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Thailand

Thailand: placing the crisis in perspective

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Thailand is today experiencing a brutal, global, crisis concerning simultaneously the place of the monarchy and army, the divisions inside the bourgeoisie, the relations between social classes “from above” and “from below”, the institutions and the political system, the dominant “values” or again the country’s insertion in the world economy: the impact of neoliberal globalisation, the lasting effect of the financial crisis of 1997, the consequences of the current somersaults of international capitalism.

Famous for its number of successful or failed coups, Thailand was for a long time after the Second World War under the yoke of military or authoritarian regimes with a parliamentary facade. It has experienced more than one sharp crisis, which has not led to a democratic refoundation of the country. In the eyes of many observers it could have gone in a different direction after 1992.

In reaction to the elections imposed in 1988 by a significant social mobilisation, the army fomented a new coup d'état in 1991. In May 1992, it violently repressed protest demonstrations, at the price of a blood bath. Faced with the breadth of disapproval in the country, it had to withdraw and promise to "depoliticise" itself.

The years 1991-1992 effectively represented a turning point to the extent that the withdrawal of the army left room for the business class to enter politics, facilitating the implementation of neoliberal policies and the integration of the country into globalisation. Some hoped that this withdrawal would be definitive and that democratic reforms would follow the economic ones. The coup of 2006 showed these hopes were vain.

Divided dominant classes

The coup d'état of September 19, 2006 was directed against the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, his party, the Thai Rak Thai (Thaĩ's love Thaĩ's), which had won the parliamentary elections of 2001 and 2005 – as well as the snap election of 2006, boycotted by the opposition.

Thaksin was no democrat. He gave authorisation to the Bangkok police to kill gangsters on sight in the name of the war on drugs (more than 2,000 deaths). He revived the war against the Malay and Muslim minority in the southern provinces. But he implemented a populist policy which had genuinely brought benefits to the poor, in particular in the countryside (funding for development health, education). He thus won significant social support, notably in the North and North-East.

Thaksin, himself a rich capitalist, partially modified the rules of the Thai political game. He strengthened the weight of businessmen not belonging to the traditional elites. He overshadowed the royal family by affirming himself on the national scale as the “protector of the poor” a role previously devolved to the king. He skirted round the alliance between the monarchy, the higher officer corps and the top civil service, a dominant feature of Thai institutions. He challenged the established interests and paid the price for it.

Not only was Thaksin overthrown by a military coup but, accused of corruption, he was forced into exile and his property partly seized by the judiciary – without it ever being proved that he was more corrupt or guilty of malpractice than other more favoured politicians.

If the conflict inside the dominant classes is so deep, it is because the monarchy and army top brass are essential components of it. The king and other members of the royal family are very wealthy with land, industrial and commercial interests of the highest importance. A notch below, the same is true for many retired generals. They form part of the Thai bourgeoisie. Mired in the past, incapable of self-reform, the traditional elites remain powerful.

The renaissance of a popular movement

The crisis of 2006 began then as a conflict inside the Thai élites and bourgeoisie. To the traditional order resting on the monarchy, Thaksin opposed the legitimacy of the ballot boxes and the 19 million votes he had won. That opened a breach which allowed the popular movements to regain their voice.

Thailand went through a "revolutionary" decade between 1973 (with the overthrow of the military dictatorship) and the early 1980s, marked by the rout of the Communist Party and the end of the armed struggle.

Since the disappearance of the CP as an active force, there has no longer been a party of the left in Thailand, whether reformist or revolutionary, which could claim to represent the popular layers. The game of clientelism has predominated, undermining the independence of the social movements and notably trades unionism. The situation is here very different from that which prevailed in the other countries of the region. [\[1\]](#).

The experience of the 1970s nonetheless left traces. Activist links has been built between towns and villages, provinces, (former) students, workers and peasants. This led to the birth of the Assembly of the Poor in 1995, on December 10, international human rights day. It included above all the rural movements of the North and North East fighting for control over their resources, but also organisations of fishers in the South or workers in the region of Bangkok. The functioning of the Assembly represented both a rupture with the very centralist traditions of the CP and with lobbyism or clientelism.

The Assembly of the Poor organised big mobilisations in the capital with massive participation from provincial demonstrators. Even if its capacity for action subsequently declined and it was confronted by its own limits, it did in its turn contribute to the profound renewal of the activist "savoir faire" of the popular movements.

The evolution of the Red Shirts

The Red Shirts are composite trend. This movement was associated with Thaksin Shinawatra and it is true that it reflects the sharpness of the divisions inside the dominant classes. It is however not correct to see the popular participation as only the "clientele" of a rich bourgeois. The Red Shirts express in their way all the facets of a global crisis of society, including the crisis of the dominant ideology with the loss of prestige of the royal family (they are often perceived as "anti-monarchy").

Thaksin has conserved a significant influence inside the Red Shirts through his links with the main leaders of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) which provides the framework of the movement. Taking account of the non-existence of left wing parties and the weakness of the trade unions, the popular currents have no specific popular representation at the national scale. That is what renders it more difficult to analyse this movement and its internal relations of force.

However, testimonies abound on the sharp consciousness among the demonstrators, of the social inequalities which characterise the Thai kingdom, Just as striking has been the class hatred expressed without restraint by the Bangkok establishment against the “hordes” of “poor” come to “invade” their capital. The Red Shirt movement is not without problems; it is obviously characterised by political cleavages which are more or less formalised. But it has been carried along by three legitimate demands.

A democratic demand. Repeatedly the parties favourable to Thaksin have won elections (very convincingly). Each time they have been struck down military or judicial coups. The conservative élites have made little secret of their contempt for the Constitution of 1997, the most democratic the country has known. It was thrown into oblivion after the putsch of 2006, the military drawing up a new one which the junta had ratified by referendum the following year.

Thailand is one of the (rare?) countries where the members of the élite, indeed the middle classes of Bangkok, declare openly that the “ignorant”, namely the poor, should not vote, and that politics should be the business of the well-educated only.

A social demand. To this anti-democratic ideology corresponds very inegalitarian social relations. Poverty is not a novelty in Thailand but the mode of economic growth has sharpened the social contradictions instead of reducing them: neoliberal capitalist development conducted under authoritarian regimes; then insertion of the country in neoliberal globalisation leading to the trauma of the financial crisis of 1997 (massive unemployment for wage earners, ruin for the middle classes). Until the beginning of the 1970s, the peasants could still set themselves up on new lands in Thailand: this “economic frontier” only closed gradually and lately in comparison with neighbouring countries. In the countryside, this mobility contributed to limiting tensions and social inequalities between farmers, although obviously there were regional differences. Contemporary peasant movements emerged with the growth of inequalities or in defence of the resources which army and private interests tired to take over: access to water, the forest and so on.

Regional demands. For a long time the élites of Bangkok have had a reputation for draining the wealth of the country to their profit alone, which strengthens regionalist sentiments not only in the Muslim far south but also in the north and north east (the traditions of the left being moreover stronger in this latter region).

Developments and clarifications

In some years of crisis, the social and democratic stakes have been clarified, beyond the conflicts raging inside the dominant classes. This development does not simply concern the Red Shirts.

The Yellow Shirts. The “yellows” originally brought together all those who opposed, for various and sometimes contradictory reasons, Prime Minister Thaksin. They benefitted from the support of the media and governments following the coup of 2006. They were thus able to occupy with impunity the two international and domestic airports in Bangkok at the end of November 2008, which led to much more chaos than the much decried occupation of the commercial neighbourhood of Rajaprasong by the “reds”.

In essence the Yellow Shirts today support the monarchy and fight for a restricted suffrage. Thus, defending these “ultra” positions they threatened to go back into the street to prevent the Abhisit government from negotiating with the Red Shirts for early elections.

NGOs and associations. Numerous Thai NGOs participated in the demonstrations of 2005 and 2006 which led to

the fall of Thaksin and hailed the coup of September 19, 2006. More militant movements mobilised against the putsch in the name of democracy, reflecting very significant divisions among NGOs. [2].

However, some NGOs which had participated in the movement against Thaksin have evolved significantly: pro-"yellow" in the beginning, they became "neutral" when the social force of the "reds" was affirmed ("against violence from wherever it comes"), and now denounce the massive repression suffered by the Red Shirts as the authoritarian features of the regime have been reinforced.

Monarchy and army

Thailand was never colonised which gave a continuity to its institutions which was not shared by neighbouring countries. However, the monarchy did not remain uncontested. The "revolution of 1932" imposed a passage from absolute to constitutional monarchy. Immediately after the Second World War, the authority of the royal family fell still further, after the murder of Ananda Mahidol, before Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), his brother, acceded to the throne in 1946.

Royal prestige was reconstituted very systematically, in particular under the dictatorship of Sarit Thanarat with US aid (the monarchy was also protected by a severe law punishing *lèse majesté* with a sentence of 3 to 15 years). This prestige was at its highest after Bhumibol contributed to favourably resolving the crisis of 1992. But he has also used his authority to back coups and bloodbaths.

At the end of a particularly long reign, the king is today very sick. The designated heir, prince Vajiralongkorn, does not share the current king's aura, far from it. The authority of the monarchy will not be easy to restore when the country is going through an institutional and ideological crisis. The (superficial) image of a Thailand which is consensual, hierarchical, organised around royalty, Buddhism and the nation, where all accept the place allotted to them, has cracked. The reality of social and political conflict appears in broad daylight – and not, moreover, for the first time. [3].

The fact that Prime Minister Abhisit took refuge in a military base to govern during the two and a half months of crisis confirms the role of the army in political life. The crushing of the Red Shirts in May restored a significant weight to the generals close to Prem and the queen. The army commander in chief, Anupong Paochinda, should be replaced in September (he is retiring) by general Prayuth Chan-Ocha, a hardliner who is very anti-Thaksin and ultra-royalist. Faced with the coming political turbulence, it is however not impossible that this hegemony is contested in the army by "watermelon" factions of the military, green on the outside but red within.

The future

In an unstable regional and world context, the future of Thailand appears very indecisive. The traditional elites have affirmed their desire not to let go of their powers and prerogatives. They receive for now the support of a great part of the Bangkok middle classes who seek to preserve their privileges through conservatism. The massive repression of the Red Shirts signifies a durable authoritarian stiffening of the regime.

This stiffening also responds to the approach of a major institutional crisis: the difficult succession of king Bhumibol. But it brings no response to the divisions inside the dominant classes or the social and regional tensions – apart from affirming a relationship of force.

The urban and rural social movements will probably continue to follow varied strategies: lobbyism and clientelism or construction of an independent capacity for action. But beyond their composite character, the recent mobilisations of the Red Shirts have shown the potential of this latter option – providing the repression has not dealt it too harsh a blow, particularly in the provinces.

Can a political left re-emerge three decades after the defeat of the CP? It is possible given the distances taken by numerous Red Shirt activists in relation to Thaksin and the work of education undertaken at base level in numerous areas. But if such is the cases, what will this left – or indeed these lefts – be like?

For now, it might be feared that the repression will discreetly continue. A witch hunt has been launched. Red Shirt cadres have already been assassinated in the provinces. The regime enjoys the support of the US and Europe who are little moved by human rights violations in the kingdom.

[1] We should stress here this particularity of the recent history of Thailand. Apart from a very small far left group, it is now 30 years since there was an active progressive party in Thailand. There are some villages where CP members regrouped following the political amnesty agreements of the 1980s, but this organisation has had no visible intervention since the end of the armed struggle. Despite the fairly general crisis of the “traditional” Communist parties in south east Asia (generally Maoist), left organisations have maintained themselves or more often reconstituted themselves in countries like the Philippines, Malaysia or even Indonesia – an archipelago where the crushing of the Communist movement in the 1960s had been especially ferocious

[2] As in many other countries, but perhaps to a still greater extent, NGOs in Thailand occupy a position as intermediaries facilitating negotiations between the administration and the popular movements. Even when they do it with the aim of helping the latter, the hardening of social conflicts places them in a bad situation. A good number of them have taken refuge in an impotent posture of “dialogue”

[3] This superficial image of a Thailand hierarchically and happily organised around the king, Buddhism and the nation has always been misleading. It has however the strength and resilience of a dominant ideology which – by definition – dominates normally. It has the function of a dominant ideology: justifying repression (the crime of lèse majesté and so on), legitimating established powers, hiding actually existing relations of exploitation and oppression. It is striking to see to what point this image has been effective and reproduced abroad in many writings whereas its misleading character had been evident at each crisis, in particular in the 1970s