

Split in the Reds: When Differences Become Intolerable

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Although the signs had been there for some time, some people did not really see it coming.

Exiled UDD leader and former cabinet minister Jakrapob Penkair was reported to have broken away from the main red-shirt movement in order to form a splinter group called “Red Siam”. Joining him was Surachai Sae-Dan (Danwattananusorn), another red-shirt keyman known for his strong Communist beliefs. The reason behind the split appears to be ideological differences, particularly over the red shirts’ recent petition for a royal pardon for Thaksin Shinawatra.

The split has not been amicable. In his recent article in a pro-red newspaper, Jakrapob launched a stinging criticism of the red-shirt leadership, especially the ‘Truth Today’ trio (Veera Musikgaping, Nattawut Saikua and Jatuporn Prompan) who played a key role in getting the petition signed and submitted. Jatuporn responded by reminding Jakrapob that when the former minister was facing lese-majesté charges, it was the red shirts who stood beside him through thick and thin.

Looking back, the potential of a split in the red shirts was always evident. While both the Thai and foreign media tend to portray the reds as a chiefly pro-Thaksin movement, such a portrayal ignores the considerable diversity in their views and fails to explain the true motives of some of their leaders. True, what people see in the news most often about red-shirt rallies are the phone-ins of Thaksin, but to say that the reds are purely about Thaksin is akin to saying that the PAD is only about Abhisit.

Rather than seeing the reds as a movement for Thaksin, it is probably more accurate to think of them as a movement against the ‘Amarts’ (roughly translated as the aristocrats and the influential unelected bureaucrats) who the red-shirts say have crippled the development of Thai democracy. But the complexity does not stop there. For one thing, the reds have not been able to give a clear and consistent answer to the question “Just who exactly are the Amarts?” While mainstream UDD leaders continue to insist that they are fighting for a system of constitutional monarchy and thus their campaign is limited to attacking Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanonda and his cronies, certain factions within the reds have quietly been prepared to go beyond that.

The royal pardon campaign, then, was the final straw that broke the camel’s back. When the campaign was first launched, it triggered a flurry of furious debates and arguments among the reds on various Internet discussion boards (see ThaiENews for some examples in Thai). As Prachatai (in Thai) reports, some red-shirt leaders also voiced their reservations about the petition. The aforementioned Surachai Sae-Dan even revealed that he had refused to attend any meeting with other leaders since the start of the royal pardon campaign. While the leaders attempted to maintain the image of harmony in their ranks, it has become increasingly difficult for people like Surachai to remain with the mainstream reds.

Jakrapob’s defection is perhaps a tad more surprising. The former TV presenter was one of the

original leaders of the UDD during its struggle against the 2006-07 military junta and has often lavished praises on Thaksin in rallies and interviews. But one could later see the signs of his radical politics when he gave a speech about Thailand's 'patronage system' to the audience in an event at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand. That speech later led to charges of lese-majesté being filed against him. After he fled overseas following the April riot, he even hinted at starting an underground insurgency against the Amarts. Other red leaders swiftly distanced themselves from him.

A related question is: Does exiled academic Giles Ji Ungpakorn have any role to play in this split? Incidentally, "Red Siam", the name of Jakrapob's splinter group, is the same as the name of a manifesto Giles wrote after fleeing to the UK. Giles himself says he does not support Thaksin, and he was comparatively late in joining the reds.

All in all, the implications of this split are not yet clear. It remains to be seen how Thaksin will react and whether the Red Siam group will be able to draw large crowds in their rallies and activities. One thing that is clear, however, is that the reds are not all mindless, stupid followers and cronies of Thaksin as the media paints them to be.

UPDATE: Giles wrote that he has no connection with the Red Siam group.

P.S.

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