

Peua Thai Government lines up with the Military

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Following the July 2011 election we have seen Prime Minister Yingluck's Peua Thai Government and the conservative elites move towards a settlement in the interests of the elites and at the expense of Democracy and Human Rights. This is a serious betrayal of the Red Shirts who fought and sacrificed for Democracy over the last few years. In many ways this "sell-out" by the Government was hardly surprising. The vast majority of Peua Thai politicians are not at all radical and most never took part in the Red Shirt protests. Taksin and his Thai Rak Thai party always made it clear that they were royalists as well.

If we look at the use of *lèse majesté*, the Government's record of abusing freedom of speech is just as bad as Abhisit's military-backed Democrats. The Minister for Information Technology and Communication Anudit Nakornrattaporn has shown himself to be a rabid royalist censor, threatening Facebook users who so much as click "like" in response to a post deemed by the Military to be insulting to the Monarchy. Worse still, Deputy Prime Minister Chalerm Yubamrung has been appointed as "*lèse majesté* supremo" to hunt down dissenters. Chalerm is known as an unsavoury gangster politician. His son murdered a policeman in a bar brawl a few years ago and Chalerm used his influence to get the charges dropped. There are unconfirmed rumours that Chalerm made his millions as a drug trader.

In the last month or so we have seen the disgraceful case of "Aa-Kong" or Umpon, an elderly shoe maker, who was sentenced to 20 years in jail on *lèse majesté* for supposedly sending an sms message. Those who have talked to him believe that he is incapable of sending sms messages and his mobile phone was being repaired at the time when the "offense" was supposed to take place. We have also seen Jo Gordon, a US citizen sentenced to 2 and a half years in jail for posting a Thai translation of the Yale University Press book "The King Never Smiles" on the internet. Then there is the case of university lecturer Surapot Taweekul who is accused of *lèse majesté* for writing philosophical articles on the Prachatai website.

Most *lèse majesté* prisoners awaiting trial, like Somyot Pruksakasemsuk and Surachai Darnwattananusorn are routinely refused bail. Recently the Red Shirt leader Arisaman Pondruangrong re-entered Thailand and gave himself up to police, thinking that he would be bailed under the "reconciliation project". He was promptly jailed and refused bail. 'Da Torpedo' and many others like 'Red Eagle' are still in jail because of *lèse majesté*. They suffer terrible conditions.

The Peua Thai government's defence of *lèse majesté* shows that it is prepared to accept the continuing influence of the Military in politics and hopes that the Military and royalists will stop accusing Taksin and Peua Thai of being against the Monarchy.

Even the United Nations Human Rights Office has called for the cessation of the use of *lèse majesté* because it is having such a bad effect on freedom of expression in Thailand.

Army Chief General Prayut Junochai previously campaigned openly against Peua Thai in the run up to the election. By most democratic standards he ought to have been dismissed, but he is still in post.

The Government also gave the go-ahead for middle-ranking officers from the Burapa Payak group, who were directly involved with the sniper shootings of unarmed Red Shirts, to be rewarded with promotions. Prime Minister Yingluck also went out of her way to be seen touring flood-affected areas alongside General Prayut.

The “settlement” with the elites means that it will be harder to bring to justice those who were responsible for ordering the killings of civilians last year. The key perpetrators are Abhisit Vejjajiva, General Prayut Junocha, Sutep Tuagsuban and General Anupong Paojinda. This is a very important issue for the Red Shirts and for establishing standards of human rights. Recently when questioned by police, Abhisit arrogantly said that his government had shown “tolerance” in dealing with the Red Shirt protests. In fact his government deployed armed soldiers, tanks and snipers to shoot down unarmed civilians, reporters and paramedics. Abhisit and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad must have shared the same finishing school!!

The Peua Thai Government is well aware that if the Thai cabinet merely accepted the exercise of jurisdiction by the International Criminal Court (ICC) with respect to the crime of killing civilians last year, the ICC would be able to investigate the matter and possibly start proceedings against Abhisit and others. Yet the Government is doing nothing. It is also refusing to ratify the Rome Statute, which would help bring cases against any future state criminals. Instead there has been talk, by people like Chalerm Yubamrung and others, of a general amnesty, which would white wash the politicians and army generals who have blood on their hands. Naturally Taksin is against the use of the ICC in Thailand because it might backfire on his responsibility for massacres in the South in 2004.

Taken alongside the increased use of *lèse majesté*, we can see that the “settlement” with the elites is more than anything a settlement with the Military. It is not about some deal with the weak willed and infirm King, who has never exercised any power independent of the Military. The appointment of a military officer, with a dubious background in human rights, to the post of Defence Minister, also showed that the Government had no intention of creating a culture where elected civilians control the Military. There is also no attempt to cut the military budget or remove them from control of the mass media.

The position of Red Shirt UDD leaders is also extremely worrying. Tida Tawornset prefers lobbying those in power, in order to get political prisoners moved to a more comfortable “political jail”, than mobilising the Red Shirt movement to demand the release of all political prisoners. She talks vaguely about changing the Constitution, while refusing to talk about *lèse majesté* or even concrete steps to implement the “Nitirat” proposals to scrap the legal legacy of the 2006 coup. Earlier, Sombat Boon-Ngarmanong, Natawut Saikua and Jatuporn Prompan all called for Red Shirts to be patient and to support “the people’s Government”. Jatuporn himself is now facing disqualification as an elected MP by the royalist-denominated Electoral Commission (EC). The technicality used as an excuse for this disqualification is clearly motivated by political considerations. Yet he has called for calm. At the same time, the EC has never questioned the eligibility of General Sonti Boonyagarin, coup leader from 2006, to sit in parliament as an elected MP! The end result of all this is that the Red Shirt UDD leaders are trying to de-mobilise the movement. Without activity the Red Shirts will wither away.

Progressive Red Shirts must organise independently of the Government and the Red Shirt UDD leadership in order to campaign for the abolition of *lèse majesté*, the release of political prisoners and the bringing to justice those responsible for State Crimes.

Giles Ji Ungpakorn, 11th December 2011

