

Thaksin and the archipelago of exile

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Exile has its own history. Over a century ago, the world's political fugitives were nationalists and revolutionaries, nursing the wounds of a failed endeavour, and plotting the coming overthrow of the oppressors. Shift forward a few decades, and their place was taken by former monarchs and emperors, desperately clinging to the last trappings of grandeur. Then for most of the past century, the classic exile was the deposed head-of-state—the post-colonial hero brought down by disillusioned supporters, or the populist dictator driven out by conservative reaction, both pursued by accusations of corruption and misrule.

At first sight, Thaksin seems to belong to this phase. Like many of them he was dislodged by army coup. Like Albert Fujimori and others, he is pursued by allegations of spectacular corruption. But in truth Thaksin belongs partly to this phase and partly to a later one in which the fugitives are the cowboy entrepreneur-cum-politicians from the wild fringes of the neoliberal era. The defining figures are the Russian “oligarchs” who were granted monstrous fortunes by ideologues who applied “free market” principles to primitive economies.

The careers of Thaksin and the prominent oligarch, Roman Abramovich, ran in parallel. Both became multi-billionaires in a handful of years in the early 1990s by mixing politics and business. Thaksin rose from small, indebted entrepreneur to telecom tycoon through monopoly concessions granted by government. Roman went from black-market hustler to world-scale commodities trader by inheriting huge interests from the collapsed Soviet state. Both went into politics in the 1990s. Thaksin became a parliamentarian and then premier. Roman became a parliamentarian and then provincial governor. Both lost power a decade later. Roman resigned, pursued by allegations of theft, blackmail, share-rigging, and responsibility for thousands of deaths in gangland killings. Thaksin was overthrown, pursued by allegations of corruption, conflict of interest, and responsibility for thousands of deaths in drug killings and disappearances.

Thaksin and Roman share a fascination with international football—the fast pace, risks, big money deals, and the chance to wave from the stadium box, recalling other crowds.

Exile has its own geography too. The revolutionaries holed up in the garrets of Paris and London. Ex-monarchs favoured lakeside villas in the Alps. Deposed dictators usually hid, in fear of retribution. The oligarchs prefer London with its unparalleled opportunities for spending the loot, and so too did Thaksin. But now he inhabits an archipelago of accessible islands amid an unwelcoming sea defined by visa regulations. Hong Kong, Dubai, Koh Kong, Nicaragua. He claims, “The whole world is my home,” but in truth the sanctuaries are luxury hotels connected by long-haul flights.

Exile also has its own forms of communication. The revolutionaries penned seditious pamphlets, smuggled back to the homeland. Former monarchs held court with noble refugees, plotting revenge. Deposed dictators issued statements through their lawyers. But Thaksin lives in the age of the weekly magazine, the video clip and the internet link. He can be virtually present anywhere. In the last few weeks he has decided to go public in international space more intensively than at any time since his initial exile two-and-a-half years ago. He has been interviewed by Time, the Review, and the Japan Times. And last week he appeared live over video link from Dubai to Hong Kong, patched through to Bangkok. Why is he doing this? What is he saying?

Three things seem significant. First, these messages are in English. He is communicating with an international audience or the government, rather than his domestic supporters. Second, he seems coached. This is not so evident from the printed word, more from the video clips. Time and again in the Review videos, he pauses in mid-sentence while his eyes glaze and he riffles through the memory banks. This is not a matter of language. He can be fluid and lucid in English though grammatically a bit squiffy. He seems to be searching for the words he has been coached to say. Reportedly his clutch of US PR companies are no longer on the payroll, but perhaps Lord Tim Bell is still on hand. In all these interviews, democracy, rule-of-law, Amartya Sen, reconciliation, loyalty pop up almost randomly as they emerge at the top of the memory stack.

Third, what he doesn't say may be more significant than what he does. Nothing on his family. Almost nothing on business. These would be subjects that the interviewer would broach if Thaksin had not placed them off limits or simply stonewalled. In these appearances, he is not human animal or business animal but political animal.

Perhaps his main aim is to position himself as an exile of the former phase of deposed politicians, rather than an exile of the more recent phase of fleeing oligarchs. The script is well rehearsed. I have done nothing wrong. The criminal allegations are all politically motivated. My court conviction could not happen in any civilized country. ("It is very ridiculous. The whole world is laughing.") He can recite this script with some conviction, even keeping his eyelid flutter (his personal in-built lie detector) under reasonable control. His statement "I am a domestic dog that can be tamed any time. I'm tame already and I can be tamed again." is probably the nearest he will come to humility. Is he saying: Please take me in; I'm wronged and harmless?

Maybe not. The starkest message of these appearances is "I will go back to Thailand. It depends on when." On first sight, this assertion suggests he is losing touch with reality. His opponents are consolidating by the day. The country is calming down. The generals who guarantee his personal safety on return can hardly prevent their tongues nipping out and moistening their lips.

But exiles can become powerful symbols of ideas they themselves do not always share. Perhaps his message is: Take me back, because in messy everyday reality I will be less threatening than as an imagined force in the archipelago of exile. Quite a gambit. But who will believe him?

P.S.

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