



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Number 30 | March 4, 2009

Thaksin's Time Atop Thailand's Politics May Be Over BY DANNY UNGER

At the end of 2007, the Thai people returned to power elected politicians the military had tossed out in a coup fifteen months prior. Thailand's current political saga, which began in early 2006, again produced a stunning plot twist in the closing weeks of 2008. This time, the heirs to the military's aspirations gained the upper hand as a Democrat Party (DP)-led coalition came to power.

Danny Unger, Associate Professor of Political Science at Northern Illinois University, explains that "The great Thai political drama has proved intractable in part because Thais do not agree as to who are the principal players and what principles are at stake."

Many Thais hope that the country's new prime minister and DP leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva, will hold power for more than a few months, ending more than three years of sharp polarization and instability in the country's politics. However, perhaps more voters feel that Abhisit attained the premiership—following two Constitutional Court decisions that forced from office his two predecessors and the defection of a large faction from the former ruling party—in suspect fashion. The possibility of ongoing instability and conflict remains.

The great Thai political drama has proved intractable in part because Thais do not agree as to who are the principal players and what principles are at stake. For many Thais, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, turfed in the September 2006 coup, was a visionary set on entrenching a durable political coalition and economic transformation. In this view, Thaksin's mission has been vitiated by a coalition of privileged groups who refuse to subject their political power and social status to electoral control.

Most of Thaksin's opponents see things differently. They feel that the former prime minister had grown so rapacious, and so successful in subverting effective opposition, that his government posed an authoritarian threat. This group was led by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which in August 2008 advocated "New Politics" featuring a predominantly appointed legislature and reserved political roles for the military.

Rather remarkably for Thailand's famously flexible politicians, the political crisis assumed apocalyptic dimensions. Increasingly, it resolved itself into a struggle from which one side or the other would have to emerge dominant. As of early 2009, it appears that Thaksin and his allies have lost the war.

WHO DID WHAT, WHEN, AND WHY?

An economic crisis hit Thailand in 1997 and paved the way for Thaksin's rise, enabling the adoption of a new constitution that led to stronger political parties and more prime ministerial power. In early 2001 elections, Thaksin led the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party to a smashing triumph. He then survived a court challenge, eviscerated his political opponents, and cemented his electoral base by delivering on promised populist programs and presiding over Thailand's economic recovery. As a result, the TRT was victorious



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again at the polls early in 2005. Soon thereafter, however, problems began to mount for Thaksin.

What looked like a Thaksin juggernaut wobbled under attacks from various quarters in 2005. Buoyed by these signals of resistance, Sondhi Limthongkul, a one time Thaksin crony, took up the cause against the prime minister. After Thaksin sold off his telecommunications assets to Singapore’s Temasek Holdings without paying taxes on the near \$2 billion deal, the cause expanded and became a durable movement early in 2006.

As the tide of opposition to the TRT intensified in 2006, Thaksin tried to sidestep the debate by dissolving parliament in February and calling snap elections. The three other parties in parliament, however, boycotted the elections, producing a call by the king for the country’s judges to sort out the legal “mess.” The judges nixed the elections. Five months later, on September 19, the military overthrew the government. The courts then banned the TRT, and barred its leaders from politics for five years. (Politicians of the TRT regrouped under the People’s Power Party (PPP) banner and, when that party too was banned in 2008, the Pheu Thai Party.) The new (2007) constitution, approved in a national referendum, strengthened the powers of bureaucrats and judges at the expense of politicians.

Following the December 2007 elections, the PPP returned to power under Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej with only the DP remaining in opposition. The PAD feared the new government would amend the new constitution, enabling Thaksin to elude legal prosecutions and return formally to power. It therefore resumed demonstrating in May, intent on driving the elected government from power. In August, Thaksin and his wife Pojaman, following a criminal sentence against her, sought political asylum in the United Kingdom. Later that month, the PAD announced its “final push” aimed at removing the prime minister from power. The PAD clashed with police and government supporters, briefly closing three southern airports. The Samak government declared a state of emergency.

On September 9, 2008 the Constitutional Court ruled Prime Minister Samak guilty of hosting television cooking programs and pushed him from office. He was succeeded by Thaksin’s brother-in-law, fated to hold office only briefly. In late November, the PAD dramatically upped the ante by occupying Bangkok’s airports for eight days. And in December 2008, the Constitutional Court struck again, disbanding three of the parties comprising the government coalition, including the PPP. The climax came when Newin Chidchob, once one of Thaksin’s key supporters, bolted the disbanded PPP and threw the support of his faction behind a new DP-led coalition.

WHAT TO MAKE OF IT ALL?

It is possible that Thaksin’s time is done. If true, that would probably be good news, assuming some of Thaksin’s political legacies are sustained. One of these legacies has been the mobilization of marginalized groups, in part through the creation of a socio-economically rooted and possibly enduring political cleavage. The genie of more participatory politics is out and Thais may not again acquiesce to the sort of domination they experienced in the 1980s under a loose elite (the bureaucracy, military, business, and palace) consensus. At least in rhetoric and symbolism, Thai political leaders now must speak to the hopes of the country’s poor. Thaksin forced the hand of the country’s political elites. If they follow through with the changes he engendered, using active public policy to grapple with still extensive marginality without adopting the accompanying authoritarian baggage, the country will be blessed.