

Populist policies and the rural-urban divide

Puangthong Pawakapan

ON 22 JULY 2014, two months after a military coup d'etat, the Thai military promulgated an interim constitution signed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej. With sweeping powers in the hands of General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, the leader of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), the interim constitution's preamble promises to eradicate corruption and bring 'reform' and subsequently 'genuine democracy' to Thai society. The NCPO promised its mostly urban middle-class supporters that it would put an end to corrupt politics in all forms. However, with a narrow focus on the corruption of politicians, the question remains whether the interim charter is able to bring genuine democracy, stability, and 'happiness' to a deeply polarized society.

Section 44 of the interim constitution, for example, provides PM Prayuth with extensive powers. They include the authority to issue orders and undertake whatever the NCPO deems necessary regardless of the legislative, executive or judicial orders, "for the benefit of reform in any field and to strengthen public unity and harmony, or for the prevention, disruption or suppression of any act which undermines public peace and order or national security, the Monarchy, national economics or administration of State affairs, whether that act emerges inside or outside the kingdom". The constitution guarantees that PM Prayuth's orders are "legal, constitutional and conclusive", thus rendering check-and-balance mechanisms unnecessary.

The NCPO's far-reaching power has, invariably, led to allegations of human rights violations. By the end of July 2014, the NCPO had summoned 565 individuals and arrested 233. These include human rights defenders, academics, activists, journalists, students, writers and protesters. Meanwhile the NCPO banned public gatherings, enforced stringent censorship on individuals, groups, and the mass media, issued repressive orders, revoked the passports of those who refused to report to the junta and who have fled abroad instead. Those who face charges will be tried in the military

A new polity in the making?

Porphant Ouyyanont

THAKSIN SHINAWATRA'S overwhelming victory in the election of 2005 marked the start of a period of socio-political division in Thai society. The former Prime Minister's way of exercising power and his emphasis on efficiency and business management were seen by many as a direct challenge to Thai traditions, and also as a threat to the monarchy. Certainly under Thaksin there was less emphasis on the King's advocacy of a 'sufficiency economy' but, instead, more on maximizing growth and becoming competitive. Thaksin thus attempted to create a strong and populist state with power centralized around his office.

In effect Thaksin was challenging the bureaucratic polity and network monarchy. Elite bureaucrats and the military, which played a key role in the Thai political landscape, were gradually marginalised under Thaksin. Viewed in this light, the present National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) government may be seen as counter-force to years of Thaksinisation. However, in countering the influence of Thaksin, the NCPO government is moving into uncharted territory. It is exercising traditional authoritarianism in an age of corporatism and social media. What are the characteristics of the NCPO government?

First and foremost is the extent to which the military dominates the NCPO government and its agencies. The coup of 22 May was led by the Commander in Chief of the army, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who was named interim Prime Minister on 21 August 2014. In Prayuth's cabinet, announced on 30 August, 11 out of 32 cabinet ministers, taking up 34 positions, were military figures. These were key positions in the ministries of Justice, Interior, Foreign Affairs, Defence, Labour, Social Development, Commerce, and Natural Resources.

Secondly, the message of stability before democracy has been continually emphasised by the NCPO government, as can be seen in PM Prayuth's weekly televised speeches. This is achieved by strong rule until such time as democratic processes like elections can be reintroduced. The denigration of Thaksin's political system is explicit. As PM Prayuth noted in one of his televised speeches: "Many people still try to destabilize the situation by using the words 'democracy' and 'election'. These people do not see that an incomplete democracy is not safe and it does not create confidence in the global community

court. The interim constitution also declares the NCPO's use of power to be within the law and, at the same time, renders the activities of coup opponents illegal.

The interim constitution also signals resistance to politicians and electoral politics. It barred individuals who have been members of political parties under three years prior to the date of appointment from becoming cabinet members of the coup-installed government (Section 20); members of National Legislative Assembly (Section 8); and members of the Constitution Drafting Committee (Section 33). Meanwhile, it channels political power to NCPO members, military personnel and government officials. In this context, Thailand may be argued to have returned to a 'bureaucratic polity', where the military, bureaucrats and business interests gain control over elected representatives. This negativity towards politicians and electoral politics is also broadly found among the urban middle class. Distrust of politicians has grown steadily since the early 1980s when participatory politics and electoral government began to entrench itself in the political system.

One of the key reasons for the distrust of participatory politics and electoral government is the belief that rural and poor voters, who form Thaksin's mass support, will sell their votes in exchange for short-term personal benefit or petty cash. The urban educated middle-class often blame rural voters' lack of good education and 'proper' understanding of democracy for the failure of Thai democracy. Many intellectuals and civic groups argue that holding elections does not necessarily mean adherence to democratic principles, and thus seek

to undermine the legitimacy of electoral politics and the principle of one-man-one-vote.

However, recent research has shown that vote-buying is no longer a decisive factor in determining election outcome. Instead the poor and rural voters are increasingly motivated by community development projects but this has been interpreted by others as being bribed by unsustainable populist policies. In addition, the urban middle-class believe that populist policies will cause long-term damage to the Thai economy. Ironically, they fail to see how multi-million baht projects catering to the interest of urbanites and industrialists have been contributing to uneven development and constitute exploitation of taxpayers. For many of these urbanites, a desirable political system does not necessarily have to be the same as a western-style democracy with respect to freedom, liberties and equality of every citizen, but it must be clean from corrupt politicians and, hence, be ruled by moral people.

As a result, antipathy for corrupt politicians, and a bias against electoral politics and rural development policies will be registered in the new constitution that the military-appointed Constitution Drafting Committee is drafting. Many Thai conservatives believe that the most efficient way towards a happy and peaceful society is to programme people with similar beliefs, and to view diverse opinions, demands and values as subversive and harmful to society. The junta is certainly creating happiness for some in Thailand, but not all.

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Below: 'RedShirt' protestor. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy of Anthony Bouch on Flickr.com



Thailand Forum: 'Society In Transition'

ISEAS, Singapore, 27 and 28 July 2015

ISEAS will be holding the Thailand Forum on 27-28 July this year. The overarching theme of the Forum will be 'society in transition' and its focus will be on developments in politics, society, culture and the economy. These developments will be assessed for their medium and long-term implications.

Papers treating recent political developments will address those developments from an explicitly long-term perspective. Scholars will be invited to think about transitional processes in these areas and the different stakeholders involved, to describe the tension between the old and the new, and to consider the ways in which such transitions will unfold in the near future.

The aim of the Forum is to take stock of Thailand's current problems and prospects and to alert stakeholders and interested parties to issues and areas likely to merit attention in the years ahead. This Forum will be of interest to students and academics, policymakers and business people.

Papers will be divided into three broad sessions: Politics; Economics; Culture and Society. They will cover issues from the military coup, the military, monarchy, decentralisation, economic restructuring, the middle class, the media, and civil society.

For more information please contact the two co-ordinators:
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Above: Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the current Prime Minister of Thailand. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy of Phaethon on Flickr.com

... the distribution of revenues is unjust, while corruption, wrongful activities, encroachment of natural resources and environment are encouraged, and the public will be told that these things are good, righteous, and beneficial to them".

Thirdly, order and populism can go hand-in-hand. The NCPO government has taken action against gang-led motorcycle taxi rackets, taxi scams at airports, and vendors on the beaches. These crackdowns have been met with public approval. Less popular are crackdowns on gambling, even at village level. Such crackdowns, of course, provide the occasion for military patrols and for presenting the military in a positive light across the country. Other populist measures seem aimed at gaining public favour can be rather bizarre. The government forced television companies to screen World Cup football matches on free-to-air channels as well as offering 20,000 free tickets for a football match against Colombia. Such measures, under a general policy to bring back 'happiness' to the Thai people, also include free army concerts and haircuts. To many these were indicative of a condescending attitude towards the general public.

Fourthly, the control of state-owned enterprises by the junta has been vital. There are 56 such enterprises and they include some of the largest commercial enterprises in the country such as the Petroleum Authority of Thailand (PTT) and Thai Airways. Their combined assets amount to around US\$360 billion. It was widely believed that Thaksin used his influence to give appointments in many of these enterprises to his political supporters. This was contrary to the long tradition of control which the traditional royalist elite had over state enterprises as well as their strong links to the military. As such, the new government's removal of powerful business leaders in the state sector who were appointed under pro-Thaksin governments has been a key means of reducing pro-Thaksin influence in the corporate sector. Among such changes have been the

resignations of the PTT Chairman, the Chairman of the Krung Thai Bank, and the heads of the Government Lottery Office and the Airports of Thailand.

Finally, the clampdown on dissent has been extraordinary. Martial law has enabled the government to ban, throughout the country, any protest gathering of more than five people. The authorities exercise control and censorship, or the threat of censorship, over newspapers and television channels, while some newspapers, radio stations, and television channels have been closed down. Initially the authorities tried to block Facebook and also called for meetings with representatives from Facebook and Twitter. These were unsuccessful but the junta let it be known that those posting anti-coup comments on social media will be tracked.

Some websites, such as Human Rights Watch, are blocked. A well-publicized instance of the junta's sensitivity to dissent was the recent last-minute cancellation of an event organized by Amnesty International and other groups at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Bangkok in September 2014. The junta has also summoned a large number of people, most of them former politicians and activists, for questioning and warnings. The current number is estimated at well over 600, and some of them have been detained for up to a week.

In conclusion, the politics created by the present government marks a very fundamental departure from Thaksin's politics. However, in doing so, the NCPO government is also hastening the end of the traditional bureaucratic polity, the demise of the Thaksin electorally based, prime-minister-led polity, and perhaps the reduction in the influence of the network monarch.

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