

The Battle for Thailand

By [Walden Bello](#)

Global Research, June 07, 2010

[Foreign Policy in Focus](#) 2 June 2010

Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Nearly a week after the event, Thailand is still stunned by the military assault on the Red Shirt encampment in the tourist center of the capital city of Bangkok on May 19. The Thai government is treating captured Red Shirt leaders and militants like they're from an occupied country. No doubt about it: A state of civil war exists in this country, and civil wars are never pretty.

The last few weeks have hardened the Bangkok middle class in its view that the Red Shirts are "terrorists" in the pocket of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. At the same time, they have convinced the lower classes that their electoral majority counts for nothing. "Pro-Thaksin" versus "Anti-Thaksin": This simplified discourse actually veils what is — to borrow Mao's words — a class war with Thai characteristics.

Epic Tragedy

No doubt there will be stories told about the eight weeks of the "Bangkok Commune." As in all epic tragedies, truth will be entangled with myth. But one thing will be clear: The government's decision to order the Thai military against civilian protesters can never be justified.

The casualties are still being counted. Government sources say some 52 people were killed in the week ending on May 19. Bodies are, however, still turning up, including about nine that rescue workers discovered on Friday at the massive Central World shopping mall at the Rajprasong Intersection, which was torched by protesters. The final count is likely to be much higher. One soldier, for instance, claims to have counted 25 dead bodies on May 20, as he went with his unit on a room-to-room operation to flush out suspected Red Shirt protesters in the Siam Square area.

Red Shirt sympathizers accuse the military of indiscriminate shooting. They point to six people, including two medical personnel, shot by high-powered rifles outside the temple Wat Pathum Wanaram, where thousands of Red-Shirt supporters took refuge. A [report](#) by Thai academic Pipob Udomittipong documented in painstaking detail a military unit's unprovoked firing at a medic's van near the Red-Shirt stronghold at Lumpini Park, a few days before the May 19 assault.

While the Red Shirts count their dead, the Bangkok middle classes dwell on the 39 establishments and buildings that were burned down on May 19. The anti-Red Shirt Bangkok Post [editorialized](#): "City residents will rebuild and prove that the collective good is a force greater than the terrorists who laid waste to our homes and businesses."

Class War

The local and domestic media have portrayed the Red Shirts as a lower-class peasant rabble invading Bangkok from the country's impoverished northeast. This is a distortion. Some Red Shirts estimate that the masses that made up the Red Shirt demonstrators and sympathizers during the two-month-long mobilization were 70 percent from Bangkok and surrounding provinces, and 30 percent from the northeast, north, and other rural areas. Those who resisted the armed assaults at key Red Shirt fortifications and refused the Red Shirt leadership's advice to disperse peacefully before the military operation were mainly young people from Bangkok's lower-class districts, such as Klong Toey.

There is a strong class element in the struggle between the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts, which together form the government's mass base. Taxi drivers are mainly a Red Shirt lot, and in the aftermath of May 19 they're eager to blast the government and the Bangkok rich and middle classes to anyone willing to listen. Given the way that the Red Shirts and hundreds of their lower-class sympathizers not only in Bangkok but throughout Thailand have been attacked, arrested, and imprisoned in the last week, there is no reason to doubt the words of one driver that, "when the curfew is lifted, Thailand will witness deeds that have not been seen before in this country."

Who Ordered Whom?

Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajeva ordered the assault. But the question is: Who gave Abhisit, who responds to powerful figures within the Thai elite, the green light? The army command apparently didn't favor an assault on civilians and neither did the police, who largely favored the Red Shirts. General Prem Tinsulanonda, known as "Prem" to many Red Shirt partisans, is the most influential figure in the Royal Privy Council. Some Red Shirts may well believe that Prem, whom they see as a master of intrigue, is the villain of the piece. But what other Red Shirts mean by "Prem" includes others in positions of great authority.

Any suggestion that the King Bhumibol Adulyadej had something to do with the crackdown would be vehemently disputed by highly respected politician Anand Panyarachun. Anand said that, in his experience as prime minister, King Bhumibol always observed the constitutional rules of the game. He only provided advice "on request" and left it up to the political players to decide what to do. "This is what happened in May 1992, when he brought Chamlong and Suchinda [the warring leaders] together and said it would be desirable for them to do what was in the best interest of the people," Anand says. "He never specifies what is to be done."

Whatever the role of the king in the recent tragedy — if indeed he had any role at all — the Thai public is now engaged in a more explicit discussion of the role of the monarchy, something that used to be shrouded with vague allusions.

Democracy and its Discontents

How did Thailand get to this point? Perhaps the place to begin is May 1992, when the dictatorship of General Suchinda Kraprayoon gave way to a new era of democratic governance. Between 1992 and 1997, elections produced three coalitions. But these coalitions were parliamentary formations dominated by traditional party bosses and elites who delivered command votes, particularly in the rural areas, through their control of economic and bureaucratic sources of wealth. Little was done to address the social

grievances of the urban and rural poor.

As parliamentary democracy lost its luster the economy barreled along, with the Bangkok metropolitan area rapidly integrated into the global economy, via financial and production networks. The 10 percent GDP growth rate between 1985 and 1995 — the highest in the world, according to the World Bank — seemed impressive. But it masked deepening inequalities: between Bangkok and the rest of the country, between the city and the countryside, among social classes. Between 1988 and 1994 — the height of the boom that made Thailand Asia's "fifth tiger" — the portion of household income going to the top 20 percent of the population rose from 54 percent to 57.5 percent, while that going to the lowest 20 percent fell from 4.6 percent to 4 percent. In the 1960s, the income of the agricultural worker was one-sixth that of workers in other sectors; by the early 1990s, it was down to one-twelfth. Poverty became, as one economist said, "almost entirely a rural phenomenon."

When the bottom fell off the Thai economy during the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, the rural poor were suddenly joined in the ranks of the marginalized by almost one million Thais, a great many of them members of the urban working classes. And as globalization went awry, parliamentary democracy fell into severe disrepute as Thai governments seemed powerless to protect the people they were elected to serve from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In return for providing a \$72 billion fund to pay off the country's foreign creditors, the IMF imposed a very severe "reform" program that consisted of radically cutting expenditures, decreeing many corporations bankrupt, liberalizing foreign investment laws, and privatizing state enterprises.

When the government of Chaovalit Yongchaiyudh hesitated to adopt these measures, the IMF pressed for a change in government. The second Chuan Leekpai government complied fully with the Fund, and for the next three years Thailand had a government accountable not to the people but to a foreign institution. Not surprisingly, the government lost much of its credibility as the IMF's demand-reducing measures plunged the country into recession and stagnation.

The Two Faces of Thaksin

It was at in these straitened circumstances that Thaksin Shinawatra, a talented manager, adept political entrepreneur, and extremely effective communicator, achieved ascendancy. As a businessman, Thaksin had benefited from globalization owing to his firms' monopolistic position in private telecommunications, one of the economy's most globalized sectors. Yet he sensed that the financial crisis catalyzed popular fears about free-market globalization, smoldering resentment at the urban and rural elites that seemed to be cornering the country's wealth, and anger at the international financial institutions. On becoming prime minister in 2001, Thaksin made a number of dazzling moves. He paid off the country's IMF loan and kicked the Fund out of Thailand, initiated a universal health care system that allowed people to be treated for the equivalent of a dollar, imposed a moratorium on the payment of farmers' debts, and created a one-million-baht fund for each village that villagers could invest however they wanted.

This side of Thaksin won him a mass following among the country's poor, marginalized, and economically precarious sectors. But there was another side to Thaksin, the side that most of his urban and rural poor followers chose to ignore. Thaksin literally bought his political allies, constructing in the process a potent but subservient parliamentary coalition. He used

his office to enhance his wealth and that of his cronies. He failed to distinguish public interest from private gain.

Thaksin appeared to have created the formula for a long stay in power supported by an electoral majority. But then he overreached. In January 2006, his family sold its controlling stake in telecom conglomerate Shin Corporation for \$1.87 billion to a Singapore government front called Temasek Holdings. Before the sale, Thaksin had made sure the Revenue Department would interpret or modify the rules to exempt him from paying taxes. This brought the enraged Bangkok middle class into the streets to demand his ouster. Feeling mortally threatened by Thaksin's effort to redraw the landscape of Thai politics, the Thai establishment jumped onto the anti-corruption bandwagon. Unable to break Thaksin's parliamentary majority or to achieve a critical mass on the streets to sweep him from power, the establishment pushed the military to oust Thaksin in September 2006.

Coup and Continuing Crisis

The military was unable to restabilize the country, partly because of its own mistakes and partly because of Thaksin's recalcitrant mass base. The generals thus soured on direct rule. When the post-coup military-sponsored regime exited, elections brought two pro-Thaksin parliamentary coalitions to power. Frustrated at the polls, the elite middle-class alliance resorted to direct action, the most infamous of which was the anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts' seizure of the new Suvarnabhumi International Airport in December 2008. At the same time, the courts intervened to dissolve the dominant pro-Thaksin party, and Yellow Shirt politicians used coercion to detach some pro-Thaksin members and force them to join a new coalition centered around the minority Democrats, headed by Abhisit.

At that point, Thaksin's followers realized that only by mounting a show of force on the streets like the Yellow Shirts could they restore their political position as the country's majority power. Street warfare in spring 2009, which resulted in the cancellation of the ASEAN Summit in Pattaya, failed to dislodge Abhisit. But it proved to be a valuable dress rehearsal for the massive Red Shirt push that began in the middle of March this year.

Within an Inch of Victory?

To many observers, the Red Shirts were within an inch of victory two weeks ago, when they managed to elicit a five-point reconciliation plan from Abhisit that included dissolving parliament in September and elections in November. The government says hardliners among the Red Shirts sabotaged the agreement by demanding new conditions, aimed at making key government leaders accountable for the 20-plus deaths in an earlier clash that took place on April 10. The Red Shirt leadership, on the other hand, claimed that the haste with which the government took back its offer and ended negotiations showed it had been merely using the negotiations to buy time for the military crackdown, which came on May 19.

The surrender of the Red Shirt leadership and the repatriation of thousands of rural folk to their provinces will certainly not end the Red Shirt challenge. According to one pro-Red Shirt academic, the disaffected military, police, and government personnel that played a prominent role in the recent mobilizations will create a potent underground network that will provide leadership for the next phase of the struggle.

But the main push will come from the people themselves. Thailand, it is clear, will never be

the same again. A taxi driver summed up where things stand at this point: “The Bangkok rich think we are stupid people, who can’t be trusted with democratic choice. We know what we’re doing. So yes, they say Thaksin is corrupt. But he’s for us and he’s proven it. The Bangkok rich and middle classes see us as their enemy. If they think we’re finished, they should think again. This is not the end but the end of the beginning.”

Walden Bello is a member of the House of Representatives of the Philippines and author of A Siamese Tragedy: Development and Disintegration in Modern Thailand (London: Zed, 1998).

The original source of this article is [Foreign Policy in Focus](#)
Copyright © [Walden Bello](#), [Foreign Policy in Focus](#), 2010

[Comment on Global Research Articles on our Facebook page](#)

[Become a Member of Global Research](#)

Articles by: [Walden Bello](#)

Disclaimer: The contents of this article are of sole responsibility of the author(s). The Centre for Research on Globalization will not be responsible for any inaccurate or incorrect statement in this article. The Centre of Research on Globalization grants permission to cross-post Global Research articles on community internet sites as long the source and copyright are acknowledged together with a hyperlink to the original Global Research article. For publication of Global Research articles in print or other forms including commercial internet sites, contact: publications@globalresearch.ca
www.globalresearch.ca contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available to our readers under the provisions of "fair use" in an effort to advance a better understanding of political, economic and social issues. The material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving it for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes other than "fair use" you must request permission from the copyright owner.

For media inquiries: publications@globalresearch.ca