

In Thailand, mass resistance to the coup smashes political myths

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The most striking thing about this coup d'état is the speed and size of the anti-coup protests. For the last 3 days, immediately following the coup, mass protests of ordinary people have simultaneously erupted in many areas of Bangkok but also in Chiangmai and other towns. This is history in the making.

These protests are spontaneous but it would be a mistake to think that they were “unorganised”. For years pro-democracy activists have been creating their own grass roots networks which are independent from Taksin, Yingluk, Pua Thai and the mainstream UDD leaders of the redshirts. Never the less, many redshirts who are still loyal to the UDD are also taking part. So are ordinary working class people, although not as organised trade unionists. The more the protests grow, the more confidence is gained by those taking part and those watching and sympathising. Such grass roots protests make it more difficult for the military. There are hundreds of grass roots leaders, with new ones emerging every day. Arresting a few will only enrage people. It is not like arresting the UDD leaders and stopping the redshirt protests as before. Communication in these networks can be via social media, but “word of mouth” is also extremely important. This is the most positive development in Thailand’s political crisis for years.

Do not doubt for one moment that it is easy to defy a military junta and stand in front of armed soldiers who in the past have not hesitated to shoot down unarmed protesters. Some activists have been arrested and taken away. Others have been taken from their homes. Many people have been ordered by the junta to report to the army. This includes prominent progressive academics, some from the Nitirat group, and also including people like Ajarn Charnwit and Ajarn Suda. Some have been incarcerated in army camps. Those who are charged with “offences” will face military courts and prison.

But amazingly the protesters return in larger numbers. The hope is that this movement will grow and will reach out to the organised working class. But this will take time. It may well be a case of “two steps forward, one step back”.

There are a number of myths that have been shattered in the last few days. The first myth, constantly repeated by lazy journalists and elitist academics, is that the pro-democracy movement is predominantly rural. Millions of rural people will be enraged by this coup and hopefully they will organised themselves to oppose it in the coming days. But what we are seeing is an anti-coup movement developing in Bangkok and containing many redshirts. I have argued for years that the redshirt movement has significant support in Bangkok and that the capital city is not just made up of the conservative middle classes.

The second myth that has exploded is the idea that the palace is all powerful and controls the army. General Prayut staged his coup d'état without even bothering to inform the king until one day after the event. There were no pictures of the monarchy behind the junta as they read out their declaration. Again this is something I have been arguing for years. The military is a law unto itself, only using the monarchy to legitimise what it does. Given this fact, the Thai crisis cannot be

explained as merely an elite dispute over the issue of royal succession. There is no point in fighting over a weak and powerless institution.

What the succession mongers are saying to the brave people who are on the streets and facing arrests is that they “shouldn’t bother”. “The gods on Mount Olympus will fight it out and determine your fate”.

The crisis is really about the democratic space in society. It is a two-dimensional struggle with an elite fight over the conduct of politics linked, in a contradictory and dialectical manner, to the struggle of millions of ordinary people for freedom, democracy and social justice. On the streets this is not a fight between two groups of people who support different elites, as conservative academics and NGO leaders claim.

Whether the rumours put out by Robert Amsterdam that Taksin is considering setting up a government in exile are true or not, such a move would be irrelevant to the real struggle for democracy. Taksin is firmly in the camp of the elites, though he favours the democratic process as a means to achieve power. He and his fellow party members have no intention of leading a real struggle for democracy which could tear down the structures of the old order, destroying the power of the army, abolishing *lèse-majesté*, punishing state killers and bringing in standards of human rights and equality via a welfare state. As Leon Trotsky argued in his theory of Permanent Revolution, such a task lies with the modern urban working class, in coalition with the small farmers.

A third myth which has been exploded is the claim by the junta that it was “an honest broker”, trying to bring about peace and stability between two warring sides. No one with half a political brain really believed this because the army and Sutep’s mobs were working together. They also were on the same side as the PAD yellow shirts back in 2006. What is now very clear is that almost all the people who have been arrested and ordered to report to the military are redshirts or progressive pro-democracy activists.

There has been a total silence from the various NGO and conservative academic “worthies” over this coup. In fact they helped create the conditions for it to occur in the first place, by demanding the elected government resign and compromise with anti-democratic thugs. The National Human Rights Commission, which is stacked with uniforms, has pleaded with the junta not to be too harsh. It is a disgrace to its name. The most that a small group of NGO figures linked to “FTA Watch” and consumers’ and environmental groups could bring themselves to say is that they hoped that the junta would return Thailand to democracy “at the earliest opportunity”. In other words, the junta should relinquish power when it feels the time is right. They also called on “both sides” in the crisis to negotiate and compromise. The result would be “half democracy”.

Supporters of Thai democracy abroad can do two simple and very important tasks. The first is to try to protect and publicise the plight of those who are arrested and imprisoned, including those who are already in jail for *lèse-majesté*. The second thing is to try to counter the lies and nonsense coming from the junta which appears in your own national media.

Giles Ji Ungpakorn
