

Political crisis in Thailand not unique by Muthiah Alagappa

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Although the government shutdown in Bangkok presently commands center stage, Thailand has been plagued with two political crises over the past 80 years or more. One is the ongoing crisis in Bangkok over the legitimacy of the incumbent government and by extension that of the political system. The second is the crisis in southern Thailand rooted in contestations over state and nation-making projects that have periodically manifested themselves in militant struggles. Although each particular moment in these long-running crises may have its own causal logic, the underlying causation of both crises have their origins in the centralization of power in Bangkok and the contested formation of the Thai nation-state that began under Rama V (King Chulalongkorn) in the context of Western imperialism in Southeast Asia. Resolving them requires fundamental change in political mindset and frameworks.

Annexation in 1785 transformed the four southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun from vassal states of the Sukothai kingdom to provinces of Siam. Governed initially under a system of indirect rule, the four provinces came under the direct rule of Bangkok during the reign of Rama V who began the modernization of Siam to safeguard the country from colonial encroachment. Siam and later Thailand embarked on a state-building project that centralized power in Bangkok and a nation-building project that emphasized Buddhism, Thai language, and the monarchy.

The nation-building project became more virulent, chauvinistic, and exclusionary under Rama VI (1910-1925) and Marshal Phibul Songkram (1938-44, 1948-57). The administrative reforms of 1902 that centralized authority in Bangkok along with the nation-making project alienated the Malay-Muslims in the south who feared losing their political and socio-cultural authority and identity.

Although centralization and the policy of integration have since waxed and waned, Bangkok has consistently rejected any political framework that would devolve power to the four predominantly Malay-Muslim provinces in the South. The general tendency has been to view the southern problem essentially as a consequence of socio-economic and administrative grievances. The tension between Bangkok and the four predominantly Malay-Muslim provinces created by state- and nation-building projects periodically escalated to political rebellion and armed struggles.

In 1947 the Provincial Islamic Committee of Pattani under the leadership of Haji Sulong and other leaders submitted a petition to the Thai interior minister that would have provided

a measure of political autonomy to the four provinces. Rejection of that petition and the mysterious death of Haji Sulong coupled with the return of Phibul Songkram to power in Bangkok in 1948 provided a powerful stimulant to armed separatism in the post-World War II era. The military struggle in Southern Thailand is a resurgence of that struggle but with no central leadership. Islam has become more prominent in the present phase of the conflict.

Likewise although the ongoing crisis in Bangkok has its own logic focused on Thaksin's machinations to garner unrivalled power in the country, at base the conflict is about legitimacy of the incumbent government and the associated political system. The legitimacy conflict dates back to the 1932 coup d'état that overthrew absolute monarchy.

Since then Thailand has experienced a prolonged period of military rule with several coups, followed by another long period of semi-democracy before transitioning to an elected government. The transitions were accompanied by violent struggles especially in 1973 and 1992. Notwithstanding its declining political role, the Thai military continues to be a potent political force. At the same time, as demonstrated by the short lived coup regimes in 1991 and 2006, there is recognition that the military cannot rule as in the past. Thai society has become more sophisticated and complex.

Popular sovereignty and democracy have gained ground. However, there is still no deep commitment to democracy on the part of the political elite. Although there is widespread acceptance of electoral democracy as the path to state power, the Thai political elite does not seem to have embraced substantive democracy. The dominant belief has been that victory in elections gives the winner a blank check to do as he or she pleases. Hence, despite the transition to semi- and electoral democracy, strong-man rule has continued to be the norm in Thailand for much of the post-1932 period. Leaders have used democratic space, institutions, and trappings to concentrate power in the office of the prime minister with a view to manipulating unbridled state power to entrench and enrich them. The manipulation of democracy by Thaksin and his cronies, and resistance to that through street rallies lies at the heart of the political crisis in Bangkok. Thaksin and his sister, Prime Minister Yingluck, believe that victory in the Feb. 2, 2014 election would confer democratic legitimacy on the government. That is rejected by the opposition. It appears highly unlikely that the election will confer legitimacy on the winner or resolve the present crisis.

Some commentators portray Thailand is a unique case. However, the political crises afflicting Thailand are similar to conflicts in many Southeast Asian countries. Nearly all states in Southeast Asia (democracies, semi-democracies, monarchies, one-party dominant systems) face contestations over the legitimacy of the political system and/or incumbent

government. Countries especially those that emphasize ethno-national and ethno-religious nation-making also confront contestations over national identity. Political development is less well understood and explored in Southeast Asia. The focus has been on economic development and regionalism. Without a strong political foundation, it will be impossible to attain durable economic and regional objectives.

Coming back to Thailand, resolution of the political crisis in Bangkok must begin with the recognition that an election alone will not resolve the present crisis. The Feb. 2 election outcome will merely replicate, reinforce, and prolong the crisis. Now is a moment for a caretaker government led by a highly respected nonpartisan personality like Anand Panyarachun appointed by the much revered king and the appointment of a nonpartisan committee of experts to draw up a new constitutional and legal framework that will give expression to the following four elements of democracy.

First, clean and fair elections that give equal weight to all citizens must remain the vehicle to state power. Military coups and other paths to state power should be outlawed. Second, there must be checks and balances on the elected government, especially the executive. The latter must function within the law of the land and put service of all citizens including minorities as its foremost priority. Tyranny of the majority is not democracy. That and personal enrichment should be made illegal.

Third, power must be decentralized to provincial and local levels. Power should not be concentrated in the federal executive, especially in the prime minister's office. Finally, people should be continuously involved in governance through civil society. Government must encourage and guarantee the rights and functions of civil society. The solution to the political crisis in Bangkok is more democracy, not less.

On the southern problem, a solution must begin with the recognition by the Bangkok political elite that the problem is political and requires a political solution. Federalism and autonomy must be important elements of that solution. People cannot be ruled forever by force and against their will. They must be drawn into the national political community and process through incentives. Autonomy need not be a step toward secession. In that regard it is important to note that no political map is set in stone. One only has to look at the political maps of Europe or Asia over a few centuries to see how they have changed. Domestic and international political change is a constant. Our goal must be to ensure that a process is in place to ensure gradual and peaceful change.

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