers in the army, judiciary, and PAD, but its democratic credentials are tainted and incomplete. Thailand's contested democracy in the eyes of the UDD and beyond means that Establishment prerogatives and preferences have carried the day for too long.

While the red shirts have lost the battle, it would be mistaken to write off their crusade against gross injustices in Thai society – between the haves and have-nots, between the traditional elite and the governed – as long as they remain unrecognized and unaddressed. Elite consensus held Thailand together in years past and enabled remarkable economic development, but it is coming loose at the seams. New social strata and the bottom rungs of society want a louder voice and a greater share of the pie, and are decreasingly willing to accept outcomes determined by traditional power brokers at the top.

Having overcome an ominous uprising, Abhisit and his backers still appear reluctant to respect and recognize the claims and grievances of the red shirts. The pro-establishment bias in Thai society runs deep. Most movers and shakers have an incentive to see the Abhisit government succeed and to see Thailand move forward in a direction consistent with establishment interests. They heard the reds' noises but they discounted them on various grounds from gullibility and stupidity to financial opportunism. They resort to the comfort and convenience of seeing former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra as the sole force behind the reds. Now that Thaksin has been further disgraced and discredited during the red shirts' downfall, they will be tempted to conclude that all's normal, that the brief sound and fury seen in Thailand was just a passing nuisance.

But the reds represented more than Thaksin. Their quest for the will of the majority to shine in a genuine democracy was real and relentless. Their efforts came to naught this time, but the anti-establishment sentiments behind them are likely to fester until they find an outlet somewhere else sometime down the road. The undercurrents against establishment forces are deep and wide in Thailand. The lack of recognition and accommodation will make them pent-up and potent.

Thailand's ongoing transformation should not lead it to replicate the experience of Nepal, as the institution of the monarchy is integral to Thai history and identity. Nor does it want to follow in the footsteps of the Philippines, whose periodic people's power movements brought neither political stability nor economic vibrancy. And it should not turn the

clock all the way back to end up in comparison to Burma's military dictatorship. Indonesia's democratic transition after decades of autocratic rule offers hope. Somewhere out there lies Thailand's organic and optimal longer-term destination.

The onus for the way ahead now rest on Abhisit and his supporters. He should now reach out to the reds rather than to mop up their remnants. What is needed next is the willingness of establishment forces to make self-enlightened reforms, adjustments and concessions in coming to terms with the grievances and expectations of the early 21st century to reconcile Thailand's inheritance from the past and its future demands. Otherwise, popular movements for greater justice and a fairer shake may well reappear in other shapes, forms and colors.