

# Far from Bangkok, rebel Red Shirts prepare for a comeback

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**Despite claims of restored order, Thailand remains bitterly divided between rich and poor, writes DAVID McNEILL in Lamphun Thailand.**

IN NORTHERN Thailand, the world has been turned upside down. Men branded terrorists are heroes, the police are the enemy and children wear T-shirts hailing anti-government rebels. Driven from power, branded a criminal and hounded by prosecutors, exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra is venerated here, his smiling features emblazoned on cups, flags and dolls at a mass rally of his supporters in this provincial town. One of the world's most famous fugitives, polls taken in this district put his support at more than 70 per cent.

Three months ago, Thaksin's Red Shirt supporters - many from this area - were violently cleared from the Bangkok streets after occupying the city centre for nine weeks. When the smoke had lifted, at least 90 people were dead, 2,000 injured and the centre of one of Asia's most laidback cities resembled a war zone. Police have since arrested many of the leaders and sent thousands scattering to the wind. But here in Lamphun, 670km and a political world away from the capital, the protesters are preparing for their comeback.

"I am one million per cent certain that the Red Shirts will return," says Sriwan Janhong, one of the movement's local leaders. "When you push people down, they come back violently," he warns. At the rally in a vast warehouse here last week, thousands of supporters pledged to fight back. "The struggle won't end until the government allows free elections and listens to us," said one, who identified herself as Dao. "We're showing today that we'll still alive."

Despite government claims to have restored order, Thailand remains more bitterly divided than ever between these mostly poor people and the country's conservative, military and royalist elite. Eventually, most believe the colour-coded political struggle between the Red Shirts and their yellow pro-monarchist rivals that has convulsed the country since Thaksin was dumped from power in a bloodless 2006 coup will detonate again.

Prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has effectively declared war on the reds since the Bangkok siege ended, drawing up draconian laws and reshuffling the government and military to strengthen the anti-rebel ranks. Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha, a key figure in the 2006 coup, is set to take over as army chief.

The authorities have been given a mostly free hand to round up the rebels and their supporters - 40,000 websites have been shut down, according to the Bangkok Post; website users, operators and service providers have been arrested. The Red Shirts say some people have simply been disappeared. "It's a witch hunt," says Dao, who works as a foreign tour guide.

Dao and her colleagues are driven by anger at what they see a political system stacked hopelessly against them. It was people like her who turned out five years ago in record numbers to vote

Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party into power. A year after the 2006 coup, they elected his party again, despite the military government's attempts to move the constitutional goalposts. The army and royalists then used the courts to dissolve the party and backed a new government led by Abhisit's ironically named Democrats. Few doubt that were Thaksin to return from exile in Montenegro, he would win again.

"They feel that they are not being fairly treated by the government, and that is fuelling their resentment," said Surapong Tovichakchaikul, a lawmaker in nearby Chiang Mai province who attended the rally as an observer. He rejects government claims that the Red Shirts who took over Bangkok were terrorists or that their campaign is orchestrated from abroad by Thaksin. "Terrorists have bombs and guns - where are these weapons? The government never seized any. They're just using that excuse to ban them."

Around the nearby small town of San Kamphaeng in Chiang Mai Province, where Thaksin and his family ran a silk business, his portrait can be found on public walls and in local restaurants. This is the political heartland of the businessman turned politician, who made over a billion dollars when he sold his stake in his giant telecom conglomerate Shin Corporation. There is little support here for the government's claims that he was kicked out for tax evasion, selling off national assets and insulting the king. "He's a politician so we wasn't perfect but he did a lot for ordinary people," said one shopkeeper. "That's why they got rid of him. It has nothing to do with corruption or defending the monarchy." Thai radio presenters debate if fascism is creeping into the country, recalling how it arose in Europe as an elite reaction to the growing clout of the rural and urban poor. The reds say conservatives are using Thailand's arcane lese majeste laws to stifle protest and throttle debate. Few are safe from increasingly wild accusations of insulting the king - rural peasants, foreign reporters, even the political establishment. Lese majeste is punishable with up to 15 years in jail.

The world's longest-reigning monarch, King Bhumibol (82) is in fragile health. Criticism of him, and discussion about his health or his eventual demise are muted in the media. Some believe his death could be the trigger for the long awaited showdown between reds and yellows. "When the king goes it will be absolutely terrible," warns Sriwan. "Nobody can predict what will happen after that." One of the few places in Thailand where the king's portrait cannot be found is at Red Shirt rallies. Instead, stalls in Lamphun sell DVDs celebrating the Battle of Bangkok and T-shirts bearing the picture of martyred Khatiya Sawasdipol, the renegade Thai general who joined the red side in Bangkok and was shot - probably by army snipers. Inside the hall, spectators line up in front of gruesome photographs of dead protesters, wounds gaping on the Bangkok streets.

On the stage, one of the Red Shirts' national leaders, Jutaporn Prompan, is speaking. A veteran democracy activist and a member of the Thai parliament, Jutaporn is one of the few leaders not under lock and key. In Bangkok he surrendered to the police in a bid to stop the bloodshed and was subsequently bailed - probably saved by his status. "Our fight will go on," he tells the crowd. "Death will not stop us."

**DAVID McNEILL**

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\* From The Irish Times - Wednesday, August 11, 2010:

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2010/0811/1224276546459.html>