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Thailand's Red Networks: From Street Forces to Eminent Civil Society Coalitions

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Abstract

The emergence of the red shirt coalitions was a result of the development in Thai politics during the past decades. They are the first real mass movement that Thailand has ever produced due to their approach of directly involving the grassroots population while campaigning for a larger political space for the underclass at a national level, thus being projected as a potential danger to the old power structure. The prolonged protests of the red shirt movement has exceeded all expectations and defied all the expressions of contempt against them by the Thai urban elite. This paper argues that the modern Thai political system is best viewed as a place dominated by the elite who were never radically threatened 'from below' and that the red shirt movement has been a challenge from bottom-up. Following this argument, it seeks to codify the transforming dynamism of a complicated set of political processes and actors in Thailand, while investigating the rise of the red shirt movement as a catalyst in such transformation.

Key words

Thailand, Red shirts, Civil Society Organizations, Thaksin Shinawatra, Network Monarchy, United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, Lèse-majesté Law

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Introduction

The Thai crisis that erupted in late 2005 and led to the military coup in 2006 ousting the elected government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has been unmistakably characterized as a color-coded conflict between two main factions in the political society — the yellow shirts who submit their loyalty to the traditional elite and the red shirts who represent a wide spectrum of the masses, from the low and middle classes and from the rural and urban areas. The aim of the yellow shirts is unambiguous—maintaining the old status quo whereby the political power remains tightly in the hands of the elite, consisting of the palace, the military, senior bureaucrats and allied businesses.¹ And they have done this in the name of protecting the monarchy, the inviolable icon of the Thai state.² On the contrary, the red shirts have generally sought to shift the obsolete political consensus which has over the years given them little benefit. This consensus among Thai elite often treats with little respect the electoral process. Thus, the red shirt movement's agendas have been to re-strengthen the electoral democracy, hoping to exercise the power of the votes to contest the elite's political domination. Only by reconsolidating the election process will political power and national wealth be distributed more fairly and equally. The main focus of this study is on the rise of the red shirts in the Thai political body. The red shirt civil society coalitions are a specific type of a grassroots movement bringing together alliances of disparate organizations in pursuit of a common objective. They operate within the space that exists between the formal political system and the public.

The red shirt coalitions have emerged in the context of a popular mandate being removed in illegitimate and illegal manners by the state's machinations. Such popular mandate, for the red shirts, was the only channel in which their demands could be fulfilled. Pitting themselves against the elite's overwhelmingly dominant power within the formal system, the red shirts began to form loose coalitions before eventually transforming themselves into an organized movement. Civil society coalitions elsewhere may be a part of the creation of a sphere that keeps the state in check. As American political scientist Larry Diamond defines civil society as “the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, self-supporting and autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or a set of shared rules. It is distinct from society in general in that it involves citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas, exchange information, achieve mutual goals, make demands on the state and hold the state officials accountable.”³ But the red shirt coalitions have moved one step upwards in redefining their own roles and functions as non-state actors working to radically change the Thai traditional political structure, from the one that serves the elite, now known collectively in Thai as the *amart*, to the one that serves the underprivileged class, or the *phrai*. But such mission has proven to be arduous. First, the old elite, depicting the red shirts as a systemic threat to their power interests, have gone on the political offensive to eradicate them, including the use of force, and lately, laws. Second, despite their effective agendas and image of a well-organized movement, the red shirt coalitions comprise of strange political bedfellows — an

1 See Federico Ferrara, *Thailand Unhinged: The Death of Thai-Style Democracy*, (Singapore: Equinox Publishing, 2011), p. 75.

2 Michael H. Nelson, 'People's Sector Politics' [Kanmueang Phak Prachachon] in *Thailand: Problems of Democracy in Ousting Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra*, Southeast Asian Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong, Working Paper No. 87 (May 2007), p. 19. Also see, Antonio L. Rappa, “Whither Civil Society in Thailand?”, *RSIS Commentaries*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Paper No. 92/2008 (27 August 2008).

3 Quoted in MD. Al-Amin, “In Search of Reality: Promoting Democratic Good Governance through Civil Society”, *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (January-March 2008), p. 9.

amalgam of pro-Thaksin, pro-democracy, anti-*amart* or even anti-monarchy factions. Consequently, they have entertained different strategies, ranging from peaceful to violent measures. Such diverse views have sometime prevented them from producing a unified stance, thus revealing certain vulnerabilities within the movement.

Within the domain of Thai studies, little attention has been paid to the significant role of the red shirts as civil society coalitions, especially the way in which they have embarked on overthrowing the old political consensus. Early analyses on the red shirts delivered a misleading conclusion that their movement was merely a proxy of another set of the pro-Thaksin elite. Indeed, the birth of the red shirt coalitions was as a result of the development in Thai politics during the past two decades. Civil society coalitions may have been around in Thailand for some time, as reflected in their role in the students' movement in the 1970s and the 1992 pro-democracy protests. Yet, they only represented certain groups in society, particularly those associated with the middle class. This character stands in stark contrast with the emerging red shirt movement which is the first organization campaigning for a larger political space for the Thai masses at a national level while engaging supporters from across different sectors in society. This explains why the red shirt movement has been projected as a potential danger to the old power structure. This study argues that the red shirt civil society coalitions are the first real mass movement that Thailand has ever produced due to their approach of directly involving the grassroots population. The prolonged protests of the red shirt movement had exceeded all expectations and defied all the expressions of contempt against them by the Thai urban elite. The modern Thai political system is best viewed as a place dominated by the elite who were never radically threatened 'from below'.⁴ Even during the high tide of the Cold War in Thailand, the communist movement, blown up as a serious threat to the power position of the elite, simply lacked mass support. What also differentiated the communist movement from the red shirt coalitions was the fact that while the former was painted as the outlawed enemy of the state, the latter has upheld tightly to a pro-democracy agenda, thus giving them a sense of legitimacy. Apparently, the red shirt movement has been a threat from bottom-up, a challenge from the *phrai* against the *amart*, and the embodiment of a rhetorical class war in a deeply divided Thailand. The country has long been ruled by power 'from above'; but this kind of politics is increasingly coming apart at the seams. The red shirt civil society coalitions have actively played their part in accelerating that from-below process.

The Past Life

In investigating the rise of the red shirt networks, it is imperative to briefly revisit the past life of Thai civil society organizations. The history of Thai civil societies is not a long one since the discourse of 'mass mobilization' is rather new in Thai political consciousness. Thailand may have been transformed from an absolute monarchy into a constitutional monarchy in 1932. But democracy has proven to be a rare 'commodity' throughout Thailand's recent memory. The country had long been governed by a series of military regimes endorsed by the head of the state — the monarch.⁵ Together, they successfully crafted an elite-centric political consensus that warranted their power interests. At times when Thailand was not under despotic rule, the old elite continued to work with or weaken civilian governments in order to prevent disturbances to political consensus. Under this

⁴ Speech of Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker at the "Review of Thai Social Movement" seminar held on 17 September 2010 at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Thailand. In, "The Implications of Coloured Movement", Bangkok Post, 23 September 2010.

⁵ Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2006), p. 195.

circumstance, political space was severely limited; and therefore it slowed down the advancement of civil society organizations. Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker explained further that in Thailand, there has been no decisive break or disjuncture involving mass mobilization. There was no nationalist movement against colonial rule, no war defeat discrediting the elite. The revolution against absolute monarchy in 1932 enjoyed wide support but required no mass mobilization. The communist insurgency of the 1960s and 1970s was located deep in the forests and hills and never swelled into a mass uprising. Moreover, peasant movements and labor agitation have been localized.⁶ In other words, the Thai political structure did not necessarily and instantly provide a breeding ground for civil society organizations to perform as effective resistant agents against the elite's interests protected by successive regimes.

Thailand's civil society organizations grew out of the concept of *pracha sangkhom* which literally means the society of the people. Early civil society organizations clearly exhibited their adherence to the concept of 'working for the people' but functioned with great difficulty particularly under non-democratic regimes. Some of these organizations included the labor movements election monitoring agencies like Poll-Watch and Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) which were regarded as the new citizens' movement groups, as well as the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), a group closely associated with Progressive Grassroots Movements.⁷ While entertaining different objectives, they shared a similar vision of a constant struggle for political, economic and policy power in society threatened by the state's abuse of power. Scholars in this field, including James Ockey and Kevin Hewison, pointed to the mass protests in the 1970s and the overthrow of the Suchinda Kraprayoon government in 1992⁸, as representing civil society at its height in Thailand.⁹ The periods coincided with Thailand's phenomenal economic growth especially in the second half of the 1980s which undoubtedly played a key role in entrenching Thai democracy in the 1990s. Surin Maisirikrod argued that the economic boom led to an expansion of the middle/managerial class, who were often suspicious of government's restrictions in political, economic and social life. The middle class indeed served as a core element of civil society in the early days.¹⁰

Despite ample opportunities to further progress their organizations under a more favorable atmosphere, many civil society groups remained weak owing to a myriad of reasons. First, although notable protests occurred, therefore implying mounting levels of social organization, Danny Unger characterized these occurrences as *ad hoc*. In general, Thais

6 Speech of Pasuk and Baker.

7 Bidhayak Das, A Study of Changes in the Civil Society in Thailand and South Korea—Focused on the Post-dictatorship Period, M.A. Dissertation, Sungkonghoe University, 2009, pp. 15 and 20.

8 In February 1991, Army Chief General Suchinda Kraprayoon removed the Chatchai Choonhavan government and set up as a governing body the National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC). The NPKC appointed former diplomat Anand Punyarachun as prime minister. Anand's interim government promulgated a new constitution and scheduled parliamentary elections in March 1992. A government coalition with 55 percent of the lower house was formed and appointed Suchinda as prime minister. Massive public protests immediately followed, leading to deadly clashes between the military and the protesters, an incident is now known as "Black May 1992."

9 Robert B. Albritton and Thawilwadee Bureekul, *Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy in Thailand*, Working Paper Series No. 4 (Taipei: National Taiwan University and Academia Sinica, 2002), p. 5. Also see, Kevin Hewison, "Responding to Economic Crisis: Thailand's Localism"; and James Ockey, "Civil Society and Street Politics: Lessons from the 1950s"; both in *Reforming Thai Politics*, edited by Duncan McCargo (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2002).

10 Surin Maisirikrod, "Civil Society, Accountability and Governance in Thailand: A Dim Case of Participatory Democracy", in *Globalization and Its Counter-forces in Southeast Asia*, edited by Terence Chong, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008), p. 104.

appeared to participate only tentatively and were seldom associated with sustained, organized groups.¹¹ There were no defined agendas among some civil society organizations. Besides, there was a lack of coalitional spirit. Likeminded civil society groups tended to work separately, declined to cooperate with one another, and in some cases even competed among themselves, hence highlighting the state of factionalism within the family of Thai civil societies. Second, back in the past, channels to access civil society organizations were largely restricted. This was coupled with the state censorship which was deeply embedded in the political system and within the media industry.¹² Only in recent times has the proliferation of new media technology, such as the Internet, the extension of cable and the wireless infrastructure, permitted a greater access to civil society groups and their activities. But they continue to face the same old issue of the suppression of freedom of expression. Third, the trait of Thai individualism also accounted for the absence of significant development of cooperative associations especially in rural Thailand. A sense of self-reliance resulted in an avoidance of anything but superficial interaction, making Thais wary of group memberships or other associations that contributed to vigorous participation in activities associated with civil society movements.¹³ Fourth, and as emphasized by Surin, past civil society organizations did not have their board-based foundation supported by the grassroots communities as claimed. Pasuk reaffirmed that their approaches were largely 'urban' with roots in the modernist middle class who had faith in industrialization, modernization, and liberal representative democracy.¹⁴ Civil society coalitions of yesteryears were motivated by the middle class, hence precluding the building of genuine civil societies from below. It was evident that students, intellectuals and white-collar workers were leading mass protests in the 1973, 1976 and 1992 political crises. But the character of the Thai civil society coalitions shifted following the assumption of power of Thaksin in 2001. Then, Thaksin sought to break the mold of traditional power by widening a political space for his supporters in rural areas to play a principal part in the transformation of Thai politics, ironically despite the fact that the latter also curbed the freedom of civil society organizations. This marked the beginning of the red shirt civil society coalitions – representatives of new social strata and the bottom rungs of society wanting a louder voice and a greater share of pie while refusing to accept outcomes determined by power brokers at the top.¹⁵

The Context

This section discusses the political conditions responsible for the formation of the red shirts civil society coalitions. In other words, it asks: How did they arrive at the political scene?

11 See, Danny Unger, *Building Social Capital in Thailand: Fibres, Finance, and Infrastructure*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Quoted in Albritton and Thawilwadee, *Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy in Thailand*, p. 6.

12 Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, *New Media for Civil Society and Political Censorship in Thailand*, Paper presented at the International Conference on New Media and Civil Society, in Bhatapur, Nepal,

29 April-2 May 2007, p. 2. The author's own copy.

13 Steven Piker, "The Relationship of Belief Systems to Behaviour in Rural Thai Society," in *Modern Thai Politics: From Village to Nation*, edited by Clark D. Neher, (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 114-32. Also see, J.A. Mulder, "Origin, Development, and the Concept of Loose Structure in the Literature about Thailand", in *Loosely Structured Social Systems: Thailand in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Hans-Dieter Evers, (New Haven: Yale University, 1969).

14 See, Pasuk Phongpaichit, "Civilising the State: Civil Society and Politics in Thailand", *Watershed*, Vol. 5 No. 2 (November 1999-February 2000).

15 Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "After the Red Uprising", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 172, No. 4 (May 2009), p. 39.

First, explicating the Thai political context is necessary. As alluded to earlier, the Thai elite embarked on a life-long project of preserving the old status quo, hence their power interests in politics. In past years, a large volume of literature has focused on this particular elite-crafted political structure and its impact on Thai democratization. For example, one of the most significant works in this category is *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism* authored by Thak Chaloemtiarana.¹⁶ This book offers a comprehensive study of former Prime Minister Sarit Thanarat's paternalistic and militaristic regime, as well as the ways in which he shaped modern Thai politics, in part by rationalizing a symbiotic relationship between his own office and the Thai monarchy. But it is the pioneered work of the British professor Duncan McCargo in 2005 that introduced a new angle of looking at Thai politics. McCargo suggests that the best way to understand Thai politics is to explain it in terms of political networks. The leading network of the period 1973-2001 was centered on the palace, coined by McCargo the 'network monarchy'.¹⁷ The network monarchy, albeit without formal functions in Thai politics, has actively used its proxies to influence and dictate the political process. The chief proxy of the network monarchy is General Prem Tinsulanonda, former prime minister and currently president of the Privy Council. Members of the network monarchy include the traditional elite in the military, the bureaucracy and big businesses. This group of elite has been behind the strengthening of the 'nation-Buddhism-monarchy' concept because they recognized how it could render them political interests. McCargo's thesis is useful in the analysis of the pre-2001 Thai traditional power structure with the monarchy sitting on top of its apex. It also serves to rationalize the subsequent power clashes between the network monarchy and Thaksin which led to the latter's downfall in 2006. The end of the Thaksin era witnessed the activation of the red-shirt civil society coalitions.

How did Thaksin emerge as a threat to the network monarchy? In actual fact, Thaksin was not the first serious attack against the elite network. In 1997, the financial crisis that swept across this part of the world already set the conditions for the challenge to the elite network. While the economic impact was catastrophic for the old power, the political consequences were much more damaging. The financial crisis forced Thailand to undergo a series of political reforms as a response to the upsurge of pressure from below. Thai poor felt the economic hardship and demanded acceleration of decentralization so as to gain better access to state resources. Incorporated in the political reforms was the drafting of a new constitution in 1997, dubbed 'the people's charter', with its specific focus on widening mass participation in the political process. For example, for the first time in Thai history, both houses were directly elected. Direct elections were also compulsory in small political units, including the *tambon* (sub-district) and provincial administrative organizations. In other words, the constitution sanctified the power of the electoral process.¹⁸ Thaksin rode on the wave of decentralization while promising many populist policies to attract the grassroots, the large segment long ignored by the network monarchy. What Thaksin did was to take advantage of the yawning gap between the elitist network and the poor. Most people living under the poverty line were farmers and workers in rural areas. The 2004 statistics reveal that the northeast and north regions accounted for 28.1 and 12.2 percent of

16 See Thak Chaloemtiarana, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

17 Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand", *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (December, 2005), p. 499.

18 Borwornsak Uwanno and Wayne D. Burns, *The Thai Constitution of 1997: Sources and Process Part II*, Thailand Law Forum, no date specified <<http://www.thailawforum.com/articles/constburns2.html>> (accessed 28 April 2011).

the poverty incidence respectively, two of the highest among other regions of Thailand.¹⁹ Inequality in income distribution was also evident in these areas. Thaksin's main source of votes in both the 2001 and 2005 elections came primarily from the north and northeast regions where income inequality was the most severe. The success of his populist programs implemented to wipe out poverty raised his popularity. He won landslide victory in the two elections, becoming the first prime minister to have served a full four-year term since 1932. Thaksin made known of his intention to empower the electoral process as part of enhancing his government's legitimacy.

Thaksin went on to secure his power position in politics, but his ambition antagonized the old power. He continued to exert his control over key institutions, in particular the military, and to revamp the bureaucracy by replacing an old sluggish system with a new business mentality. Thaksin turned Thailand into a company presided by himself as a CEO (chief executive officer).²⁰ At the beginning, he received enthusiastic support from the business community and the middle class in Thailand. However, they soon realized that the economic benefits only accrued to a small coterie of families clustered around Thaksin, and therefore began to rally against his administration. On the surface, this could be interpreted as merely a battle between two groups of elite. At a deeper level, Thaksin was not alone in fighting this battle. Thaksin was shrewd in projecting his image as a leader who drew his authority directly from the popular vote, was devoted to working for the people to fulfill the demands from below, and was openly disdainful of the old guards including bureaucrats, bankers, academics, newspaper editors and judges.²¹ The attack against Thaksin and his populist policies now became a wider attack against the electoral democracy, and more specifically, eligible voters in far-flung north and northeast regions. In the process of eliminating Thaksin, Bangkok middle class, who allied themselves with the old elite and who felt their minority status in the electorate being jeopardized by Thaksin's menacing populism, formed a movement under the name 'People's Alliance for Democracy' (PAD) and schemed to depose his government, first by street protests and second by provoking a military coup. The PAD members chose to wear yellow as a symbol of resistance against Thaksin's supposedly threatening regime. King Bhumibol Adulyadej was born on Monday, symbolized by the color yellow. In this connection, the PAD sent a strong message that Thaksin endangered the position of the king — the epitome of the network monarchy. In Thailand, disrespecting the most important icon of Thai national identity is a severe crime. Thaksin was conveniently put in the category of those with an anti-monarchy attitude; even when in reality the underlining issue pertained to Thaksin's reconstructing a new broad-based political consensus.

A coup was finally staged to purge Thaksin's looming threat to the network monarchy. But little did the military realize that the coup deeply instilled a sense of resentment among Thaksin's supporters at the grassroots level. They condemned the coup as a vicious tactic used to disparage the electoral democracy. What followed in the aftermath of the coup was the implementation of several measures designed to re-strengthen the position of the network monarchy, even in doing so the elite further alienated themselves from the grassroots. The post-coup government drafted a new constitution which effectively restricted the power and authority of the executive branch, presumably to prevent politicians like Thaksin from posing a threat to the elite in the future. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (Thais love Thais) Party was disbanded and its 111 executive members were barred

19 Source: National Accounts Office, Office of the Economic and Social Development Board (2004).

20 See Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin: The Business of Politics in Thailand*, (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2004).

21 Speech of Pasuk and Baker.

from politics for 5 years. The north and northeast residents were infuriated by the military's political intervention. Not only did the elite fail to address long years of grievances and hardships among the people in these most remote parts of Thailand, they took away Thaksin, their only 'savior', who was willing to listen to their plights and to rebuild a better life for them. Against this backdrop, the perceived political injustice compelled groups of Thaksin supporters at the grassroots to form a loose alliance initially with an anti-coup agenda, later to be known as the red shirt civil society coalitions.

Rising 'Red'

Sua daeng is the Thai name for 'red shirts'. The red shirt social movement first called itself the Democratic Alliance against Dictatorship (DAAD) to reflect its anti-coup identity. It came into being following the coup in late 2006. During its embryonic stage, the DAAD actually wore 'yellow'²² but switched to 'red' in 2007²³, while the old name DAAD was changed to the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) in 2009; these developments were possibly indications of the red shirt movement becoming a better organized force. 'Red' was picked to symbolize the group and to be in contrast with the yellow shirt movement.²⁴ But the choice of 'red' also has other political meanings. It expresses its rebellious attitude against the old establishment. Interestingly, red is also the color that once symbolized the Thai communists who were accused of scheming to overthrow the centuries-old monarchical institution. Expressively, 'red' was an emblematic color of the communist world, chosen for the hue of the flags of many communist states. 'Red' as the representation of the Thai Communist Party was meant to indicate its association with other global communist parties' iconography. But clearly, there was no historical link between the red Thai communists and the red shirts of the present day. The objectives of the DAAD were threefold: campaigning against the 2006 coup, supporting Thaksin and rejecting the appointment of General Surayud Chulanond, a royalist and a former army chief, as prime minister in the post-coup military-led government. The surfacing of the red shirts movement denoted that the conflict now flowed beyond a mere elite battle. Thaksin, despite everything in his background, became the instrument of a demand, bubbling up from below, for a fairer society. Thaksin was transformed by this force into a kind of politician common in most countries, but very new in Thailand — a stump populist who claimed the direct support of the people. He thus became a trigger for the

22 On occasion, they wore yellow, but not as a symbolic color. Initially, they wore normal dress, but especially when they announced their march to Prem's residence – leading then to the first major violence in this era of conflict—the leaders asked protesters to wear royal yellow to show that they were not protesting against the monarchy or the King, but against Prem.

23 But this was also a gradual and organic change, beginning with Sombat's No-Vote Group in 2007 – against the new constitution - using "red" which was slowly adopted by more and more protesters. At the confrontation on 2 September 2008 at Makhawan against the PAD, the UDD protesters wore red armbands to separate themselves from PAD. Soon, the UDD changed its strategy, and began their mass rallies in the stadium, and that was when they began to use red as a clear identifying color. The first time was at the rally at Muangthong Thani's Thunderdome on 11 October 2008. Hence, they were dubbed 'Red Shirts'.

24 Nick Nostitz argued that the color code of the "red shirts" was a fluid development. The first time "red" was clearly visible as the predominant color was their first mass event at Thunderdome in Muang Thong Thani on 11 October 2008. At first, the media labeled them "red shirts" as opposed to the "yellow shirts" of the PAD, a designation that was soon taken over by the UDD protesters themselves, as it also signified the wider network outside the UDD with similar aims. Taken from the New Mandala website <<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2010/12/03/legitimacy-crisis-in-thailand>> (accessed 28 April 2011). Nostitz is the author of *Red Vs Yellow: Thailand's Crisis of Identity*, (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2009).

mass of people to find meaning in the vote as a means to better themselves.²⁵ It is pivotal to note at the outset that the DAAD/UDD is only a part of the wider red shirt movement.²⁶ As the movement has grown, there are new splinter groups which may not share every vision with the UDD, such as a more radical *Daeng Siam* (red Siam) and several other groups that have functioned partly in the underground independently. Thus, as a result, the UDD does not always represent the overall red shirt civil society coalitions. However, for the purpose of this study, while acknowledging the differences between various groups, it treats the red shirt civil society coalitions as a collective entity sharing one ultimate objective: attacking the current elite-led power structure

Membership

Jim Taylor views that the red shirts are one of the most significant social movements to appear in modern Thailand. Within the movement, aside from some intellectuals and businesses with political interests wanting to see the restoration of the democratic process, members are mainly constituted by rural and urban poor who have experienced social, economic and political reforms at the grassroots under the Thaksin government.²⁷ However, even though one of the original objectives put forward by the UDD was to campaign for the return of Thaksin who has been in self-exile since the military coup²⁸, not all members of the red shirt civil society coalitions endorse a pro-Thaksin position.²⁹ Pasuk and Baker argue that the UDD's core was among the supporters of Thaksin in the north and northeast regions and the migrant population in Bangkok. But the movement has subsequently developed to include support from many in the intelligentsia and middle class who have no love for Thaksin but believe that democracy is under threat. An element of their supporters is drawn from a new generation of young 'netizens' who learn by chatting on the social media. They are not fighting for Thaksin, but want genuine democracy. Some of the supporters hold socialist or republican ideas, but probably these are the minority.³⁰

Meanwhile, Viengrat Netipo explained that the red shirt civil society coalitions are a combination of 'multi-layered groups' of people in society. Those who identify themselves with the red shirts movement are not restricted solely to lower class citizens or the poor, but they also come from the middle class. Viengrat further elaborated that although most of the middle class members in the red shirt coalitions are in the 'lower middle class', there are also representatives of 'higher middle class' who lend their support to the red shirts'

25 Speech of Pasuk and Baker.

26 The UDD is by far the largest organization. Nevertheless, at grassroots level there is less distinction between the UDD and the other groups than at leadership level. For example, many of the now mostly closed community radio stations in Pathum Thani may nominally be UDD but were often quite close to *Daeng Siam*, with both DJ's and ordinary protesters joining *Daeng Siam* events at the National Memorial.

27 Jim Taylor, "Tragedy and Loss", *New Internationalist*, 22 December 2010
<<http://www.newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2010/12/22/tragedy-and-loss/>> (accessed 29 April 2011).

28 Thaksin returned to Thailand on 28 February 2008, after the People's Power Party, which he supported, won the post-coup elections. But after visiting Beijing for the 2008 Summer Olympics, he did not return to hear the final Supreme Court sentence regarding his corruption charges and applied for asylum in the United Kingdom.

29 The first anti-coup groups that protested publicly- Giles Ji Ungpakorn and Sombat's 19 September anti-coup group-did not come from pro-Thaksin positions. Also, one of the first more prominent leaders - Dr. Weng-was even briefly part of the PAD. But of course, the majority of the early protesters came from a pro-Thaksin background, including other early groups such as the Saturday Group, and Nok Pilap Khao, and then of course PTV, led by Veera, Jatuporn, Jakrapob and Nattawut, who then were still a secondary leader.

30 Speech of Pasuk and Baker.

agenda.³¹ In sum, the red shirt civil society coalitions are apparently constituted by a diverse cross-section of society. Predominant members are those from the rural areas in the north and northeast regions. But some 'reds' are also residing in the elite's power center Bangkok, particularly those of the middle class and some urbanites with rural roots. They distinguish themselves as those lacking in traditional elite's patronage power. In other words, they are 'outside' of the network monarchy. Admittedly, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint where exactly the headquarters or power bases of the red shirt civil society coalitions are. Based purely on the seemingly preferred locations for red shirt movement's activities in the north and northeast regions, one finds that the following provinces often serve as 'playgrounds' for the red shirts: Lop Buri, Udon Thani, Suphan Buri, Ubon Ratchathani, Chanta Buri, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Kalasin, Chon Buri, Anthon, Nakhon Sawan.³² The other difficulty is that no one is quite certain about the total number of the red shirt members. Even estimation can be elusive due to the fluid nature of the coalitions and some of their underground activities which require membership confidentiality. Nick Nostitz, the author of the two-volume *Red Vs Yellow*, opined that it is easy to find out the official members of the UDD as they have computerized files over their membership. The other groups, such as *Daeng Siam*, 24th of June Group, or the different Facebook groups, have no such membership files. Yet, Nostitz was confident that the smaller groups are only in the thousands at most. Many UDD members do agree with *Daeng Siam* ideology, but will not come out in the open with their views. It also depends on the different provinces, and how well their organizations have been managed. In Udon Thani in the northeast region, for example, one may find that their organizational structures are well established whereas in other provinces, although the support for the red shirts is overwhelming, existing groups are not well organized.³³ The membership issue gets even more complicated in the case of 'on-the-fence supporters and sympathizers' because some of them have rarely attended the red shirt protests. In the meantime, according to one source quoted in *Bangkok Post*, the number of red shirt supporters in the north and the northeast being mobilized en masse might just reach one million (2010).³⁴ This figure can be seen as an overestimation, considering the average turnout number of red shirt supporters of less than 100,000 in each rally in Bangkok.³⁵ It can also be deemed as underestimation, considering the total number of those who voted for Thai Rak Thai Party which amounted to 19 million in 2001 and 16 million in 2005. But again, not all members of the red shirt movement voted for Thaksin in the past.

Rhetorically, the red shirts have portrayed themselves as the underprivileged members of society because of their derived political and economic status. Because of their place in Thailand's intensely hierarchical social structure, they perceive themselves as *phrai*, an old word for serf in Thailand's version of an anachronistic feudal system, or *sakdina*, while describing the elites as *amart*, or a senior noble or official. The *phrai-amart* dichotomy has been used to legitimize the red shirt movement's struggle for equal rights, and more importantly the elimination of 'double standards'. Through this dichotomy, it illustrates the deep resentment against the inequalities of wealth, power and opportunity. The only way to establish some sense of equality is to break down the old consensus which has placed the

31 Presentation of Viengrat Netipo on the topic "Structural Context of the Thai Political Crisis: The Shift in Triangle of the Power Sphere Paper, at the AAS-ICAS Conference, Honolulu, Hawaii, 2 April 2011.

32 "Red Shirts in Simultaneous Provincial Protests", *The Nation*, 30 March 2009.

33 Email interview with Nick Nostitz, 30 April 2011.

34 Kamol Hengkietisak, "UDD Rally Unlikely to Topple Government", *Bangkok Post*, 13 March 2010.

35 But there were larger rallies in Khon Kaen in 2010, just before the big protests, and also a subsequent rally in Udon Thani with 60,000 to 80,000 people attending. It is quite significant that there is very little reporting on mass rallies in the upcountry in the media other than in the red shirts' own media.

interests of the *amart* – in this case, members of the network monarchy – at the heart of the Thai political structure. This dichotomy also emphasizes the stark division between urban and rural territories. The red shirt coalitions have depicted themselves as those from *bannok*, literally meaning rural residents. But perhaps, ‘subaltern’ would be a better translation, as it carries the meaning of those outside the hegemonic power structure which are not confined only within the rural residents group. The *bannok* terminology brings with it other significant political meanings, such as voicelessness and blindfoldedness; they were employed to boost a moral high ground among the red shirt members during demonstrations. Meanwhile, the *amart*'s portrayal of the red shirt movement as ‘the other’ has in many ways elevated the fighting spirit among the red shirt coalitions. For example, the yellow shirt movement once stated that the mostly rural red shirts were ‘buffaloes’, relegated not just to the lowest level of the human order, but to the animal world.³⁶ In another instance, the PAD said that Thai masses [reds] are too ‘uneducated’ to choose sensible leaders and resist vote-buying.³⁷ The otherness making thus becomes a convenient device for undermining political opponents. Lately, the new slogan, *taa sawang* or more eye-opening, has served to encourage the red shirt members to openly discuss even the most controversial issues like the role of monarchy in politics. *Taa sawang* has been anglicized in different versions, such as by Thongchai Winichakul as an ‘emotionally disillusioning process’ which suggests some of the complexities of the term. For Thongchai, ‘disillusionment’ not only captures the terrible disappointment felt by ordinary Thais who suddenly realized they had been deceived, but also the unraveling of the hyper-royalist myths and illusions.³⁸

Objectives

One key objective of the coalition, as stated earlier, has been to contest the existing dominant relations of power. However, it is not the sole objective of the coalitions which consist of other different kinds of ‘red’. The UDD issued six objectives of its movement: to achieve democracy and sovereignty belonging to the people; unite all people to fight against the aristocracy/elite network; non-violence; resolve economic problems of the people; establish a ‘true rule of law’ and eliminate double standards, and; cancel the 2007 constitution and reintroduce the 1997 people’s constitution.³⁹ But with so many different ‘shades of red’, other groups have, aside from one common objective of tearing down the old traditional power structure, pursued their other goals. For example, the *Daeng Siam* has called for a ‘peaceful democratic revolution’, although what exactly the ‘revolution’ means has not been clearly defined.⁴⁰ Groups, like the September 19 Network against the Military Coup, the Students’ Activity News Centre, Club of Saturday Lovers: Say No to Dictatorship, White Dove 2006: Reclaiming Democracy, Udon Lovers, and the Police’s Housewives Club, possess their own members and formulate their own strategies. Some have survived within the overall red shirt civil society coalitions. Some have vanished. Some are more radical than others, thus providing a useful context for the state to create a certain negative persona of the red shirt movement. As seen during the brutal crackdown on the red shirt

36 Taylor, “Tragedy and Loss”.

37 “Desperate Times in Thailand”, *The Economist*, 28 November 2008.

38 Quoted in Andrew MacGregor Marshall, “A Brief Guide to Thailand’s Royal Succession”, *Zenjournalist* <<http://www.zenjournalist.com/2012/10/a-brief-guide-to-thailands-royal-succession/>> (accessed 26 April 2013).

39 “Immediate Policies of United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship: Red in the Land”, unpublished bilingual document issued by UDD. Source: email discussions with Jim Taylor.

40 Source: The Announcement of Daeng Sayam (Red Siam) No. 2, Current Situation (The Middle of March, 2010). Author’s own copy.

members from April to May 2010, the Abhisit government accused some members of the red shirt coalitions of being ‘terrorists’, or ‘men in black’ who wanted to incite a civil war.⁴¹ At the same time, there have been some lurking questions of whether these ‘men in black’ may represent *agent provocateurs* working on behalf of covert government or other elements of Alfred McCoy’s ‘covert netherworld’ which is an invisible social interstice inhabited by criminal syndicates and secret services.⁴² Nonetheless, the different objectives act as one of the weaknesses of the coalitions. Jakrapob Penkair, a *Daeng Siam* leader, confided that the entire strategy of the current democratic movement [of the red shirts], including independents groups inside and outside Thailand, Thaksin and his team, and possibly the opposition Puea Thai Party, has not been uniformly conceived.⁴³ The lack of an articulate conception allows their opponents to construct many faces of the coalitions, ranging from being anti-monarchy, anti-elite, anti-royalists, anti-yellows, pro-Thaksin, pro-republic, pro-Puea Thai, or even pro-Cambodia.⁴⁴

The conflict between the red shirt coalitions and the traditional elite has sparked a fierce ideological debate over how Thailand’s democracy should develop. The red shirt coalitions have undoubtedly aspired to empower the electoral system and to remove the ‘double standards’ which of course means the reduction of the entrenched power of the *amart*. On the contrary, in defending their power position, the *amart* have exploited the monarchy as a political apparatus to attack the red shirt enemies. They have accused the red shirt members of tilting towards republicanism. In April 2011, Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha assigned an army officer to file a complaint against a number of red shirt UDD leaders for committing *lèse-majesté*.⁴⁵ *Lèse-majesté* is defined by Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code as defaming, insulting or threatening the king, queen, heir apparent or regent, and a complaint can be filed by any citizen. Any charges against Thais are a grave matter. Not only is the penalty of three to 15 years in prison severe, but the investigation and prosecution process is also opaque and grueling. The UDD leaders had denied the allegations and pledged never to pursue a *lom chao* (toppling the monarchy) campaign. Even Thaksin has repeatedly pronounced his continued loyalty to the much revered institution.

Ideologies

Different groups within the red shirt civil society coalitions embrace different ideologies as they strive toward achieving their common objectives. Some endorse peaceful means, while some take on the violent approach as a part of their ideologies. The UDD has issued a set of rules to which every UDD member and subgroups have to adhere to, but other independent groups are neither part of the UDD nor do they subscribe to the UDD’s rules. First, the UDD-led coalitions have sought to eliminate the rampant double standards. Since the coup of 2006, the network monarchy has applied different standards for its proxies and against its opponents. Here are some of the cases revealing such persistent double standards:

- Supporting the PAD’s political activities (overthrowing the Thaksin regime and that of his political nominees — Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej and Prime Minister

41 Robert Amsterdam and Dean Peroff, *The Bangkok Massacres: A Call for Accountability*, A white paper (July 2010), p. 46. Author’s own copy.

42 See Eric James Haanstad, *Constructing Order Through Chaos: A State Ethnography of the Thai Police*, PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008, p. 259.

43 In a private conversation with Jakrapob, October 2010.

44 Accusing the red shirt movement of being pro-Cambodia is basically an attack against both Thaksin who has forged close ties with Cambodia, and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen as an enemy of Thailand.

45 Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Thailand’s Military on the Offensive”, *Wall Street Journal*, 20 April 2011.

Somchai Wongsawat who is Thaksin's brother-in-law).⁴⁶ Restraining the red shirts' demonstrations and finally ordering a deadly crackdown on them in May 2011.

- Slow prosecution process against the PAD members who occupied the Suvarnabhumi Airport in late November 2008. Core red shirt leaders were arrested immediately after the crackdown.
- Queen Sirikit and Princess Chulabhorn attended the funeral of a yellow shirt member killed by the police in the clashes in front of the Parliament in 2008. No members of the royal family have visited the injured red shirt protesters.
- Thai Rak Thai Party and People's Power Party (Thai Rak Thai's reincarnation party) were dissolved in 2006 and 2008 respectively for electoral frauds. The pro-elite Democrat Party accused of misusing its development fund escaped the dissolution.
- PAD's media is free to operate. Websites, radio stations, television networks, publications belonging to, or sympathizing toward, the red shirt coalitions have been blocked and closed down.
- Red shirt civil society coalitions are almost without law protection, with stalled investigations in the case of Major General Khattiya Sawasdipol, a red shirt leader, being assassinated. No progress on the state report on the death of closer to 100 red shirt protesters as a result of the May 2010 crackdown.
- A number of red shirt members charged with *lèse-majesté*. Members of the network monarchy, including President of the Privy Council Prem Tinsulanond and former Prime Minister Anand Punyarachun, also criticizing a member of the royal family, have not been charged. This included the case in which PAD leader Sonthi Limthongkul repeating Da Torpedo's offending remarks (Da is a member of the red shirt movement). Sonthi was later acquitted of all charges.

Second, 'equality' is also a much desired ideology of the red shirt civil society coalitions. Double standards cause inequality and widen the gap between the two factions, with the red shirt movement being consistently deprived. To a great extent, it indicates the demand 'from below'. The search for equality, in the political, economic and social realms, has led some members of the red shirt movement to declare a 'class war' against the *amart*. Giles Ji Ungpakorn, the author of Red Siam Manifesto which inspired the *Daeng Siam*, argued "What we have been seeing in Thailand since late 2005 is a growing class war between the urban and rural poor and the old elite. Those who started this class war, only intended it to be an inter-elite dispute, but they have succeeded in unleashing major class forces. On the side of the elite are the royalist middle classes and the NGOs. It is of course not a pure class war. Due to a vacuum on the Left, millionaire and populist politicians, like Thaksin, have managed to provide leadership to the poor."⁴⁷ However, the notion of a 'class war' has proven to be just another rhetoric used to elevate a fighting spirit among the lower class members of the coalitions. In reality, the red shirt movement is an attack against the power structure, but not against business or the capitalist system. After all, Thaksin, the icon of some of the red shirt members, is a true face of capitalism. Although the support is largely class-based and the conflict has been drawn along the class line, the red shirt coalitions have no enemy class that they want to demolish.

46 Samak was charged with conflict of interests since he maintained his cooking television program while serving as prime minister. Meanwhile, the Court ordered the dissolution of Somchai's party, the People's Power Party, because one of its executive members was found guilty of committing electoral frauds.

47 Giles Ji Ungpakorn, "Class Struggle between the Coloured T-Shirts in Thailand", Journal of Asia Pacific Studies, Vol. 1, No 1 (2009), p. 83.

Third, 'pro-democracy' is central to the red shirts' ideology. This ideology is found in the coalitions' support for a one-man, one-vote system. The red shirt network wants the results of elections to be respected rather than scuppered by Bangkok elite. The recurring use of catchphrases, like 'defender of democracy', 'fight for democracy' or even 'die for democracy', has been put up against enemies of democracy in the elitist camp. Core leaders of the red shirt coalitions have recently attempted to trumpet this aspect of their ideology to the public. But they encountered a difficult dilemma: the need to use Thaksin's name to draw support from his diehard fans in the north and northeast regions and the need to disregard him so as to create a genuine pro-democracy reputation—but this in turn could also disappoint some of the pro-Thaksin supporters. It is subsequently manifest that the coalitions have begun to distance themselves from Thaksin, but not to cut all links with him. There are two important reasons behind the decision.⁴⁸ They do not want to be accused of working on behalf of Thaksin, a corrupt and immoral leader in the eyes of the *amart*. Sustaining intimate ties with Thaksin would give legitimacy to the network monarchy to continue to discredit the entire red shirt movement. The other reason is that a pro-democracy ideology would appeal better to neutral or 'colorless' members of society. It represents a strategic way of 'recruiting' the disaffected public who was not previously attached to any civil society organizations into the coalitions. Pro-democracy is a self-legitimizing ideology. It has opened the door for the red shirt coalitions to enhance its international profile as a force promoting a voice of democracy and rejecting the militarization of politics. In the past five years, the traditional elite have exploited their cozy ties with foreign allies while seeking their backing in the maintenance of their *ancien régime*. The United States, for example, which have traditionally enjoyed good relations with the palace and the army since the Cold War period, were pressured to reposition themselves to cope with the latest political development in Thailand. Washington thus tried to reach out to the red shirt coalitions to display its affinity of Thai democracy. But the response from the elite was predictably cold. When United States Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell bid to bring together top Thai officials and close associates of Thaksin in the red shirt camp at a joint breakfast meeting in Bangkok in May 2010, Prime Minister Abhisit declined the high level invitation. He criticized the United States of interfering in Thai politics.⁴⁹

It is crucial to underscore that while the red shirts coalitions have striven to emasculate the power of the network monarchy and criticize some of its leading members, specifically General Prem, they are careful not to be seen as being anti-monarchy. Indeed, respecting the monarchy has been an essential ideology of the red shirt coalitions for the fact that the monarchy is still an unfringeable national identity. Most of the red shirt members are open about their loyalty to the royal institution, although they are not necessarily royalists; in this category are all key UDD leaders. But it is also true that some elements within the red shirt coalitions may profess an anti-monarchy attitude.⁵⁰ They have spoiled the coalitions' standpoint vis-à-vis the monarchy which has in return provided an excellent opportunity

48 But one must bear in mind that Thaksin himself was inconsistent in his involvement with the red shirts – at times very active, and at other times, such as after the dispersal of the red shirt movement up to late December 2010, he almost disappeared from the scene.

49 Shawn W. Crispin, "US Slips, China Glides in Thai Crisis", *Asia Times*, 20 July 2010

<http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/LG20Ae01.html> (accessed 29 April 2011).

50 Increasing numbers of especially ordinary protesters are anti-monarchy now, to differing degrees, and often more radical than the leaders. Countless anti-monarchy graffiti appeared at the protest venues. Today, according to one source, the majority of red shirts are no longer loyal to the monarchy. Even the ones still loyal to the institution are strongly questioning the monarchy and individual members of the royal family.

for the elite to manipulate state mechanisms, such as the *lèse-majesté* law to curb the activities of the red shirts, and worse, to prosecute their leaders. The issue of the monarchy has created a fissure among red shirt members themselves. The UDD leaders, such as Jatuporn Prompan and Natthawut Saikua, stressed all UDD members' high regard toward the monarchy, and they only criticized proxies of the network monarchy, General Prem and Army Chief Prayuth, for interfering in politics.⁵¹ Some of the red shirts' sympathizers have suggested an immediate, thorough reform of the monarchy, not abolition, if the monarchy wants to survive in a new political environment. The most prominent figure in this group is Somsak Jeamteerasakul of Thammasat University. He has since been threatened with *lèse-majesté* and even a physical harm by mysterious forces.⁵² Meanwhile, there are reports that the anti-monarchy agents within the red shirt coalitions might be on the rise.⁵³ Signs of anti-monarchy keep appearing in various locations in Thailand, including graffiti, or in the form of accessories-for-sale, ranging from T-shirts, banners and stickers. These products however do not carry direct or obscene anti-monarchy messages; they come with secret codes and symbols. For example, a now-classic phrase often seen on T-shirts is *Ai-Hia Sung Kha, E-Ha Sung Ying*, which means, 'Bastard ordered the killing, bastard ordered to fire'. Because of the draconian *lèse-majesté* law, any direct accusation against the Thai monarchy is strictly a criminal offence.⁵⁴ Moreover, many websites, especially Facebook and Twitter accounts, have been set up with an anti-monarchy objective. They mostly contain scandals inside the wall of the palace. Hence, they have been blocked by the Thai authorities. A large number of webmasters of the so-called *lom chao* websites have been arrested and prosecuted over the years.⁵⁵

Strategies

As for the coalitions' strategies, street protests are fundamental to their success in opposing the Abhisit government. In November 2008, the UDD successfully organized one of its biggest gatherings at the Bangkok Rajamangala National Stadium to lend support for the then Somchai government. It was confirmed that the number of red-shirt protesters was up to 70,000.⁵⁶ The red shirts' assembly at the national stadium kicked off a series of street protests from 2008-2010. Frequently, the red shirts camped out and occupied the site of Sanam Luang, near the Grand Palace and not far from the House of Government. The demonstrations reached their first peak on 11 April 2009 when members of the red shirt coalitions travelled to Pattaya, stormed into the Royal Cliff Hotel and forced the cancellation of the ASEAN Plus Three Meeting, after briefly confronting with the royalist blue shirts, organized by a group of politicians aligning with the network monarchy. Two days later on the Thai New Year's day, they launched violent demonstrations in Bangkok, ransacked government offices, burned buses, and even attempted to harm Prime Minister

51 Jatuporn was accused by General Prayuth, the Army Chief, of making inappropriate remarks about the monarchy during the red shirt rally on 10 April 2011. See, "Jatuporn Vows to Campaign from his Cell if Remanded", *The Nation*, 14 April 2011.

52 "Somsak's Press Statement", Prachatai, 24 April 2011 <<http://www.prachatai.com/english/node/2441> > (accessed 30 April 2011).

53 Nirmal Ghosh, "Red Shirts Taking Hardcore Stance", *Straits Times*, 18 November 2010.

54 David Streckfuss, *Truth on Trial in Thailand : Defamation, Treason, and Lèse-Majesté*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon New York: Routledge, 2011.

55 "Political Prisoners in Thailand" Website reports that there are no accurate figure on how many have been charged under *lèse-majesté* laws, including those accused of violating Computer Crimes Act. Recent (2010) estimates are that there have been more than 300 cases since the 2006 coup <<http://thaipoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com/pendingcases/>> (accessed 30 April 2011).

56 In a private conversation with Jakrapob, late 2008.

Abhisit.⁵⁷ From March-May 2011, the red shirts protesters returned to the streets of Bangkok, demanding the resignation of Abhisit and the dissolution of parliament to pave the way for the elections. This ended tragically in the state crackdown on the red shirt demonstrators. Allegedly, they retaliated by burning down the Central World shopping mall, the location of their gathering at the Rachaprasong intersection.⁵⁸ A state of emergency was declared in the Thai capital. These incidents effectively generated a ruthless reputation for the red shirt civil society collations, and distinguished them from previous civil society organizations. The red shirt coalitions are different from the social movements of the 1990s, when groups or organizations of people got together to stage protests or sit-ins in order to air their grievances and bargain with government to advance their interests, mostly in cooperation with various non-governmental organizations. Obviously, the red shirts have become much more politically vigorous and influential. Massive crowds in each demonstration also indicate that the movement has effectively exercised its power from below.

Today, with the Thaksin-backed party, Puea Thai, in power, the red shirt civil society organizations are cooperating with it to push certain political and social agendas through parliamentary process, such as the proposal on amnesty (to emancipate red-shirt political prisoners). The Puea Thai has served as the 'sanctuary' of some of the core leaders of the red shirt coalitions. Jatuporn is a member of the Puea Thai. Nattawut is now Deputy of Commerce Ministry. Veera Musigapong was one of the TRT executives; he is a leading member of the red network but has gradually faded away since after he was set free from prison in February 2011 (Veera and other UDD leaders were arrested in the aftermath of the May 2010 violent demonstrations). However, the internal squabbling inside the party, the different party policies endorsed by different factions, the lack of credible leadership, and the ambivalent attitude toward its ties with Thaksin, all have impeded the development of red shirts-Puea Thai alliance. Some Puea Thai leaders, like Mingkwan Seangsuwan, wanted to distance the party from the red shirt coalitions—the move criticized by pro-Thaksin factions inside the party.⁵⁹ Apart from collaborating with the Puea Thai, the red shirt coalitions have unquestionably operated on behalf of the grassroots. With the UDD under the chairmanship of Thida Thavornseth, these coalitions capture and play along with the theme of 'political inclusion', arguing that the elite has incessantly interfered in politics, ignored the will of the majority, and undermined electoral democracy. The grassroots are the main source of legitimacy of the red network civil society organizations and the justification for their political activities.

Organization

Owing to their complex nature as being a 'meeting point' for diverse groups with different approaches yet sharing one objective, the red shirt civil society coalitions felt the need to craft their own interlinked structure as a network with multiple entryways and exits. The main concern among the movement's leaders is to stay active and interlinked among its dispersed nodes and yet, at the present time, to also remain discreet. The movement's core

57 Things got out of hand at the Interior Ministry on the 12 April 2009, where Abhisit declared the emergency decree. He was attacked by angry mobs; this was to be followed by a crackdown early morning the next day at about 3.30 am, at Samliem Din Daeng, in which bullets were also fired into protesters by the soldiers.

58 Other buildings in Bangkok and several city halls in the provinces were also burned. Some buildings in Bangkok were most likely not burned by red shirts, but by opportunistic looters. Email interviewing with Nick Nostitz.

59 "Mingkwan's Grim Career Path in Puea Thai", Bangkok Post, 26 April 2011.

leaders are either hiding, moving regularly across borders, or have already surrendered and imprisoned under questionable charges. The movement is committed to the building of collective identities which rely heavily on a combination of strong comradeship and individualistic nature of the masses.⁶⁰ But how do leaders of the red shirt civil society organizations communicate with each other? Jim Taylor elaborates:

“The rural masses through local-level leaders at the district determine to a large extent the direction of the movement of a protest group in consultation with provincial and regional leaders. The center then provides the platform for the articulation of the movement’s needs. The current UDD structure consists of a President/Chairperson, Secretary, and twenty-three committee members. Then under the committee are five sub-committees: northern region (three persons), northeast region (two persons), eastern region (three persons), central region (three persons; including Bangkok another four persons), and southern region (two persons). All elements in the movement are allowed to move separately and autonomously. Collective action requires consultation at all levels of the social movement. Importantly, the movement focuses on engendering grassroots empowerment for political participation and democracy. Up until the crackdown and state of emergency, there was a mobile unit deployed for holding one or two day field community workshops. This was part of the ‘democracy’ awareness-raising for the movement.”⁶¹

A more pertinent question is: what are the weaknesses of the coalitions? First, the red shirt civil society coalitions seem to be preoccupied with short-term concerns, rather than to plan a long-term vision to accomplish their objectives. Such concerns include the need to push their agendas, peace-making among factions within the coalitions and with Puea Thai Party, and constant retaliation against the traditional elite. These priorities have prevented the coalitions from laying out an effective long-term strategy to address questions like: What kind of agendas will the red shirt coalitions want to put forward now that their Puea Thai ally returns to power? And what will be the best way to sustain electoral democracy and protect it from the intervention of the *amart*? Second, one of the most difficult tasks is to reconcile the different approaches that separate the moderate members from the radical elements within the coalitions. Radicalism as an ideology and an approach among some factions has engendered a negative image of the coalitions. Lastly, while there are a number of rising intellectual leaders within the UDD, none has stood up and been able to replace Thaksin. These leaders may include more well-known figures – Thida, Veera, Jatuporn, Nuttawut, and others – former prominent judge Manit Jitchanklab, medical doctor Weng Tojirakarn (out of prison), Korkaew Pikulthong from Peau Thai Party (out of prison), Chinnawat Haboonpad (founder of taxi radio stations which were key communication channels for the red shirts), and Arisman Pongruangrong (surrendered). Some were reproached for abusing their MP position as they also played an active role in the UDD. Some were accused of being a part of the old corrupt regime Thaksin. The red shirt civil society coalitions are in need of a charismatic leader to take on the challenge against the old elite who have the ever powerful figurehead of their own. The by far most popular and charismatic red shirt leader is now Nattawut Saikua, currently serving as Deputy Minister of Commerce in the Yingluck Shinawatra government.

⁶⁰ See, Taylor, “Tragedy and Loss”.

⁶¹ Jim Taylor, “No Way Forward but Back?: Reemergent Thai Falangism, Democracy, and the New ‘Red Shirt’ Social Movement”, in Bangkok: May 2010: Perspectives on a Divided Thailand, edited by Michael Montesano, Pavin Chachavalpongpun, Aekapol Chonvilaivan, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).

Conclusion

The turmoil in Bangkok that started in 2006 and has lasted into the current period might be, on the one hand, dramatic, or to some even unique, in comparison with what happened in Thailand in the past. On the other hand, this is a story of a struggle for democracy. It shows a clash between two main players: the network monarchy and the masses. Thai academic Somsak Jeamteerasakul argued that at the core of the crisis lies the gigantic contest between two power blocs, one centered on the elective institutions (for example, parliament, political parties, and politicians), the other on the non-elective ones, with the monarchy itself at the latter's peak.⁶² The red shirt civil society coalitions have proclaimed themselves as defenders of democracy and set out to constrain the power position of the elite while reiterating the power of electoral system. What has made the Thai situation more acute, or even dangerously violent, is the fact that the much needed political transition is long overdue. The old establishment has for decades dominated political power without pressure from below. They got used to the absence of a check and balance system. So, civil disobedience has been a taboo in Thai politics.

Thaksin, for many, was a hero, in a sense that he dared to open up a once closed political space for a fairer competition even when it meant challenging the prerogatives of the network monarchy. His populism, no matter how shallow it was, greatly aided the process of eye-opening, making the grassroots realize their newfound power through the electoral process. The political liberalization combined with the improvement in economic wellbeing under the Thaksin regime resulted in an eagerness among the Thai underprivileged class to rise against the traditional status quo. In this context, the red shirt civil society coalitions have emerged as a potential movement from below and supported by the grassroots population. But the task to tear down the obsolete political consensus is a difficult one. The battle against the *amart* has been brutal. Internal fragmentation is also threatening the integration of the red shirt civil society coalitions. Despite these obstacles however, the red shirt coalitions have grown in strength. Their pro-democracy agenda is fundamental to their survival and eventually their success. As Thailand is moving into the period of greater uncertainty with the imminent royal transition and the expected reinvention of the network monarchy, the red shirt coalitions will become an even more indispensable civil society organizations to ensure that democracy will be safeguarded in that precarious process.

This article has attempted to codify the transforming dynamism of a complicated set of political processes and actors, while investigating the rise of the red shirt movement as a catalyst in such transformation. Positioning Thailand in a fiercely competing political setting between two networks, it seeks to elucidate the role of the red shirts as bottom-up civil society coalitions challenging the old order and restructuring a new political landscape in which achieving a true democracy is the ultimate objective. The fundamental message is that an organic social force, like the red shirt movement, has a significant role to play at the time when Thailand is entering a critical transition.

⁶² Somsak's statement can be found at <<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2010/12/03/legitimacy-crisis-in-thailand/>> (accessed 19 January 2011). Somsak is a lecturer at Thailand's Thammasat University.

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