

# Thai-Style “Democracy,” 1958-2010

Sunday 28 March 2010, by [FERRARA Federico](#) (Date first published: 23 March 2010).

Last month I had the honor of being invited by the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand to participate in a panel discussion with former cabinet minister Suranand Vejjajiva and acting government spokesman Panitan Wattanayagorn. The subject was “Tanks, Thaksin and \$2 Billion.” On the day of the event, I was informed by the organizers that Dr. Panitan had requested (and had, of course, obtained) to appear solo for the first 45 minutes, at the end of which he would leave and allow the event to continue in his absence. It has been reported already that Panitan spent much of his time insisting on the themes of “democracy” and “the rule of law” — the irony of which I subsequently had the opportunity to point out. In retrospect, however, a more dramatic and revealing moment came when Panitan allowed flashes of sincerity to percolate through an otherwise largely dissembling presentation on Thailand’s ongoing political crisis.

“What happened to us?” — he wondered aloud, an expression of stunned disbelief on his face — “what happened to our patience, to our tolerance, to mai bpen rai?”

Of course, anyone with a cursory knowledge of the country’s history already knows that Thailand’s ruling class has never been famous for taking anything like a “mai bpen rai” approach in dealing with challenges to its authority. So it was hard to escape the conclusion that Panitan could not have been lamenting the change he observed in the posture of generals, noblemen, privy councillors, politicians, and crony capitalists of all colors and stripes. His dismay could only have been directed at the vast majority of the Thai public, at those who have long been expected to turn the other cheek to violence, injustice, and exploitation. It is only their refusal to accept the latest usurpation of their power, their failure to take it lying down, that could now lead the noted sakdina intellectual to profess his bewilderment. Certainly, Panitan’s astonishment and anguish are shared rather broadly these days within Thailand’s increasingly besieged political establishment.

Not five decades ago, political scientist David Wilson described Thai society in terms that might perhaps provide a window into the source of Panitan’s bemusement. Wilson observed “a clear distinction between those who are involved in politics and those who are not” and noted, ever matter-of-factly, that “the overwhelming majority of the adult population is not.” He went on to say:

The peasantry as the basic productive force constitutes more than 80 percent of the population and is the foundation of the social structure. But its inarticulate acquiescence to the central government and indifference to national politics are fundamental to the political system. A tolerable economic situation which provides a stable subsistence without encouraging any great hope for quick improvement is no doubt the background of this political inaction.

As it turns out, David Wilson was correct to identify in the “acquiescence” and “indifference” of the vast majority of the public the fundamental basis of “Thai-Style Democracy” — a system of government that, notwithstanding the shallow deference paid to some of the most meaningless trappings of democracy, largely preserved the right of men of high birth, status, and wealth to run the country. Indeed, it was in the interest of building this system of government that Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat insisted that peasants continue to live off the land. It was in the interest of preserving this system of government that the Thai people have more recently been urged to walk “backwards into a klong” and renounce progress in favor of a simpler existence. And it was in the interest of

reiterating what this system of government once expected of them that Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva recently promised that everything will be fine, so long as the Thai people accept their station in life and, as he put it, continue to "do their jobs lawfully."

"Thai-style democracy" was not destroyed in one day. Despite increasingly desperate pleas to be content with what they have, over time the people of Thailand have had enough of "stable subsistence" and have flocked to Bangkok to fulfill dreams their leaders said they should not dare harbor. Economic growth and modernization gave rise to hopes that a "quick" and decisive "improvement" in their material condition was now within their grasp. Confronted with the refusal by the country's ruling class to grant them a fair share of the country's newfound prosperity — reliably built on the backs of the people — they shed their "indifference" and began to vote, en masse, for those who at least bothered to pay some lip service to their empowerment. And when their will was overturned, not once but three times over the last four years, for many among them "acquiescence" was quite simply no longer an option. "Mai bpen rai" has turned into "mai yorm rap."

For a variety of reasons — not the least of which is the cretinous arrogance of its guardians — "Thai-style democracy" has been in failing health for almost two decades. It finally died last week, overpowered by the tens of thousands of people who marched on Bangkok to demand equality, justice, and "real" democracy. Last Saturday, its corpse was paraded through the city in a festive, 50-kilometer-long procession — an unmistakably Thai rendition of a New Orleans jazz funeral.

The red shirts could never hope to bring a million people to Bangkok, given the monumental logistical challenges that would have presented under the best of circumstances. At the end of the day, their numbers were depressed further by the fact that these were not the best of circumstances. Thanks, in part, to the complicity of their own, most dimwitted leaders, in advance of the march the reds were successfully portrayed as barbarian, "rural hordes" — most of them paid, some of them brainwashed, many among them not really Thai — determined to lay waste to the capital city in a last-ditch effort to rescue the dwindling fortunes of one man. Just in case the widely anticipated prospects of violence and chaos (periodically revitalized by staged police raids and mysterious bomb attacks) had failed to scare enough people into staying home, hundreds of tripwires were laid down in the form of checkpoints extending deep into the Isan countryside. Then, just at the opportune time, the government pressed the panic button when it imposed the Internal Security Act and began speaking openly about the possibility of an emergency decree — what would amount, in practice, to an autogolpe.

And yet they came — not in large enough numbers to inaugurate a new system of government, to be sure, but in numbers certainly large enough to trample the old one to death. Some have argued, with merit, that their goals remain unclear, their motives diverse, their demands inarticulate, their strategy underdeveloped, and their leadership coarse, homophobic, and hopelessly divided against itself. Still, the death of the old system requires no clear vision, no unanimity of motive, no strategic acumen, and no enlightened leader; indeed, it does not even require the physical removal of the current puppet regime. What definitively snuffed the life out of "Thai-style democracy" is that its foundation of indifference and sheepish acquiescence has been thoroughly dismantled.

The red shirts may well be confused about what they want to build, but they now have a good idea of what they are against. Perhaps the most revealing development in this regard is the resurrection and endless repetition of the word "phrai," a word that strips its complement — "amartaya" — of all its remaining ambiguity. Phrai does not mean "slave," "proletarian," or "pauper." It means commoner. And though attempts to spin and muddle the meaning of this phrasing are legion, everyone knows what a "commoner" is not.

Whatever the Prime Minister might say, this is not a “class war” in the sense that it pits poor against rich. This fight is about restoring the aristocracy to the ceremonial role it formally accepted, at the barrel of a gun, on June 24, 1932. Most importantly, this fight is about subjecting the *amartaya* — the mandarins and praetorian guards, most themselves *phrai* by birth, who have long exploited the pretense of defending the monarchy to hoard power and riches for themselves — to the will of the people. And while the reds have yet to achieve either of those goals, “Thai-style democracy” could no longer endure once its founding ideology was exposed as an especially ignoble adaptation of Plato’s “Noble Lie.” It is merely by standing up to say “enough” that hundreds of thousands of people, many belonging to social classes whose right to participate in the country’s governance has never before been acknowledged, accomplished what previous democratic movements could not — put the old system to death. While no one knows exactly what kind of new social contract will take shape in the years to come, the only chance of stability is offered by one that recognizes the people’s right to govern their own country. A “real” democracy, if you will.

“Thai-style democracy,” the spawn of Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, is survived by its adoptive father and its loving caretaker of three decades. There can be little doubt that the latter, now aged 89, will spend the rest of his days clinging to the vestiges of the old system like a grief-stricken gorilla sometimes spends weeks carrying around the carcass of her dead pup. One can only hope that those around him will have the presence of mind not to embark on a collective suicide mission, throwing themselves in the path of a stampede in the deluded hope that they might somehow bring back to life what has now been definitively consigned to the history books. With some notable exceptions, it seems, the people of Thailand are no longer willing to prostrate themselves to the level of dogs.

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From Khi Kwai.

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