

Monarchy, democracy, and the politics of polarisation

Wednesday 26 November 2008, by [Chang Noi](#) (Date first published: 24 November 2008).

In early 2006, Sondhi Limthongkul and PAD swathed themselves in yellow and appointed themselves as defenders of the monarchy. The consequences of this act have emerged slowly but inexorably over the last two-and-a-half years. An axis that was last significant in Thai politics over half-a-century ago has re-emerged.

Sondhi and PAD did not initially target Thaksin as a threat to the monarchy. Sondhi simply complained that Thaksin had ceased to be such a good leader. PAD initially focused on Thaksin's authoritarian tendencies and his readiness to use state power to generate private wealth. But claiming to defend the monarchy added significantly to PAD's support, and raised the emotional level of its message. It also served as the cement in an alliance of convenience between PAD and the generals. At first, PAD only charged Thaksin with infringing on the prerogative of the monarchy in his dealings with the Buddhist Sangha. Then it increased the stakes by alleging that Thaksin and his political allies had traveled to Finland in order to plot the overthrow of the institution. At the same time, PAD called on the monarch to intervene directly in the political process to remove Thaksin. Though the monarch is supposed to be "above politics," PAD strained the delicacies of that arrangement.

The politics of polarization are all about opposites. In the past three months, the central issue of Thailand's political conflict has spun beyond Thaksin's personal future to a more fundamental debate over how the country should be run.

On one side, the critical issue is good governance. Popular participation has to be balanced by knowledge and morality, and hence "good" and "educated" people are more qualified to participate than others. Election has to be balanced by appointment. The franchise may need to be weighted by property, education, or other qualifications. The monarchic institution has a special role of moral guardianship.

On the other side, equality is paramount. The sovereignty of parliament and the principle of one-person/one-vote are non-negotiable. Abuse has to be controlled by checks and balances, not by compromising on these basic principles.

Thaksin is of course an unlikely candidate to be the defender of democracy. While in power, he openly disparaged the democratic principle as merely a matter of convenience. He ridiculed the idea of human rights and obstructed the freedom of information. He scoffed at the rule of law and argued that checks and balances are merely obstructions to getting things done. He devalued the importance of the parliament and the cabinet, and aimed to run the country like a company – meaning a Thai-Chinese style company in which the taokae is an absolute ruler. He campaigned at the 2005 election on the platform that Thailand needed to move beyond the western model of competitive democracy. He hankered after a one-party, one-man state and lifelong rule.

But in the historical logic of polarization, none of that matters. Thaksin was an unlikely candidate to become a populist, but seven years ago history presented him with the opportunity and he seized it

with both hands. History has now dumped democracy in his lap.

That has happened because Thaksin's opponents have repeatedly resorted to undemocratic methods. Calling on the monarch to intervene. Agitating for the return of "royal powers." Boycotting a parliamentary election. Rolling the tanks through the streets in the most primitive coup Thailand has seen in half a century. Appointing a parliament. Drafting a blatantly anti-parliamentary constitution. Sending soldiers into the villages to "persuade" people to revise their political loyalties. Mobilizing public funds and public resources to influence the results of a general election. Seizing Government House and attempting to disrupt parliament. Recruiting a lethal private army. Insulting the mass electorate as ignorant and unworthy of the franchise. Occupying public space as private property. Threatening to override the principle of one-person/one-vote in favour of blatantly elitist schemes.

Against this background, Thaksin has had to do almost nothing in order to melt into the role of the beleaguered democrat.

While Thailand is deeply conservative in many ways, there is also strong support for the democratic ideal. The struggle to achieve democracy against absolutism and military authoritarianism has been the leitmotif of politics for almost a century. The mass electorate has recently learnt how to use the vote to gain some small advantages and is reluctant to give it up. The contractors, businessmen, and fixers who play electoral politics at local and national levels have partially replaced the old framework of bureaucratic power and oppose any backsliding.

In the face of attack, the majority of voters and politicians have stood firm behind Thaksin. Growing numbers of intellectuals and activists feel they have to side with the defence of democracy against its enemies.

The Rajamangala Stadium rally on 1 November put these forces on public display, hinting at the potential. Since his ouster, Thaksin had been mouthing democratic platitudes but with limited conviction. His statements came over as nice scripting by his expensive consultants. But his reference to the "power of the people" in his Rajamangala phone-in, and his subsequent riffs on democracy, have the feel of an actor easing into his role. In August 2001, he blurted out "I love people, I want to work for them," and launched his career as a populist hero. He now loves democracy and wants to work for it.

Of course both his populist epiphany and his democratic epiphany have come when his wealth and power are threatened by the judicial process. Here lies the poison in the choice which the country faces. Backing democracy also means endorsing Thaksin's overweening greed, his evident desire for revenge, and his authoritarian bent. Meanwhile, standing up for morality, the rule of law, and clean politics means endorsing coups, PAD's cultish and violent conservatism, a mangled version of democracy, and all that lies behind them.

But in the politics of polarization, there is shrinking space for people who find both these choices flawed.

P.S.

From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/polarise.htm>