

A Thai Response to the Tyranny of Global Commentary

by Fuadi Pitsuwan

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Many international commentators on the Thai political crisis paint the protesters on the streets of Bangkok as illegitimate (e.g. Kurt Campbell, Tom Plate, and Charlie Campbell). By doing so, they imply that Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister's elected government are saviors of Thai democracy. The truth is much more complex. Resorting to such a simplistic and myopic analysis is an example of what Michael Vatikiotis, regional director for Asia of Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, calls "the tyranny of global commentary."

On Dec. 22, I visited three of the five main protest sites in Bangkok (Asoke junction, Rajaprasong junction, and Lumpini Park) to see with my own eyes what is unfolding in my country. It is troubling when commentators don't talk to the people on the streets, feel the depth of their emotions and try to understand their grievances and frustration but still resort to a common thesis of elite vs. non-elite, or urban middle class vs. rural poor, as many global commentators have. Moreover, it is problematic to judge which side is right or wrong in such a polarized situation, particularly from afar.

What I found at the protest sites altered my own image of the protesters. These are largely orderly and peaceful demonstrators – some splinter groups clash with the police – are quite eclectic and are more diverse than "Bangkok elites." The core of the movement is still the urban middle class, but I also talked to a few who are as far from elitists as one could imagine. One gentleman came all the way from the northeastern region, a Thaksin stronghold. Another was a motorcycle taxi driver who came to a protest site, armed with only a whistle, a Thai flag, and his motorbike.

This whole saga is more than just the "urban middle class" trying to hold on to power or the "establishment" trying to take back power from Thaksin and his cronies, or even a fear of succession for the Thai monarchy. In fact, the once sleepy, silent electorate has awakened. They may be a minority, but they are not small in numbers and are definitely more expansive and inclusive than the original "yellow shirts" movement of a few years ago. They no longer tolerate what they believe is "competitive authoritarianism"; their concerns are very much the same as the Western world has with Morsi in Egypt, Erdogan in Turkey, Chavez in Venezuela, and Hun Sen in Cambodia. Just because the Bangkok regime is not Islamist, isn't defying US leadership, or is in the Chinese sphere of influence, doesn't make Thailand an exception. These uprisings are becoming a global trend.

These global commentators should spend more time pondering why some 500,000-1 million people – many of whom used to be quite complacent about and uninterested in politics – have taken to the streets demanding an end to the Thaksin regime. There must be compelling reasons to this uprising against an elected government. Its size alone makes this an unprecedented phenomenon in Thai political history.

As much as I sympathize with the protesters, it is difficult to condone their proposal to establish an unelected people's council, which would effectively suspend democracy. Similarly, the opposition would be better off contesting the Feb. 2 general elections, rather than refusing to get into the game. To their credit, however, the protesters show a genuine desire for tougher laws against corruption, abuse of power, and for devolution of centralized administrative control, among other sensible demands. The major sticking point is that as they try desperately to escape a "tyranny of the majority" they provoke the fear of a "tyranny of the minority" and could turn unruly very easily.

But, for international analysts, who claim to know a great deal about how democracy should work in Thailand, to dismiss the protesters' desire for the spirit of democracy and to paper over their grievances does a gross injustice not only to the Thai protesters and their sympathizers, but also to the democratic norms that their Western governments have sought to promote throughout the world. For those on the streets, the Thaksin regime is the epitome of pervasive corruption, abuse of power, nepotism, cronyism, outright crimes, and extra judicial killings. And they have grounds to believe so.

Admittedly, the protester's odds of getting rid of the Thaksin regime by shortcutting the democratic process are slim, if not impossible. But labeling the protesters as those who disregard democratic principles shows a lack of empathy. These commentators are falling into the same trap as the protesters who claim that people in rural areas are not educated enough to understand democracy.

What the world is witnessing in Thailand are (at least) two competing definitions of democracy. One favors process, emphasizes form over substance, and gives undue priority to elections. Thais who subscribe to this definition care less about how democratic the government behaves after elections. The other definition puts more weight on the spirit and substance of democracy and what it ought to bring. Thais who identify with this view do not realize that they cannot achieve truly democratic ends by suspending the electoral process. The most likely correct answer is that a vibrant democracy requires both notions. But it is myopic, if not wrong, to suggest that the first group is more democratic than the second.

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