

Da Torpedo's case pushes Thailand back to the Dark Ages

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Time for Redshirts to be clear about how to fight

Last month Daranee Charnchoengsilpakul (or “Da Torpedo”) was sentenced to 18 years in prison for “lese majeste” after a secret trial in Bangkok. This is just another example of how Thailand is rapidly coming to resemble authoritarian countries like North Korea. Other examples are the use of the Internal Security Law to prevent peaceful demonstrations by the pro-democracy Redshirts and the way that the unelected Prime Minister, Abhisit, urged the military to kill demonstrators in April this year. What is also shocking is the way that there has been complete silence from so-called “human rights activists” or NGOs and academics in Thailand about what has been going on. This can only be described as shameful. Amnesty International’s long term policy of turning its back on Thai prisoners of conscience, jailed over lese majeste, is also appalling. It throws into question the role of this organisation.

Da Torpedo never committed an act of violence. She never killed anyone or destroyed anyone’s property.

She is a pro-democracy activist who made speeches in public. She has been jailed for 18 years for making these speeches. In Thailand, army officers and state officials who commit violent crimes against the people

are free to enjoy power and privileges. The worst crime in the eyes of the Thai ruling elites, is to think for oneself and to express those thoughts. This is why Da is in prison. This is why Suwicha Takor and others are in prison on lese majeste charges.

The Thai elite want us to be half-wits. They want us to do as we are told and be loyal to Nation, Religion and King. When the Leader farts, we all have to fart. If he wears a pink shirt, we must all wear one too. We must all believe that he invented everything that is of value in the country. The elite want us to crawl on the ground in front of them as though we are not human. We must smile like idiots and chant in unison that we “love our King and country”. The problem in Thai society has always been that the rulers are corrupt, brutal and barbaric, while the people are generally good. Yet ‘They’ claim the right to lecture us on being good citizens.

Democracy doesn’t grow on trees or fall into our hands like ripe fruit. We all have to fight for it and it must be a collective struggle. That means that we must never forget Da Torpedo, Suwicha, or any other prisoners of conscience in Thai prisons. We must campaign for the abolition of the lese majeste law.

The dispute among Redshirt leaders

The current dispute among Redshirt leaders is not a problem. It is an opportunity for millions of

prodemocracy

to take part in an extremely important debate. We must have this debate in the open, while trying to maintain some unity on specific issues among the Redshirt movement as a whole. A democracy movement, by its very nature, will be full of debate and argument. The debate is about the way forward to democracy. It isn't primarily about personal gain or bravery, although Redshirts are not angels.

Current disputes among the Royalist Yellowshirts, however, are more about fighting over the rich pickings which come with power and public office. This is because what unites the Yellowshirts in the first place is their defence of personal privilege in the face of popular democracy.

The Redshirts have learnt through struggle since the 19th September 2006 coup, that "Real Democracy" will not just be achieved by mass demonstrations or by winning repeated elections. Demonstrations have been put down by bloody repression and election results have been repeatedly overturned by unconstitutional means. The pro-democracy movement has come to realise that our aims are being blocked by powerful and entrenched interests. It isn't any single person or institution among the elites. It is the Army, the Courts and top Civil Servants, the Royal Family and the Privy Council and the Democrat Party and their allies. They stand together against the wishes of millions of ordinary Thais. They are against democracy, social justice and progress.

These conservative elites carry two main weapons: the means of violence and the means to try to build legitimacy. The centre of power and violence is the Army. But they constantly use the Monarchy to legitimise their actions and the weak and unprincipled King goes along with this.

The current debate among Redshirts is about Reform or Revolution as a road to democracy. It isn't about whether or not to overthrow Capitalism. The debate is sharp now because we stand at an important juncture.

The full power of the elites is now plain for all to see. The question is how to deal with it. Should we compromise by hoping to reform the elites or should we fight to overthrow them?

Thaksin and the 3 political leaders of the Kwam Jing Wan Nee programme are in the Reform camp. They feel that the task of overthrowing the elites is too big, too risky and counter-productive. They want a peaceful road with compromise. They are prepared to keep the Monarchy like it is today with minor changes. Many Redshirts would agree with them because they fear violence and upheaval. Revolution risks a bloody crackdown and long jail sentences. It is a difficult task. But Reform risks capitulating to the conservative elites. The recent petition to the King to pardon Thaksin, which was supported by this faction and organised by millions of grass-roots Redshirts, carries many dangers. It gives power to the King in an undemocratic fashion and can create illusions. But equally it can expose the King and the Royalists for being against the People. It has caused a real head-ache for the conservatives.

Jakrapop and Surachai are for Revolution. So am I. But we may disagree on other issues. I cannot and will not speak for them. That would be unfair. However, they are clear that the Monarchy must be reformed.

My view is that it is too late to wish for a Constitutional Monarchy in Thailand in the same model as Britain or Japan. The army generals and the conservative elites have shown that at any time they are prepared to use

the Monarchy to destroy democracy and rip up the Constitution. Therefore we must abolish the Monarchy and cut down the size and power of the Army. Thai history teaches us from the 1970s and 1990s that such

significant changes in society only come about through mass struggle. Actions by small groups or by armed groups cannot achieve the necessary thorough-going changes. A large number of Redshirt

activists are now

against the Monarchy. There is a growing anti-Monarchy feeling throughout the country and the elites recognise this.

As a Socialist, I would hope that during the revolutionary struggle for democracy, many people will come to realise that parliamentary democracy is not enough. We need economic democracy where the people

decide on investment and production. This is the true democracy of Socialism. It is a million miles from the Stalinist dictatorships of North Korea, China, Laos or Cuba.

There is no guarantee of success for the revolutionary road in Thailand. It will be a long hard struggle. But I believe that there is no longer any room for reform in order to achieve democracy. The behaviour of the elites since the 2006 coup has proved this.