

# Thailand: One year on from the “red shirt” rebellion

Sunday 25 March 2012, by [Anuthee Dejthevaporn](#), [WARD Liam](#) (Date first published: 26 April 2011).

March 2010 saw the largest rallies in Thailand’s history, with hundreds of thousands of pro-democracy “red shirts” marching through the capital. This spirit of defiance led tens of thousands to occupy Ratchaprasong intersection in central Bangkok demanding the resignation of the unelected Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and fair elections. They occupied for five weeks, but in May the state unleashed a brutal crackdown, killing up to 90 people.

With mass protests now returning to central Bangkok to mark the anniversary of the crackdown, *Socialist Alternative*’s Liam Ward spoke to Anuthee Dejthevaporn, former General Secretary of the Student Federation of Thailand on the state of the movement. During the uprising, Anuthee spoke at several of the mass red shirt rallies, and along with several other prominent student activists was detained by the military authorities afterwards.

**Anuthee Dejthevaporn:** The Student Federation of Thailand joined in the red shirt demonstrations. We became a small student faction in the demonstration, and tried to gather round progressive students to join. You see, one problem with the student movement, according to the red shirts, is that students in most universities are not interested in politics or even in the democracy movement, they see red shirts as fools who are being hired by politicians to come and demonstrate. So they don’t care about it.

Anyway, there is some fraction of progressive students, and our aim was to try to bring those progressive students in, to join with the red shirts demonstration.

## **Liam Ward - You were in Bangkok when the crackdown happened?**

**Anuthee Dejthevaporn:** Yes. At first we didn’t think they would have a brutal crackdown like that...because we had a lot of people. And there is some sense in Thai politics that any ruler who did a massacre like this cannot stay in power. As we discovered later, this is not correct...

There were two crackdowns actually. One was in April, which failed, because of the people we call “men in black”. To this day, we still don’t know who they are. But in the night, they shot grenades into the command centre of the military and killed the commander who was ordering soldiers to shoot into the protesters. And then the first crackdown had to end. We had lost about 30 people.

In the second crackdown in May, they pushed us really hard. They used everything they had. Even snipers, a lot of snipers. From official records, the military requested 500,00 rounds of ammunition, and returned 400,000. Which means in this crackdown they used about 100,000 rounds of ammunition. Against unarmed civilians. Automatic rifles, sniper rifles, they used everything against us.

At that time I was not in Ratchaprasong, because I and some of my friends had just left before the crackdown. And then we heard the crackdown, and soldiers were encircling the intersection so we could not get back inside. So we had to set up smaller demonstrations around to circle the soldiers

again. But without weapons or rifles or anything to fight the soldiers, we could not fight them.

**In the aftermath of the crackdown, was there debate among the red shirts about the best way to respond? Were there calls to take up arms for example?**

In the first days after the crackdown, yeah, some of them suggested we have to fight, we have to find weapons, to use guns against guns. There were a lot of discussions about this. And there were bombings in many places. Some of them were of course done by the government trying to make a situation. But some of them are from individual red shirts who are really angry and who see no way out. And after the crackdown, almost everyone is screaming the same way, "we have to do something, we have to use weapons."

After some time, a small group of red shirts decided to make not a demonstration but a peaceful action, something like a flashmob, in Ratchaprasong. The first time there was only something like 20 people but they grew bigger and bigger.

**That's a brave thing to do after protesters have just been shot and the emergency decree is still in place.**

Yeah, and the government didn't have the guts to do anything because they had already been blamed a lot, so they just let us do it. Then on the four-month anniversary of the crackdown there was a really huge demo in Ratchaprasong. People came from everywhere...and had something like a carnival. They came to sing and shout and put candles in the place where their friends were shot. They sang, they danced and they shouted against the king - but in metaphor.

Because there are lèse majesté laws in Thailand. So when someone wants to talk about the king, they will not talk directly about the king. They will use metaphor, saying something like "the blind guy ordered the killings" or something like that (the king is blind in one eye).

So after the four-month anniversary everyone knows that the red shirts, almost all of them, had become anti-monarchists. Before the crackdown, most of them still loved the king, still had trust in the monarchy, still thought it was not the monarchy that was behind the 2006 coup. But now they changed their mind because now they had seen with their own eyes.

[April 10 marked the twelve-month anniversary of the crackdown, and there were more protests to mark that crackdown.] In May there will be another protest.

**What are their demands?**

They have a lot of demands. They are demanding the release of political prisoners. There are for example still people from the outer provinces, the countryside, who burned down the city council building during the crackdown and were arrested. Hundreds are still locked up. The red shirt leaders were released because the government tried to lessen the pressure. But they still locked up many other red shirts...

**So what is the strategy of the red shirt movement now?**

The government is saying that they will dissolve the parliament and have an election any time soon. The main organisation of red shirts, the UDD, have agreed to enter the election. But they say they're not just going to finish this after the elections. They say elections will be really important because it will prove the majority of Thais really support the red shirts through their Puea Thai Party. Then the red shirts will have more legitimacy...

But there's a lot of red shirt people who disagree. They say the elections mean nothing, and can decide nothing. Even if Puea Thai could win, the military could stage a coup, the judiciary could declare the dissolution of the party. They can do many things, the ruling class.

Personally, I think the elections are important. Not as a means to take state power but as their leaders say, to prove that the majority is really supporting us and we will have enough legitimacy to keep the movement going.

Another debate is whether or not to speak directly about the king in public. Some UDD leaders suggest that we do not speak directly, that we just talk secretly about these things because a lot of people already know. The people spread this information very quickly. They just copy a CD and spread all this information around and the government can't do anything about this.

But some parts of the red shirts, the intellectuals, they're arguing that we should speak about the monarchy directly but in a way that we would not get arrested under the lèse majesté law. They argue that if we do not raise the question about the monarchy in public we will not be able to change anything because only when we raise it and make it a debate will we be able to challenge it.

In my opinion, even if we can win a lot of people to this idea, even if the scholars and intellectuals speak up and convince people that we need to reform, need to abandon the lèse majesté law and so on, the ruling class don't care. They just don't care. They wrote this law. And even if there's some way that we can avoid being arrested they can still use it against us. Even if they can't use the law they can use force, brute force, illegal force. They can abduct us, they can do anything with us. So the ruling class does not care if it is legal or illegal. If they want to crack down on us they will just crack down. Like we have seen in the crackdown in April and May. They just don't care about the laws. Even the laws that they wrote themselves.

So I think we should speak about the monarchy in a way that we can avoid being arrested. In a secret way...

### **Have the revolutions in the Arab world had an impact on the red shirts?**

Yes, a lot! Many people are referring to the situation in the Middle East. They are asking, what country are we going to be like? Will we be like Egypt? Or Libya? There are two ways. Some of them think we are going to be like Libya, we'll have a harsh civil war. And some of them think we're going to be like Egypt...

The red shirt movement is a democratic movement. It's a movement of the poor who are demanding a better life. Some of them are even talking about some kind of socialism or socialist economy. They want somehow to improve their life. This is what [former PM] Thaksin did, even though he's a capitalist. And of course he had his own agenda, everyone knows this. Even the people, the poor, they know this. But still, it improved their life. And they need more improvements through democratic means, through electing someone to really represent them. And they need freedom, freedom to speak of things. And that's the most important thing for socialists because without freedom we can only be socialists in a very underground way. Freedom of expression will be very important to have a further movement, to be able to organise, to spread our ideas in society. But today Thailand still has no freedom. Now we are demanding it and we need support from all around the world.

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