Dueling Elites: Thailand’s Political Standoff

Since a military coup toppled the government of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, the country, which has since returned to democratic rule, has been plagued by increasingly strident political conflict. Southeast Asia Editor for Asia Times Online, Shawn W. Crispin, argues that uncertainty over Thailand’s royal succession is helping to fuel the conflict.

By Shawn W. Crispin
WHEN ANTI-GOVERNMENT demonstrators took to Bangkok's streets in April, the protest movement's leaders broke a longstanding local taboo by publicly criticizing King Bhumibol Adulyadej's royal advisors. Thailand's monarchy is by law above politics, but as the country's political conflict escalated with competing and increasingly disruptive street protests, it has become increasingly apparent that the uncertain royal succession is at the heart of the struggle.

Over the past three and a half years as former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra became a lightning rod for political tension, Thailand's standoff has generated dramatic global headlines and spectacular displays of political brinkmanship, including last year's seizure of Bangkok's main international airports by the royalist, yellow-garbed People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), and the chaotic disruption by the rival pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) in April of an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit.

Yet for all the global news attention, Thailand's political conflict has frequently been misinterpreted as a simplistic good versus evil battle for democracy, one that pits an entrenched urban elite who favor an inequitable status quo against a marginalized rural countryside that has been politically awakened to democratically demand more social justice and a larger slice of the national economic pie.

The more complicated reality is that Thailand's power struggle is between competing elites, old and new, both capable of mobilizing disruptive crowds of supporters and neither particularly democratic in their history or outlook. Both camps are jockeying for position ahead of the royal succession and are known to have different views on what role the monarchy and monarchical institutions should play in Thai society after the highly revered Bhumibol finally passes from the scene.

That is believed to include divergent perspectives on the future of the Crown Property Bureau, which manages royally-owned properties and controls over 40 percent of all land in Bangkok's central business district. Last year Forbes magazine ranked Bhumibol as the world's wealthiest monarch, with a net worth estimated at over $35 billion.

Although the distinctions are nuanced, the old elite's power stems largely from its extensive land holdings, bureaucratic privilege and association with the royal palace; the nouveau riche, on the other hand, have more recently built their fortunes in private business and industry.

Thaksin, who straddled the line between the new and old elite by building a billion dollar private telecommunications empire through a state-granted virtual monopoly on mobile telephone and satellite operating concessions, rose to political prominence in 2001 on a populist platform that vowed to prioritize local over foreign interests.

That message struck a chord in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, and once elected Thaksin showered the rural countryside with an array of populist offerings, including village development funds, a cheap universal health care scheme and debt moratoriums for cash-strapped...
farmers. In financial terms, those policies never amounted to much more than 80 billion baht per year, a trifling sum compared to the over 1 trillion baht his government earmarked to rehabilitate indebted industrialists and property developers.

But the state-dominated broadcast media, where over 90 percent of Thais receive their news according to some academic estimates, hammered home the perception that Thaksin’s government was the first to make helping the rural poor a priority. But there has long been a development push into rural areas, and Thailand already has some of the best rural roads in Southeast Asia, electricity in over 95 percent of national households and an extensive, if under-financed, educational and health care infrastructure. Thaksin’s pro-poor claims were often more hype than reality.

At the same time, his democratically elected government was run in controversial authoritarian fashion. He openly questioned the efficiency of parliamentary processes, opting instead to unilaterally pass controversial legislation by executive decree. He tampered with the independence of institutions that were meant to check and balance power, and cracked down hard on critical media, both foreign and local.

His so-called “war on drugs” campaign resulted in the extrajudicial killing of over 2,300 drug suspects, while his heavy-handed policies towards southern Muslims was at least partially responsible for reigniting a dormant insurgency that has now killed thousands. He also exhibited favoritism in military promotions, leapfrogging his own military academy classmates over more experienced and deserving soldiers, culminating in the promotion of his first cousin to the post of army commander.

But it was Thaksin’s perceived co-optation of royal images and symbols to win over rural constituencies that sparked suspicions among the royalist establishment that he intended to fill the power vacuum expected to open upon Bhumibol’s eventual passing with his own brand of strongman leadership. For instance, many royalists were outraged when Thaksin presented Bhumibol with one of his 30 baht health care cards while the monarch was recuperating in hospital.

The so-called “yellow shirts” of the People’s Alliance for Democracy movement first mobilized on the potent charges that Thaksin had shown disloyalty to the throne — allegations he has consistently and strenuously denied. Those anti-royal charges, first aired in September 2005 by media mogul and PaD co-leader Sondhi Limthongkul, captured the imagination of Bangkok’s middle class and galvanized a potent street movement mobilized mainly around defense of the monarchy and related themes.

The protests set the stage for the September 2006 coup, which military leaders said was warranted because of Thaksin’s alleged corruption, anti-democratic tendencies and disloyalty to the crown — the very accusations the PaD pinned on Thaksin during its several months of destabilizing protests.

A military-appointed and highly ineffectual government, led by Privy Councilor and former army commander General Surayud Chulanont, abrogated the progressive 1997 constitution, replaced it with a less democratic version that included an amnesty for the coup-makers and allegedly attempted to fix the December 2007 elections in favor of the conservative opposition Democrat Party.

That did not happen. Instead, the newly formed People’s Power Party, which was aligned with Thaksin, prevailed in the election and established a new government under the leadership of veteran politician and royalist Samak Sundaravej,
who vowed to broker a truce between the exiled Thaksin and the palace. Samak overestimated his powers of persuasion and by August Thaksin was convicted and sentenced to two years in prison on criminal conflict of interest charges related to a land deal brokered between the government and his wife in 2003.

Thaksin fled the country before the ruling and from exile has questioned the legitimacy of the verdict. Soon thereafter authorities moved to permanently seize 76 billion baht ($2.2 billion) worth of his and his family’s assets frozen since the 2006 coup in Thai bank accounts. The funds are believed to be the bulk of the exiled former premier’s personal holdings. By late August, the PAD stepped up its destabilizing protests against Samak’s administration by laying siege to Government House.

A controversial court decision the following month knocked Samak from power, paving the way for the appointment of Somchai Wongsawat, a former judge and Thaksin’s brother-in-law, to the premiership. His appointment sparked PAD allegations of nepotism and the protest group intensified its demand for Somchai’s resignation after a violent police crackdown on its members in front of parliament in early October. When Somchai refused to budge, the PAD seized and closed down for over a week Bangkok’s main international and domestic airports in November, stranding tourists, crippling trade and severely damaging the country’s international image.

That crisis was defused by yet another controversial court ruling, this time on electoral fraud charges that dissolved the PPP and banned its senior executives from politics for five years. Thaksin’s supporters claimed the verdict was tantamount to a “judicial coup” and complained that the courts had taken sides in the political conflict. With key defections among previous
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Thaksin supporters, the long-time opposition Democrats formed a new coalition government in December led by Abhisit Vejjajiva.

News reports soon emerged claiming that the top military brass were instrumental in building the coalition, implying that Abhisit owed his government’s existence to behind-the-scenes military maneuvers. On that and other grievances, the Thaksin-aligned UDD have this year organized a series of “pro-democracy” protests, demanding among other things the dissolution of parliament, snap elections and restoration of the 1997 constitution.

Thaksin and the UDD upped the ante by calling for a “people’s revolution” and publicly accusing certain Privy Councilors of complicity in plotting the 2006 military takeover - charges that the royal advisors have all denied. Protest leaders have also said they are in a struggle against an “aristocracy” that has long undermined the development of Thai democracy.

The UDD’s own democratic credentials were called into question when the protest group’s leaders abandoned their previous claim to non-violent struggle and in early April aggressively ramped up their activities. Red shirt-wearing protesters blockaded traffic in central Bangkok, disrupted a planned ASEAN summit and violently attacked Abhisit’s personal vehicle in what government officials have since claimed was a botched assassination attempt.

The military eventually restored order on April 13, though not without controversy. Thaksin and UDD leaders claimed that soldiers fired on and
killed red shirt protesters, while the government and army claimed nobody was killed in the operation, which was widely lauded by the local print media for its perceived professionalism and restraint especially in comparison to traumatic events in 1973, 1976 and 1992 when harsh military crackdowns on student protests led to many deaths. Exiled UDD co-leader and Thaksin confidante Jakrapob Penkair hinted in press interviews after the military crackdown that Thaksin's supporters could launch an insurgency to press their claims, though few political analysts have taken his call to arms seriously.

In retrospect, it's now clear that Thaksin and the UDD were angling for a violent state response that they could leverage to strategic effect in promoting their cause, both locally and internationally, as a democratic one. While the UDD undoubtedly mobilized potent symbolism and significant numbers, the protest group's lurch towards violent brinksmanship was likely more a reflection of Thaksin's growing desperation rather than a demonstration of political strength.

The Thai government has intensified its quest for Thaksin's extradition, narrowing significantly the number of countries he may now travel to without risking arrest. Meanwhile, there are growing indications that the Thaksin-aligned opposition Peua Thai party, the third incarnation of his original Thai Rak Thai juggernaut, is at risk of further splintering with major defections to newly formed government coalition partner Bhum Jai Thai reportedly in the offing.

Whether this means Thaksin is a spent force and the establishment forces that have lined up behind Abhisit's government have won the day is still uncertain. In hopes of shoring up their flimsy democratic mandate, the Democrats are believed to be preparing for snap elections in early- or mid-2010, coinciding with a forecasted economic upturn and after the implementation of constitutional reforms.

Assuming the pro-Thaksin Peua Thai can stay reasonably unified, it's still possible that the party can leverage the exiled leader's popular brand into another election win — though that's less likely than before with the strong emergence of Bhum Jai Thai, a party that aims to compete through similar appeals to populism in Thaksin's traditional strongholds in the north and northeastern regions of the country.

All bets are off, however, if in the interim the 81-year-old ailing Bhumibol passes from the scene. With Thaksin and his political allies on the back foot for now, earlier concerns that they may attempt to complicate the delicate royal succession have in some measure receded. Bhumibol has in recent months signaled that Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn should inherit the throne, dampening earlier speculation among diplomats and palace insiders that the popular Princess Sirindhorn might receive the royal nod instead.

Even so, some Bangkok-based diplomats believe the military might be tempted to suspend democracy and temporarily seize power to ensure a smooth royal succession, particularly if there is even a hint of instability stemming from the transition. It's unclear how Thaksin and the UDD, which in recent street protests have taken hard aim at both the military and royal advisors, might react in such a scenario. What's clearer is that as the end of Bhumibol's reign draws nearer, so too does the uncertainty surrounding Thailand's political future.

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