

Militant struggle in Thailand as anti government protesters clash with the army

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Events in Bangkok reveal a revolutionary situation is unfolding in the country writes Simon Hardy

The Red-shirt rebellion in Thailand shows no signs of decline despite government forces opening fire on demonstrators in the capital Bangkok on 10 April. The fighting left 20 people dead, 4 of them soldiers, and more than 800 injured as gun fights broke out between the opposing sides. Police firing tear gas and rubber bullets, before switching to live rounds, were defied by protesters hurling petrol bombs and shooting back.

The Red-shirt movement is a coalition of supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and various left wing forces opposed to the role of the military and the king in Thai politics. The current month long protest has seen Red-shirts blocking roads and occupying parts of Bangkok, as well as large-scale demonstrations in other towns across the country.

Clearly a large part of the ruling class in Thailand is terrified of this movement, and wants it driven off the streets. When the police moved into one of the encampments in the city centre the protesters defended themselves, setting up barricades and defying the order to move. After several hours of fighting the police and army withdrew agreeing a truce with the demonstrators to temporarily cease the fighting.

The Red-shirts draw a lot of their support from the poor and dispossessed in Thailand. They see the struggle for elections as a way of overthrowing Abhisit Vejjajiva who came to power in 2006 on the back of a military coup. The army and the ruling business elite in Bangkok hated Thaksin's populist programmes - seeing them as a dangerous concession to the poor. Thaksin himself, is not a principled friend of the poor by any stretch of the imagination. He was implicated in various corrupt and nepotistic activities (primarily around selling his shares in the country's national telecommunications firm) - a fact which the army and opposition forces used to remove him from power in a coup in 2006. When Thaksin was speaking at the UN he received the news that the army had taken power. The coup makers initially called the new government the 'Council for Democratic Reform under the Constitutional Monarchy'. The reference to the Constitutional Monarchy was quickly dropped because it dangerously exposed the role of the king in approving the coup.

The military ran the country for a year and introduced a new constitution which was less democratic than the old one, for instance appointing half the senate instead of electing them. They have used their powers subsequently to disband political parties that won elections, interfering in the democratic process with a frequency which is beginning to rival countries like Turkey.

Who is Thaksin?

That this movement focuses on restoring Thaksin is the greatest weakness of this movement. The courageous Red-shirts are willing to fight and die for a corrupt capitalist politician who made billions in telecommunications in the 1980s, describing himself then as a 'Genghis Khan type of manager'.

When his party ***Thai Rak Thai*** (Thais Love Thais) came to power in 2001 he introduced various programmes which provided some much needed relief for the poorest in Thailand. Many people point to the cheap health insurance which his regime provided. True this scheme allowed Thais to go to hospital and receive treatment for less than a dollar, but it still has not provided universal health care for everyone, and still maintains the profit motive at the heart of the health industry. He also froze debt repayments for the poor and made it easier for them to get loans from banks instead of loan sharks, as well as giving each village a grant to set up a small business. Thaksin thus built himself a reputation as a philanthropist who wants to offer more possibilities for the poor and rural villagers within the market economy. He is no anticapitalist.

Indeed, it is not so much that the TRT party set new standards for helping the poor, but the little they did provide seemed like a revolution compared to the previous Democrat Party governments, who showed no interest in anti-poverty measures. In recent years the Democrat party has organised a 'Peoples Alliance for Democracy', made up mostly of upper middle class people (but also some trade union leaders), who are sympathetic to the role of the military and the King in keeping order and security in Thailand. It was the PAD that blockaded the international airport in September 2008 and brought down the government, resulting in a pro PAD government taking power.

Currently spending his time in Montenegro, home of various playboy billionaire figures, Thaksin is relying on the tenacity and enthusiasm of his supporters to bring him back to power. His recent comments, portraying the Red-shirts as 'common people' locked in combat with the 'Bangkok elite' are largely true, but he is certainly not one of the 'common people.' In fact Thaksin is a bourgeois populist who, if he were restored to power, would be obliged by the present world economic conditions to attack the working class and the rural poor too.

But not all the Red-shirts are pro-Thaksin, despite the usual simplistic portrayals of the western media which like to paint a picture of the masses being caught between personalities of 'great men' fighting for power. What the Red-shirt movement also demonstrates is a progressive impulse by the poor and working class for democratic change and a direct challenge to the so-called right of the king and military to interfere in Thai politics. The fundamental problem in Thailand is that that the king and the army are blocking meaningful reform, but that broader privileged strata back them and have been willing to engage in violent repression against the poor. Because the road of reforms is blocked, militant mass struggle has broken out, leading to the current revolutionary situation.

The demonstrators have shown that they can defy the government their police and the army. But the revolutionary aspiration for change 'manifest amongst the youth on the streets - will be betrayed if Thaksin comes back to power. In fact the plebeian red-shirt youth need to break from Thaksin and link up with the Thai working class. A political general strike could force out the present government and demand elections to a Constituent Assembly. A revolutionary working class party standing in such elections would make the case for a republic, and workers' and poor peasants power and for socialism. In a Constituent Assembly the demands of the villagers as well as the urban poor and the workers could be voiced. But only a workers and peasants government could meet these demands.

Rather than a philanthropic capitalist, implementing pro market policies for the poor, the working class and peasants themselves must come to power in Thailand. This will be not just a fight against the Bangkok

business elite, the military and the monarchy; it must be a fight with all the Thai capitalists including Thaksin, and the system that they represent.

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