

## Thailand: Neither Thaksin or the military

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Six months of mass mobilisations have paralysed Thai politics. Another inconclusive election was held on 22 April, the second in the month, after Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra stepped down from office earlier in the month.

Another was to take place at end of April but has been suspended by the country's top judges. The King has stepped into the crisis and adopted the role of a Bonaparte, standing above the classes, and in an address to the country called the political situation a mess.

The first set of elections in April had been called three years early because of massive street protests since September last year of up to 150,000 calling for Thaksin's resignation organised by the Bangkok(PAD).

The PAD claims that Sakwin is corrupt and the final straw was the sale of his huge Shin Corp telecommunications companies for \$1.69 billion at the beginning of this year on which he paid no tax. There have also been accusations that he has used his office to gain a lucrative contract with the Burmese military for one of his companies.

Thaksin called the April elections to take some of the heat out of the campaign assuming his Thai Rak Thai party would win convincingly.

Instead there has been deadlock. In both elections, the Thai Rok Thai party won but failed to garner the necessary parliamentary deputies because they failed to win the 20 per cent of the vote necessary in constituencies, which were unopposed. Instead, the PAD refused to challenge the Thai Rok Thai party and organised an abstention.

There was a massive campaign of ballot spoiling ? over half the votes cast in Bangkok for example were blank on 7 April. There was also a boycott by the three main opposition parties ? meaning voter turnout was a low 60 per cent. This has meant that the 500 parliamentary deputies needed for Parliament to open and decide a new Prime Minister have not been elected. In the first election 40 seats were left empty and the 22 April elections had no result in 13. The latest election is an attempt to fill these gaps.

Thaksin is the single wealthiest man in Thailand, with his family maintaining a 53 per cent interest in a huge telecommunications empire. He has been likened to Berlusconi with his TV channel broadcasting Thaksin's movements 24 hours a day including five days of him camping!

The Thai Rak Thai party came to power in 2001 after the 1997-8 crash and offered some concessions such as cheap healthcare and local development. This built support among peasants in the north and east, who are organised in the People's Assembly land movement, and even in some trade unions. On 1 March this year trade union leaders presented Thaksin with flowers ? unions have also traditionally been partly funded by the Labour Ministry despite draconian labour laws. This year such popularism pulled in workers at the PTT energy company (part-privatised by Thaksin) who organised a rally against PAD activists calling

for the company's renationalisation.

But allied to this populism, Thaksin has also carried out neo-liberal reforms such as US-Thai free trade agreement, attacked media freedom and clamped down in the south on Muslims. He has been bolstered because the new post-1997 constitution strengthened the powers of the prime minister at the expense of parliament and the executive.

### **The bourgeois opposition**

The protests since last September on the streets of Bangkok have involved huge sit-ins outside of Parliament House, large mobilisations of women including a demonstration on international women's day calling for a general strike to bring down Thaksin, NGOs and trade unionists.

The main base of PAD has been the urban middle class, which have been hit by a 50 per cent rise in household debt since 2001.

But PAD offers no solution. It is led by a clique of rich people who have fallen out with Thaksin; his former friend, Sonthi Limthongkul, a wealthy media mogul, and his ex-mentor Chamlong Srimuang. Sonthi is now the most outspoken public figure against Thaksin's ? initially in his weekly television programme and then in September 2005 by gathering together the anti-Thaksin coalition. But he combines appeals to the King to appoint the prime minister with religious beliefs in an attempt to wield an alliance of monarchist and religious forces such as the Buddhist Dharma Army. PAD also has on its five-person steering committee on which sits former general secretary of a state labour union, Somsak Kosaisook, and is supported by other workers' and peasants' organisations, which makes it a popular front. Last year, Thai's senate committee, inspired by the opposition, called on trade unions to form a pact with business to oppose the Thai-Japan free trade agreement.

PAD's key demand has been for Thaksin to resign and for the Thai King to appoint a new Prime Minister and Parliament. Recently NGOs have developed a broader base to its politics calling for fair trade and more local investment. All, however, fail to challenge neo-liberalism's domination of Thai politics.

But many on the Thai left have refused to join the large demonstrations because of their support for the King.

Labour activist Sakdina Chatrakul Na Ayudhya said: 'Democracy is up to the people and not the King. It's also not clear what Sondhi wants. Many democracy lovers are not confident about his motives and remain reserved. I'm not sure what his standpoint is,' (The Nation, 4 December, 2005).

The workers have nothing to gain from support for either side. While making up 40 per cent of Thai society, workers have stagnating pay levels, with the minimum wage of only 500 bahts (about \$100 a month), a six day a week of up to 60 or 70 hours a week ? particularly young workers ? and face many privatisations.

But moves have already been made towards greater independence such as some of the unions of state employees rejecting the government money to fund Mayday celebrations ? the Labour ministry offered 3 million bahts.

There was also a big fight by electrical workers last year against attempts to sell-off the country's state owned utility company.

The left, peasants and workers have suffered years of anti-communist repression and the misleadership of the Maoist Thai Communist Party ? now politically defunct and running museums and holiday camps. The

result has been attacks on labour that have seen Thai unions reduced to organising only 2 per cent of workers. Peasant organisations such as the People's Assembly have become dominated by autonomist ideas that reject national organisation and the development of a political voice.

However, there are opportunities. Since the World Social Forum in Mumbai ideas of anti-neoliberal ideas and that another world is possible have been popularised. Currently, the dominant forces are the NGOs with their politics of fair trade, anti-sweatshop campaigns, micro credit, businesses and farming, which has seen them working with labour, women and peasants. This year the World Social Forum has a Bangkok leg which will have a further effect on workers' and peasants' movement.

### **Tasks of revolutionaries**

While these ideas are only the latest manifestation of reformism workers and peasants need global solutions to multinationals and neoliberalism.

The left must intervene into the demonstrations against Thaksin with their own programme, expose the popular front nature of PAD and its reliance on the monarchist and neo-liberal politics of Sondhi. They cannot rely on constitutional manoeuvres such as continuing abstention campaigns and decrees by judges but need to stand their own candidates.

Workers must continue their fight against privatisations, poverty pay and long hours.

They must also fight for the interests of the poor and oppressed such as the muslims in the south and the peasants. They must champion the cause of women and lesbians, gays and bisexual and transgender people who have been ignored for years by a left dominated by Maoism and Stalinism.

To do this it needs its own party, neither the Thai Rak Thai nor the PAD but a working class party to fight for a workers' and peasants' government.

The struggles in Nepal, Bangladesh and Bihar, in India, and the fight against land seizures and poor factory conditions in China show the potential of workers, peasants and the oppressed in Asia. All these struggles are part of the global struggle against neoliberalism and imperialism. And all these struggles show the bravery, enthusiasm and creativity of the masses. We can win.

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