The Long Winding Red Road to Ratchaprasong and Thailand's Future
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Philip J. Cunningham

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The sniper shooting of Seh Daeng, Maj. Gen. Khattiya Sawasdipol, on May 13, 2010 by an unknown assailant while chatting with foreign reporters has brought to rupture the standoff between Reds and Yellows in the heart of Bangkok and signals a new stage in the movement and its repression. Seh Daeng, whose nickname means "red commander", was the reddest of the red shirts. His daughter, who sat at his bedside in the hospital until he succumbed to his grievous wounds on May 17, 2010, has been a staunch supporter of the yellow shirts, illustrative of the convoluted politics of the era. To better put in context the convoluted color-coded politics of the present day, and to identify some of the key heroes and villains and historic reference points being talked about on both sides of the barricades in Bangkok, a brief review of Thai political activism over the years will follow.

Seh Daeng shot

The road to the red-shirt takeover of the Ratchaprasong intersection in the heart of Bangkok's busiest shopping district is a long and winding one. Political activists are not unlike historians in that they frequently point to events in the past to understand what is happening in the present. Key milestones on Thailand's winding, bloody road to democracy are introduced to illuminate the democratic and revolutionary claims and historic pretensions of the red and yellow shirted activists today.

Red shirt protest in Bangkok

The Origins of Thai Democracy

The bloodless coup of 1932 marked the end of absolute monarchy and is regarded as the birthdate of Thai democracy. Pridi Panomyong, later forced into exile to China by co-conspirator Pibun Songkhram, remains a hero wronged by history to Thai leftists, while Pibun, who yielded top-down authoritarian power for much of the 1940's and 1950's is viewed as a bulwark of establishment power.

Bhumibol Adulyadej, the present king, was coronated while Pibun was prime minister, but given Pibun's republican leanings and history of participation in the 1932 coup, he was not particularly supportive of the monarchy.

Thanks in part to the US-stoked hysteria of the Cold War, the chameleon-like Pibun, who welcomed the Japanese with open arms in World War II, and then welcomed the US with open arms in 1945, was not perceived as anti-communist enough and was replaced in a 1957 coup by the self-styled "royalist" strongman Sarit Thanarat.

Sarit, ruthless, authoritarian and exceedingly rich, was succeeded by his close associate Thanom Kittakachorn, another staunch anti-communist who likewise enjoyed generous US support.

Thai Radicalism in the 1960s

The 1960's saw Thailand grow under authoritarian rule, with a concomitant rise in the countryside of the Thai communist party, especially in the Isan region, which ironically was the homeland of Sarit.

One of Thailand's brightest thinkers, an independent scholar named Jit Phumisak, who was hired by the US embassy in Bangkok to translate the Communist Manifesto, but more importantly was the author of numerous tracts on Thai feudalism and lyricist/composer of songs that are still sung by protesters today, was threatened, jailed and hounded by the Sarit regime until he joined the newly formed Thai communist guerilla movement in the mountains of northeastern Thailand in the province of Sakol Nakorn.

Jit was shot to death in the ricefields of a contested area on the side of a dirt road on May 5, 1966, an event memorialized in the haunting and melancholy song, Jit Phumisak, sung by the folk rock group Caravan. Simply put, Jit Phumisak is the Che Guevera of Thailand.

1970s Student Radicalism and the Communist Movement

On October 14, 1973 student demonstrations erupted over corruption and the constitution, leading to the fall of the hated Thanom government which inaugurated a three-year freewheeling hiatus in which US troops were asked to leave and a home-grown democracy was tested and attempted but failed to sink deep roots.

In the case of 1973 the King intervened on the side of the students, but when the military staged a coup three years later in the face of Thammasat University student demonstrations protesting the return of Thanom from exile, the monarch sided with the military.

After the brutal crackdown of October 1976, many students went into exile or joined guerillas in the Communist Party of Thailand in the "jungle." Typical of this generation, Caravan lead singer Surachai Chantimatorn and his fellow band members who started out as bards of the 1970's protests, then radicalized and went into exile in China and Laos where they joined the United Front of the Thai Communist Party after the October 6, 1976 military crackdown. Things had gotten so bad in Bangkok that for Caravan, and hundreds of other "Ocotober people," the hardship of life in the jungle seemed a reasonable choice.

Chamlong Srimuang and Samak Sundaravej, both of whom later served respective terms as mayor of Bangkok, and eventually became bitter archrivals during the Thaksin years, were on the wrong side of history, the military side, in 1976.

General Prem Tinsulanonda, who ruled Thailand with a steady hand for much of the 1980's after replacing military factions directly responsible for the 1976 coup, bought peace and a measure of prosperity through a successful amnesty deal

that brought the activist youth of the 1970's back into the fold of society. Since then, Prem has come to represent the pinnacle of a supple establishment, serving as an elder statesman and a leading member of the Privy Council serving the monarchy.

Seventies activists dropped the revolution as the CPT withered as a result of the Sino-Soviet split within the fledgling movement and amnesty offers from General Prem. Theirs is a lost generation, characterized by wild extremes. Many willingly gave up the armed struggle, which did not suit Bangkok's best and brightest student leaders anyway, but they had nowhere to go. Some gave up hope and idled in drugs or drink, others reinvented themselves and became academics, poets and writers. Others still, with input from the 1976 class student leaders such as Sutham Saengpratum, who were imprisoned until amnesty was offered by Prime Minister Kriangsak Chomanon under the urging of Jimmy Carter, became politicians in their own right.

Perhaps to atone for this historic misjudgment, Chamlong studied Buddhism, lived an ascetic lifestyle and became a key activist in the anti-coup and anti General Suchinda Kraprayong demonstrations of 1992, which culminated in the Ratchadamnern street killings of "Black May."

Again the monarchy intervened, reprimanding both parties. Chamlong and Suchinda crouched for the cameras at the King's feet, then withdrew from the struggle. A royalist interim PM was appointed, and eventually elections were held, effectively neutralizing Suchinda's military faction, which, after all, had been entirely responsible for massacre of the demonstrators. Neutralized, perhaps, but not accounted for. The disgraced General Suchinda took a profitable sinecure position in the telecoms industry.

The interim PM, Anand Panyarachun, helped restore normalcy, especially to jittery markets, and willingly stepped down as soon as elections were scheduled. But the democratic period that followed has been full of fits and starts, resulting in a series of short-lived coalition governments, the most accomplished of which was led by Chuan Leekpai of the Democrat Party, where the young Abhisit was being groomed for a future leadership role.

The Historical Origins of the Red-Yellow Divide

During the Chuan years, and then the Thaksin years, there were scattered protests, most of them peaceful and some involving sustained camp-outs in public places. Many leftists of the October generation (1970's activists) and the veteran activists of Black May (1992) were supportive of such street activism regardless of who was premier. Caravan, in particular, has a decades-old tradition of supporting demonstrations, especially on behalf of the poor, and they have played tirelessly at student commemorations of democratic milestones and at countless street gatherings, including mass demonstrations of the Assembly of the Poor, held in front of Government House, which created the template for long-term protests at public intersections, complete with food service, stage and security. The predominantly rural demonstrators adapted quickly to life in the open, and created vital tent cities of the kind that yellow shirts and red shirts have since emulated.

To say the red-yellow divide represents a class struggle is fundamentally inaccurate, a willful interpretation that plays into the hands of a divisive populism, though accusations of class bias do indeed resonate in Thailand's deeply unequal, hierarchical society which keeps alive, through music and memory and a free press, the dream of equality and justice.

Many grassroots members of the red shirts happen to be Northeasterners from Isan, but that is not to say that Isan people are red-shirts. It has long been the poorest part of the country, but some poor people turn out to be extremely

conservative politically, dictator Sarit was from Isan and popular in the way that fascists sometimes are, but for the most part the people of Isan have been pragmatic and tend to show support for the status quo just to keep their heads above water.

The Northeast today might better be described as a mosaic, with huge yellowshirt strongholds, such as Ubon city, though right across the river on the rural side of the bridge, one can find a red hotbed. Similar complexities can be found in most of the provinces rimming Cambodia, including Buriram, a pro-government "blue shirt" stronghold who finds its patron in Thaksin-turncoat Newin Chitchob, while the more northerly Isan towns such as Udon and Khonkhaen in the north can be more fairly described as redshirt strongholds.

There is ample evidence of vote-buying and rent-a-mob activity, but there is also compelling evidence of poor people getting sick and tired of the status quo and joining the fray, which in recent years means putting on a color coded shirt and joining a demonstration.

Isan has a rebel tradition which goes back at least to the 1950's, when its politicians, at the risk of their careers and very life, opposed the Bangkok dictators, a pattern repeated in the 1960's with Jit Phumisak's generation of guerilla activists (he was born in what is now Cambodia but most of the guerillas were from Isan) and in the 1970's with the students who went into the jungle along with the Caravan generation. Not surprisingly, Caravan's lead singer is from Khorat province in Isan, and the lyrics for Jit Phumisak were penned with the help of Khamsing Srinawk, a writer from Isan who focused on the poor and disenfranchised of the region.

Folk-rockers Caravan, and a band influenced by Caravan known as Carabao, whose lead singer was educated in the Philippines but served briefly as a messenger for the CPT, have produced dozens of songs about social injustice and the plight of the poor, setting the stage for the mix of politics and music today.

Prominent, pro-Isan leftists such as Therdphum Jaidee, and Kraisak Chunhawan, son of the elected prime minister deposed by General Suchinda in the events leading up to Bloody May, are outright anti-Thaksin, if not yellow shirt supporters, and many of the rank and file led by the socially prominent newspaperman Sondhi and the ascetic Chamlong were drawn from both former activists and Bangkok's poor and middle classes.

Thus October people can be found on both sides of the red/yellow divide, as can poor people from Bangkok and Isan people. This is not surprising, as divisive color-coded politics have divided many a family right down the middle.

As noted earlier Seh Daeng, was the reddest of the red shirts, while his daughter, who kept vigil at his side in the hospital following the attempt on his life, is considered a yellow shirt. Seh Daeng died on May 17, 2010 just as this article was being posted.

Another example of shifting alliances is the founder of the yellow shirts himself. Sondhi Limthongkul was a business associate and political ally of Thaksin before turning against him and organizing the potent yellow shirt demonstrations. Sondhi, who survived a still-unsolved assassination attempt that took place just after red shirt demonstrations of April 2009 were quashed, has come out of political silence to express sympathy for the more grievously injured Seh Daeng, briefly bridging, through shared tragedy, a sharp political divide.

In recent years, some well-known October people and former jungle fighters have become Thaksin supporters and MPs under his tutelage.

Although many of the red shirts like to draw a direct line between 1973 and 1976 and 1992 with

the red cause, and there is some continuity of personnel, the same could be said for the yellow cause which was also influenced by earlier waves of social activism.

Furthermore, some very prominent democracy activists will have no truck with either camp. Just to mention two, October 14 heroes Seksan Prasertkul and Thirayut Boonmee, both respected academics, have been conspicuous by their absence from activities both red and yellow.

The Red Shirt Movement of 2010

But more surprising is the absence of the new generation of students. Where are the young people today? The red crowd is distinctly middle aged, if not middle class, and students are few and far between.

The presence of older demonstrators, especially from rural areas, on the streets of Bangkok is hailed in some quarters as a new kind of political consciousness, but there is also opportunism at play.

This year, as last, the red shirt rallies were crucially timed for the March-April-May period which coincides with the dry season. Soaring temperatures alone make this choice seem odd, until one considers the labor pool. This is the one time of the year the countryside becomes truly idle, and rural folk have some time on their hands due to the temporary halt in agricultural activity. This year, as in other years, all sorts of rural people descended on Bangkok in March, for all sorts of reasons. Many were seeking to supplement their meager incomes, which for some means work as day laborers or driving a tuk-tuk or taxi. For a few thousand others, there's been the novel opportunity of joining a demonstration that says the peasants and poor are the heroes of the nation. For many, this means an all expense paid song and food gala at Ratchaprasong intersection, where the only price of admission is to sit and listen to speeches until the crackdown comes.

Then there are red leaders, and Puea Thai party members who are loyalists to a billionaire in exile. They include core leaders Veera Musikapong, Nattawut Saikua, Jatuporn Promphan, along with others such as Chaturon Chaisaeng and Jaran Ditta-apichai, the latter two "October People," former communist guerillas with close ties to Thaksin.

It is important to remember that "red," as in the Thai Communist Party's historic armed struggle, and "red," as in current populist activism closely linked to Thaksin, are not one and the same thing, though there is some overlap in personnel, the vivid political paraphernalia, and perhaps in guerilla organization and fighting technique.

Nation editor-in-chief Sutichai Yoon, a seasoned observer who has been reporting on these events since starting his own newspaper in the 1970's, recently described Thaksin as the true "hardcore" backer of the red shirts.

The Role of Exiled Prime Minister Thaksin

Exiled tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, sometimes by his own admission, though he contradicts himself frequently, is certainly a key advisor, if not the "black hand" behind the red shirts. This goes beyond funding to policy line and strategic advice, some of which gets repeated in red speeches on stage. Ironies abound, since he is so rich and yet so intent on fueling rhetoric of class war. He was an authoritarian ruler with the temerity to give himself a remake as Thailand's Aung San Su Kyi, victim of authoritarianism. As premier he was an anti-democratic, anti-human rights personality who is now engaged in pro-democracy, pro-human rights posturing, with the help of the best international PR firms money can buy.

Thaksin Shinawatra

Thaksin skipped the seventies wave of student activism entirely, first as a police cadet, then as a student of criminology in the US where he worked in a fast food joint, flipping burgers and frying chicken at a time when his generational cohorts were fighting for democracy in the streets of Bangkok. He became rich by exploiting police connections, and later via a satellite monopoly, yet his business activities, while rife with conflict of interest, have generally fallen within the scope of the law and standard business practices in Bangkok.

The bloodless coup that deposed Thaksin while he was speaking at the UN on September 19, 2006, an organization he frequently disparaged during his years as Prime Minister, set in motion the red shirt movement, which has among its goals the intent to reclaim the "democratic" mantle stolen that the generals stole from Thaksin.

Oddly, the generals in 2006 did not behave as the precedent of Pibun, Sarit and Thanom would have suggested, but instead kept their promise to relinquish power and were remarkably low key. And they have tried to remain so ever since. In recent years, the military has proved extraordinarily reluctant to use force, or even to go after Thaksin's frozen assets, leaving the messy work for civilian governments that followed.

Surayud Chulanont, the interim Prime Minister installed after the coup was a military man and royalist, who ironically joined the military when his own father was at large as a wanted communist rebel.

Surayud's lackluster term was followed in 2008 by none other than the maverick, sharp-tongued Samak Sundaravej, who emerged as an unexpected proxy for the exiled Thaksin.

Thaksin, who was quick to use charges of lese majeste to neutralize his perceived foes, including four Far Eastern Economic Review reporters, found himself increasingly hounded for being disloyal to the King. Though Thaksin is too clever a politician to express anti-King thoughts openly, if indeed he entertains such thoughts, he did engage in verbal skirmishes with the King's trusted right hand man, retired general and privy council member Prem Tinsulanond.

Samak, a confirmed royalist, was a shrewd choice of proxy for Thaksin, but he never got out from under the shadow of his outspoken support for the brutal crackdown on students in October 6,1976. This despite enjoying the tentative support of some "October people" who, thirty years after their defeat by the likes of Samak, were now on the same side, also aligned with Thaksin. Politics indeed makes for strange bedfellows.

Samak held his ground belligerently, despite being hounded by yellow shirts demanding he resign, but finally he was forced to step down because of a legal technicality. (There was an alleged conflict of interest between his being premier and being on a cooking show for which he was paid, a trumped up charge which looks especially silly compared to the multimillion dollar conflicts of interest that his patron Thaksin, and numerous Thaksin cronies, got away with while in office.)

Thaksin's brother in law, Somchai Wongsawat followed Samak's tenure as "proxy" prime minister with an even less illustrious tenure of his own. Pressure from the airport crisis and a corruption complaint led to him stepping down and a new coalition emerged, which thanks to a key last minute defection of Newin Chidchob from the Thaksin camp, put the Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiwa in power as the head of a coalition government.

Thaksin's long association with the Thai police, a relationship solidified by family connections of his wife, has raised questions of commercial and political conflict of interest. It has made it possible to see the police as politicized in a way that makes them especially supportive of, or at least unwilling to take direct action against, the Thaksin supported red shirts. In what has proved to be a bold move, the red shirt protesters camped out right in front of police headquarters and the hospital at Ratchaprasong without observable resistance.

The Thai Military and Police

The Thai military, which includes pro- and anti-Thaksin factions, has been, until recent days, even more enigmatic in its passivity than the police.

When faced with civic disruptions of the sort that even such democracies as the US or Britain would be unlikely to countenance, such as the take-over of all major airports by the yellow shirt protesters, or the subsequent takeover of Bangkok's most valuable shopping and hotel real estate by their red-shirted rivals, the police and the military have stood on the sidelines twiddling their thumbs.

And perhaps with good reason, as the military has proved through bitter example of Red October and Black May that soldiers armed with tanks, helicopters and machine guns are too blunt an instrument, too deadly a force, and likely to inflict too much civilian damage, to serve the nation well in times of turmoil.

As I write, the military has at last unleashed its terrible power and reports from Bangkok suggest the city is being turned into a bloody war zone.

May 14, Thai forces move against protestors

Tragically, the military has been drawn back into the fray, in part at the behest of the yellow shirts and royalists pressuring the generals to do something, but also due to the deliberate goading, "bring it on" attitude of the red shirts seeking to draw the military into conflict, seeking to take on and absorb casualties who can be transmogrified into martyrs and people's heroes, and fire up even more zeal in order to bring on chaos and then systemic change. Key actors on both sides of the barricades, haunted by lessons learned in their own ways from Thailand's long and unusually violent search for democracy, take on actions cued by the past, on the faulty assumption that 2010 is 1973 or 1992 all over again, which it decidedly is not.

Superficial similarities abound, certain memes in Thai political culture make each and every struggle seem like a tribute to earlier struggles, but despite similar rhetoric and music, the color coded activists are not necessarily branches of the same tree, but rather more like a parasitic creeper vine intertwined with, and slowly strangling, what's left of the desiccated tree of democracy planted in 1932.

The Poor in the Red Shirt Movement

Thus, a maelstrom of intertwined and contradictory currents led to the Ratchaprasong protest of 2010, where poor people, some of whom were trucked in from the farms of Isan, ID cards taken away upon arrival to assure they don't take the money and run or leave abruptly, along with genuine rural volunteers and activists fired up by rhetoric and rage, and not without genuine grievances, sit side by side on the pavement of Ratchaprasong, waiting for the ax to fall.

Thus the poor gather in support of an exiled tycoon, led by former communist activists and anti-communist businessmen and popular singers who harangue the crowds with anti-elite, anti-Abhisit rhetoric in the middle of Bangkok's elite commercial real estate and shopping district. The speeches are harsh, sometimes bordering on hate speech, but the staged proceedings are greatly humanized, and rendered audience friendly, by frequent pauses to break into song or announce the latest delivery of delicious food.

Meanwhile, Thailand's traditional arbiter of thorny political crises lies silent in a hospital. Concern about the long-reigning King's condition, and the unsettling succession question, add to the general sense of malaise.

Now that fighting has broken out and the red stage at Ratchaprasong is about to become a cultural memory, the seductive and calming effect of music is being employed to an extraordinary degree.

Memories of the Dead

When a red-shirt is reported killed, or a commemoration of the April 10, 2010 killings is announced, a mournful but uplifting leftist tune is played, with the rag-tag red shirt leaders lined up on stage like a jungle-based politburo.

"Nak su, thuli din" a rousing anthem penned by Jan Kamachon can be heard, bringing the militant crowd to its feet, and to tears.

> "We are treated like dust on the ground,
>
> but fortune will reverse itself
>
> Don't give in to them, that's all that matters.
>
> We will die side by side…
>
> Use blood to wipe away social decay…
>
> Ahead of us, a future that is beautiful
>
> the fire has been lit, it will spread…"

The visions of fire and blood ring all too true. And the hierarchical habit of treating other people like dirt and dust underfoot will persist long after the smoke finally clears at Ratchaprasong.

What happened there will no doubt be an open wound for some time to come, but it will also quickly coalesce to become the stuff of legend, for different sides, for different reasons and with different lessons learned.

Yet Bloody May 2010 at Ratchaprasong will remain divisive and controversial in a way that differs from the one-sided massacres faced by earlier generations of peaceful activists. For all its claims to the moral high ground as a peace-loving democratic movement, the red shirt program is in certain respects the product of a malignant populism, influenced by modern media technique and barrel of the gun tactics favored by earlier revolutionaries.

In 2010 a significant number of the demonstrators were armed and belligerent, and if their techniques were traditional and low tech—everything from slingshots to bamboo spears and Molotov cocktails—there also were armed agents in the shadows, standing on red-

held ground, using handguns, rifles and hand grenades to create mayhem and new cycles of violence and rage. (It must be stressed that the identity and provenance of the "black-shirt" provocateurs remains murky.)

May 14 video (http://video.nytimes.com/video/2010/05/14/multimedia/1247467846589/thai-protests-again-turn-violent.html) of the Red Shirt Movement and attack.

In any case, the "Seh Daengs" and the known militant wing of the red shirts have much to answer for, as do the moneymen and policy makers directing events from a distance.

There is so much blame to go around on both sides of the barricades. Army crackdowns in the name of law and order almost invariably take innocent life, deepening the tragedy, since General Anupong was outspoken in favor of a political solution and observably reluctant to use force against the protesters.

Thai folklore, future history, future poetry and song, will no doubt be replete with new-arch villains, people's heroes and unforgettable martyrs, as has been the pattern in the past.

Like the Taiping rebellion in the late years of the Qing Dynasty, the red shirt uprising may best be understood not just as a cause of a nation's distress but as a symptom of suppressed rage, unrest and unease in a deeply divided society.

Thailand will continue to examine its past, and attempt to put into historic perspective the current troubles, in order to better map out a new kind of future.

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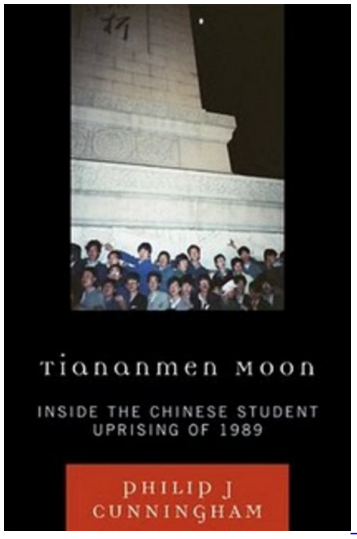

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