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Calls for Egypt-style Soft Coup in Thailand: Why They Will Fail

By Teresita Cruz-Del Rosario

Synopsis

Unresolved conflict and continuing divisions within Thailand have sparked calls for an Egypt-style soft coup. Military intervention will not resolve the problems of a country that has learnt from a coup in 2006 that generals are unable to manage an economy, deliver public goods, and forge a national consensus.

Commentary

THE PAST week has seen Bangkok media awash with news, analyses, opinions and commentaries on the possibility for an Egypt-style soft coup in Thailand. *The Bangkok Post*, a leading newspaper, carried a news item in which Democratic Leader and former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva warned that a coup would be possible if “government abuses its power.”

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, aware of the rumours that quickly circulated in the aftermath of the coup in Egypt, called a press conference to insist that “not everything is a political game” and that “the people will give the government a chance.”

Protests against Yingluck

Nonetheless, with speculation of a coup preceding the overthrow of Egypt’s President Mohammed Morsi, Yingluck moved in recent months to fend off any discontent within the military by reassuring army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha that he can keep his post until he retires in September next year. With renewed confidence, he announced: “No more rumours. . . . Political problems must be solved by political means. The army will only deal with security issues.”

An increase in the defence budget also awarded the largest share to the army - a move that signalled compromise and accommodation rather than a tendency towards majoritarian rule a la Morsi.

Thailand, like Egypt, is nevertheless a deeply-divided society. The Red Shirt-Yellow Shirt divide remains unresolved. Deep animosity between the two political camps continues to simmer and threatens to spill again into the streets. Yingluck’s recent self-appointment as defence minister raised the temperature further. On her first day at work, some 100 protesters blocked the gates of the ministry to bar her entry. The motley group, calling themselves the Thai Patriots, called on the army chief to stage a “peaceful coup.”

Social and economic contrasts

Thailand however is not Egypt.

In contrast to Egypt's economic free-fall under Morsi, Thailand's economy boasted a 5.3% growth rate in the first quarter of this year. Thailand moreover is an upper-middle income country with a GDP per capita of US\$5474 in 2012, compared to Egypt's US\$ 3187. The UN World Food Programme estimated that 14 million or 17% of Egypt's population suffered food insecurity in 2011. Thailand on the other hand is a food-surplus country and the world's main rice exporter, earning it \$1.2 billion in the first quarter of 2013. There are no food queues in Thailand, nor are there the severe energy shortages that Egyptians suffered in the past year.

Tourism arrivals crossed the 22 million mark in December 2012, up by 16% over 2011. The majority of tourists come from East Asia, notably China, Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea, signifying a confidence among neighbours towards the relative peace and prosperity not only in Thailand, but also of the entire region. In contrast, tourism in Egypt, once a thriving industry, has nearly collapsed.

Further, despite the challenges facing social institutions, Thais have mechanisms to resolve disputes and organise social life. Courts function. Parliament meets regularly to pass laws. Bureaucracy dispenses public services. Even the slow crawl of traffic in Bangkok is mitigated by traffic lights that work, and the police regulate traffic and disentangle gridlocks.

Most important of all, civil society is vibrant, nourished by an environment that permits and tolerates dissent, boasts a relatively free media, and encourages public intellectuals to engage in fierce debate and criticism. Civil society has flourished amidst numerous attempts to bridge the gap between the Red and Yellow Shirts, seeking to find compromises and break the impasse. In contrast, comedian Bassam Youssef, Egypt's Jon Stewart, was arrested and hauled in for questioning in late March after poking fun at Morsi on television.

Though the military-backed constitution of 2007 is still in force, attempts to introduce amendments are subject to formal political processes. Proposed changes to the charter require approval from more than half of the 650 elected members of Thailand's two-chamber parliament. Once approved, they are reviewed by a nine-member Constitutional Court. Changing the Thai Constitution is not an arbitrary process, unlike Morsi's interference. That prompted the withdrawal of all non-Islamists from the drafting process and ramming through of the Constitution despite concerns about its references to Islamic law and potential restrictions on freedom of expression and women's rights.

Compared to their Egyptian counterparts, Thai women enjoy social and political freedoms. Thailand's legal framework to protect women's rights is robust. The Name Act of 2005 allows women to choose their family names. The Penal Code was amended in 2007 to criminalise marital rape. The amended Civil Code awarded equal rights to men and women to seek divorce, while the Protection of Victims of Domestic Violence Act passed in 2007.

Coup success, governance failures

Authors Aurel Croissant, David Kuehn, Philip Lorenz, and Paul Chambers described Thailand as a "coup prone" country, in their book *Democratisation and Civilian Control in Asia*. Thailand has experienced 18 successful coups since 1932 and ranks fifth worldwide in terms of the number of coup attempts. That said, Thailand's generals, as well as those of other Asian countries, do share one common feature: they learnt that military regimes are inept at running an economy, creating public goods, and delivering social services.

In short, they realise, sooner rather than later, that seizing power is the easy part. Governing a country and marshalling different sectors to build consensus is a different kettle of fish. Given dismal track records, most Asian generals prefer to remain in their barracks, uphold civilian supremacy, and shy away from the temptation to grab power again.

The 2006 coup in Thailand bears lessons for Egypt. The calls for renewed military intervention in Thailand in the wake of the ousting of Morsi notwithstanding, most Thais believe that the 18th military intervention that year should be their last one.

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