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The Roots of Thailand's Turmoil

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PHOTOS: NATTHAWAT WONGRAT

Soldiers in the streets and protesters clamoring for democracy — we've seen this before in Southeast Asia, but was Thailand's recent unrest really a clash between the "the haves" and the "have-nots" as depicted by an almost unanimous chorus of foreign media? As battles between anti-government protesters and the military killed 85 people and injured 1,402, a Western academic claimed that "the farmers of Thailand have stood up." It was supposed to

have been a more or less spontaneous uprising by society's poor and disadvantaged against the urban elite in Bangkok.

Superficially the scenes may have looked similar to the 1988 protests for democracy in Burma or perhaps even the 1998 uprising in Indonesia which led to the fall of Suharto. But there are fundamental differences between those events and Thailand's "Red Shirt" protest movement — the popular name for the grouping officially known as the United Front



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for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). The list of casualties speaks for itself. Of those killed, 11 were soldiers and policemen, as were 411 of the wounded. Unlike pro-democracy movements elsewhere, the UDD had its armed units and was far from the “non-violent” force it purported to be. The UDD also became infamous for its attacks on the media. Several journalists, both Thai and foreign, were threatened by UDD thugs and, on May 19, personnel at a local television

station had to flee for their lives when the mob set fire to their building, apparently “dissatisfied” with the coverage they were getting.

This should have come as no surprise: anyone who had visited Red Shirt rallies would have been struck by the language used. Although “democracy” was a catchphrase, the rest of the message was one of intolerance and even hatred of anyone who did not agree with the protesters, often peppered with obscenities.

Top left: The controversial and distasteful UDD blood protest won few accolades.

Above: Serious casualties in the aftermath of clashes near Phan Fa Bridge on 10 April.

Bottom left: Red Shirt protesters at Ratchaprasong intersection exult in the moment.

Bottom: Massed UDD protestors surge against security lines in April before the rules of engagement were adjusted to keep both sides further apart.



PHOTO: VINAI DITHAJOIN



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Above: UDD protesters near Sala Daeng intersection sit on piles of broken paving slabs, prepared to repel security forces.

Bottom line: Protesters man the barricades and rest under the skytrain.

And there were always armed men around, dressed in black fatigues.

It should also not be forgotten that the movement was launched on March 12 — two weeks after Thai courts had seized \$1.4 billion of assets held in Thai banks of the family of Thaksin Shinawatra, the former prime minister who was ousted in 2006 and is wanted for multiple counts of corruption. But he must have had significant amounts of money saved elsewhere, because a local Red Shirt leader in Thailand's rural northeast told the German press agency DPA on May 23:

"Thaksin spent hundreds of millions of baht to sponsor the protest." Apart from funding from Thaksin, now in exile in Dubai, the Red Shirts are believed to have also received financial backing from other extremely wealthy families allied with him.

And although tens of thousands of people from impoverished parts of the Northeast were mobilized to take part in the protests, it is significant that there is not a single representative of disadvantaged sections of society in the UDD leadership. The main leader, Jatuporn Promphan, served as secretary



PHOTOS: NIC DUNLOP

in the ministry of natural resources and environment in the Thaksin government and, in 2003, he and other officials ordered over 1,000 police to retake a large tract of land in the south, which had been taken over by poor farmers. They accused the government of leasing the land to big palm oil producers instead of redistributing it to the farmers. Jatuporn then defended the police action, saying the protesters were “armed” and “broke the law.” During his years in power, Thaksin himself tried to stifle the media, silence critics of his regime — and launched a vicious “war on drugs” which claimed more than 2,000 lives in extrajudicial executions.

The clash in Thailand should be described as a clash between two oligarchies. On one side, the traditional elite consisting of the old Sino-Thai plutocracy that for years have enjoyed a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship with the military, bureaucracy and monarchy — and the new nouveau-riche elite that began to emerge during the

Vietnam War era, when the economy took off and culminated in the boom of the 1980s. Lacking the political connections of the old elite, Thaksin and his business associates built up their own power base through a string of populist policies, which won many admirers in certain parts of the country. However, the political confusion among many of the Red Shirt followers is demonstrated in a UDD Chiang Mai café: on the wall hang side by side portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Che Guevara — and Thaksin.

Significantly, however, the Red Shirt movement has remained a largely regional phenomenon, mainly in the northeast. UDD influence in the central plains is considerably weaker and virtually non-existent in the south. In those parts of the country — strongholds of Thaksin’s sworn enemies, the Yellow Shirts — there are also many poor and disadvantaged people.

Rather than being the “class war” that the UDD likes to talk about, and the Western

Below: An unidentified man in plain attire shoots a pistol at soldiers during serious clashes with security forces in Bangkok’s Bon Kai area on 15 May.



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- Above: A member of UDD throws a Molotov cocktail at soldiers.
- Bottom left: During a clash with soldiers, a member of UDD eats lunch off a container that also holds ping pong balls.
- Bottom centre: A volunteer fire fighter was shot in his head while helping an injured UDD demonstrator.
- Bottom right: A member of UDD took off his clothes to celebrate his courage after shooting off a firecracker that exploded near soldiers.

media seemed to believe it is, it is a conflict between old and new money which is also pitting poor as well as rich in different parts of the country against each other. This divide is a serious problem which any Thai government and serious political force would have to address — and not take advantage of for their own respective political agendas.

Whatever the outcome of the present crisis, the future of Thai democracy does not look good, nor does the prospect of national reconciliation. In fact, a country that only a

few years ago was seen as a pillar of economic and political stability risks becoming a failed state. This frightening scenario can only be thwarted if Thailand gets solid, independent state institutions that can handle a crisis like this one — and bridge the gap between various elites as well as different parts of the country and society's rich and poor. ■

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