

Thailand's Coup by Stealth or Something Else

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The picture of coup and anti-coup forces contending in Thailand is simplistic at best.

Last week the international media was awash in stories of a 'Thai stealth coup'. They portrayed the Council for National Security, the military grouping that deposed the caretaker government of Thaksin Shinawatra in September 2006, as thwarting the formation of a government by the People's Power Party (PPP) which won a plurality in the December 23 elections.

In news coverage and commentary, the Election Commission of Thailand has been presented as the council's stooge. The Thaksin PR machine could not have hoped for more.

Various commentators and the PPP itself have claimed that the investigation of 83 cases of potential electoral irregularity, 65 by the PPP, is nothing more than an attempt to disenfranchise the Thai electorate by disqualifying PPP winners, thereby allowing an anti-Thaksin Democrat Party-led coalition to be formed. They also point to the various cases that are currently working their way through the courts that may see PPP dissolved, just as its predecessor Thai Rak Thai was in 2007. All of this, they claim, is in line with a 'secret' council four-step plan to eliminate Thaksin

The capitalist and political forces in PPP that showed little regard for the rule of law during the Thaksin period (2001-2006), now find themselves at the end of a very unpleasant stick. It is understandable that they should seek the very real protections offered by the rule of law.

Is the election commission a stooge?

It is most likely being pressured to act in the interests of the coup group and its allies. It is also likely that it is being pushed to act in the interests of PPP. Commissioner Sodsri Sattayatham said as much on Thai national television on January 6, when she spoke of "being caught between two poles of power". The commission also has officials, as do most Thai state agencies, who will be trying to discharge their duties without fear or favour.

People with a short memory assume the current election commissioners were chosen by the Council. The current commissioners were actually appointed while Thaksin was acting as caretaker prime minister. In early September 2006, pro-Thaksin members of the caretaker Senate voted as a bloc to select the five commissioners from 10 forwarded by the judiciary. The bloc-vote ensured that anti-Thaksin nominations for the election commission were eliminated.

For reasons that remain unclear, a day after the 19 September 2006 coup d'état the military endorsed the Senate selection of the commissioners. One might surmise, rather generously, that the coup group acted thus because the 10 nominees forwarded to the senate by the judiciary were chosen in the shadow of the king's appeal to judicial integrity, and thus could be expected to act with caution and impartiality. Of course, in the conditions of post-coup Thailand such integrity is entirely contingent on a range of threats, beliefs, and professionalism.

Now, given this history, and the fact that the commission is a conflicted organization in which there

remain many Thaksin supporters, one might ask whether it is accurate to claim that it is an instrument of a 'stealth coup'.

It may be preferable to see the situation in different terms. The coup remains a work in progress inasmuch as those who launched it still wield power. Its objectives are transparent (elimination of Thaksin) and are hardly advanced in a secretive mode. Consider for example that Samak Sundaravej, leader of the PPP, sought to pre-empt council for national security machinations by declaring himself ready for government on the last day of 2007, claiming 254 seats. Yet the Council remains in place, as does its appointed government, and Samak has gone to ground. Whatever one thinks of the PPP and its claim to represent the democratic will of the people, its claims of a plot against it surely have some substance.

But why should it be otherwise? In a war, one force uses the instruments open to its influence. From this perspective, it is indeed surprising that not more has been done to eliminate the Thaksin threat. In these circumstances it is obvious that the Council for National Security might seek to influence the election commission. However, whether the council succeeds is a matter for empirical investigation.

Democracy?

Although the struggle between strategically relevant opposing forces in Thailand is presented through the idiom of democracy, the opposing forces who stand by the coupsters are actually an inter-sectoral mix of business, bureaucracy, police, military and royalists who care little for genuine democracy. As these inter-sectoral forces fight for state control they do so in a partial "state of exception" whereby, for the most part, force determines outcomes rather than law, persuasion or a democratic mandate. This is actually the same situation that held in the later Thaksin years, although the balance of forces has reversed.

The acute state of Thai politics at this present time has little to do with democracy. An elite struggle that goes back at least a decade is manifest: a new brand of capitalism that seeks to break from the quasi-feudalistic hold of monarchy is in motion, but it is a force that dares not declare its name. Enlightened Thaksin forces want a bourgeois revolution against the current way the monarchy and networks surrounding it work, but they dare not declare their mission. These forces - a mix of the old left, old right, capitalists and technocrats - mobilise forces under a banner of right wing populism, including Buddhist chauvinism, but they have yet to elaborate any genuinely ideological position to challenge the force that thwarts their emergence. They are also hostile to liberal forms of democracy.

So where is the 'left' in all of this? Some serve the stealth bourgeois revolution of the pro-Thaksin forces. They are beholden to a version of objective history that pits "progressive capitalism" against quasi-feudalistic monarchy and aristocracy. They have been unrelenting in their claim of Thaksin's democratic mandate, willing to ignore that democracy means so much more than a mark on a ballot paper. Such belief in the march of objective history has led to many historical calamities and it is not hard to see Thaksin as one of them. The killings of Tak Bai and the War on Drugs surely count as modern equivalents of the descent into governmental barbarism.

Others on the left and a range of political liberals have sought to use the monarchy as a buffer against the political authoritarianism represented by Thaksin. In doing so, they have found comfort in myths about the monarchy, tradition and elite democratization. They have supported the use of extra-constitutional power to overthrow the Thaksin regime. Beholden to a subjectivist view of history (good versus evil), such forces are willing to turn a blind eye to the palace's history, and its privileged economic position. They seek the return of 'royal liberalism', in which the monarchy

stands as the supreme ombudsman, supporting the emergence of constitutional rule.

At this moment in time it appears that the contending fractions of the Thai elite are about to enter the final round of a long struggle. It remains to be seen if they will step back from the brink and instead embrace compromise. One thing, however, is certain: as long as contending elites fail to agree to any rules of the game and instead wage open political warfare for complete victory, Thailand's chance of returning to some form of liberal democracy are slim.

P.S.

* From Asia Sentinel:

http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=982&Itemid=35

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