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Thailand

What is at stake in the crisis?

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The violent repression aimed against the Red Shirts which took a dramatic turn in April and May has not put an end to the Thai crisis, even if it has put an end to the popular mobilisations in the capital, at the price of at least 89 officially recognised deaths, some 2,000 wounded, hundreds of incarcerations, generalised censorship and so on.

In its brutality and breadth, this repression amounts to a declaration of war launched by the traditional elites against all the opposition sectors, including those inside the bourgeoisie: no free elections, no compromise!

Thus no response has as yet been given by the government led by Abhisit Vejjajiva to the social, political and institutional problems which are at the origin of the kingdom's crisis. The rejection front constituted – faced with the demand for democratic elections – by the royal family, the military hierarchy, the upper bureaucracy, the other more conservative sectors of the dominant classes and the higher layers of the Bangkok middle classes will however face a difficult period with the predicted death of king Bhumibol.

The future of Thailand now appears highly uncertain and it is very hard for us to predict how the situation will develop, but the stakes are considerable. The country is shaken by several deep intertwining crises which concern both the place of the monarchy and the 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 impossible reform?

The current crisis marks the defeat of the attempts at democratic reform begun in 1992. In 1991, the army brutally repressed the democratic demonstrations but, following the protests raised about this bloodbath, it was forced to withdraw to barracks and undertake to “depoliticise” itself. Was it going to effectively withdraw from political life in a country which had essentially lived under military juntas or authoritarian regimes with a parliamentary facade since the Second World War?

The army represented a very significant economic power in the country and its forced withdrawal after the massacre of 1992 allowed businessmen who were not part of the traditional elites to enter politics. Becoming Prime Minister in 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra incarnated the new ambitions of this sector of the wealthy classes. He came up against the alliance between the monarchy, the high bureaucracy and the army, the pillars of the regime. He challenged the balance of power by affirming himself at the national scale as the “protector of the poor” a role devolved to the king. Thaksin was no democrat. He gave authorisation to the Bangkok police to kill suspects freely in the name of the war on drugs, while in the name of the war against Islamist irredentism the army carried out blind repression in the southern provinces. But he financed social programmes and by loosening the grip of the institutions opened a breach which allowed popular aspirations to be expressed.

Unable to compete with Thaksin at the electoral level and to retake the reins of power, the traditional elites responded to this reformist direction with the military coup of September 19, 2006, then in 2008 two judicial coups to unseat two “pro-Thaksin” governments. Having retaken power, they began a veritable counter reform, casting aside the Constitution of 1997, the most democratic that the country had known (everything is relative). The military drew up a new constitution which the junta had ratified by referendum in late 2007. Its drawing up led to numerous

debates, the most reactionary forces organised in the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD- the "Yellow Shirts") demanding the establishment of an income based electoral system, allowing the marginalisation of the popular layers at the institutional level.

Since then the army has completely rejoined the political arena, with Prime Minister Abhisit even taking refuge inside a military base to govern during the two and a half months of crisis!

What is at stake in the current crisis goes well beyond the question of repression alone: it concerns first and foremost a redefinition of the political regime. A question all the more crucial in that the monarchy and the army leadership are directly part of the Thai bourgeoisie. The royal family is according to the magazine "Forbes" the richest such family in the world with land, industrial and commercial interests of the first order. The army as an institution is also an economic power of the first level and it ensures the wealth of many retired generals.

Stuck in the past, incapable of self reform, the traditional elites remain powerful. Tokyo and the Western capitals have been careful not to denounce the violations of democracy and human rights committed by Bangkok. But the social immobilism of the élites nonetheless worries international business circles. The latter have not forgotten that it was under Thaksin that neoliberal policies were implemented facilitating the insertion of the country within globalisation. Thailand is also the only country in the region where social inequalities have got worse. Thus, the influential "Economist" magazine has published highly severe editorials and articles on the situation in the kingdom. It was notably the first journal to criticise the current role of the monarchy.

In Thailand fractures can also appear inside the army. The crushing of the Red Shirts in May restored an important weight inside it to generals close to the very influential chief advisor of the king Prem Tinsulanonda and to the queen. The army commander in chief, Anupong Paochinda, was replaced in September following his retirement by general Prayuth Chan-Ocha, a partisan of the hard line, very anti-Thaksin and ultra royalist. Faced with the coming political turbulences, it is however not impossible that this hegemony is contested in the army by "watermelon" factions, "green on the outside but red within" who do not wish the army to be used to repress the people. Opposition could also come from career soldiers overlooked because they do not belong to the currently dominant circle.

The situation is still more unstable since the king, Bhumibol, is very ill and must die soon, which will open a serious crisis of succession and probably an intensification of factional conflicts inside the elites and the army. The designated heir to the throne, prince Vajiralongkorn, is utterly without the aura of his father.

A renewal on the left?

The rebirth of a militant left in Thailand constitutes a second major stake in the ongoing conflicts. Here again, nothing is settled in advance. The political left has not existed in Thailand for nearly three decades. As to the social left, it was very much weakened at the time of the 2006 coup. That is why the crisis first took the form of a conflict between factions of the dominant classes. But the crisis has deepened and the underlying class contradictions have emerged.

The weakness of the Thai left has old roots. The Communist movement appeared timidly in the late 1920, but not in very favourable conditions. The country had never been colonised and the industrial revolution came late, so Communism was not able to forge itself inside a vast liberation struggle or a developed working class. The (small) working class was ethnically segmented and the Communist movement was above all present among Chinese immigrants. Until the early 1970s, peasants could still establish themselves on new land which helped contain the rural crisis. Each region has its own political and social history: north-east, north, central plain, south... Repression made the survival of legal organisations very uncertain

However, in an explosive international context (Thailand serving as “aircraft carrier” to the US forces fighting in Indochina), the country experienced a “revolutionary” decade, inaugurated in 1973 by the overthrow of the military dictatorship. Several left organisations then formed a common front, but only the Communist Party (CPT) was in a position to coordinate action in the various regions and social milieus. Unhappily, faced with the Sino-Indochinese conflict in 1978 and very dependent on Beijing, it entered into crisis. Its defeat, completed by the early 1980s, and the end of the armed struggle closed this revolutionary decade.

Since the disappearance of the CPT as an active force, there has no longer been a left party in Thailand, whether reformist or revolutionary, which can claim to represent the popular layers. Many activists tried at the end of the 1980s to constitute new political groups. Some made contact with the Fourth International and participated in the activities of the International Institute for Research and Education (IIRE) in Amsterdam, but all these attempts failed. There were reasons for this which were specific to Thailand: the CPT was truly a “jungle party”, with the great majority of its members living in the guerrilla camps; leaving them, they were without resources or any local organisation to support them. Those who left did so in great numbers but individually, not through structured splits.

In these conditions, clientelism undermined the independence of the social movements and of trades unionism. Numerous former CPT militants joined Thaksin to establish policies in favour of the poorest but remained silent on the democratic questions. Today still, the trade union movement has not overcome this situation of dependency and its weaknesses. No union was in a position to organise support strikes for the Red Shirts during the crisis.

The experience of the 1970s has nonetheless left traces. Activist links were built between towns and villages, between provinces, between (former) students, workers and peasants. While new peasant movements were born with the growth of inequality or in defence of resources which the army or private interests had commandeered (access to water or the forest and so on), this led to the birth of the Assembly of the Poor in 1995, on December 10, the international day of human rights. It included above all the rural movements of the North and North-East, but also organisations of fishers from the South or workers from the region of Bangkok. The functioning of the Assembly represented both a break with the very centralist tradition of the CTT and with lobbyism or traditional clientelism.

The Assembly of the Poor organised big mobilisations in the capital with massive support 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.

What will happen today? Could a new social and political left be born thanks to the experience of the Red Shirts? That is the fear of the élites. It is also what the rapid evolution of this composite movement could lead to.

Evolutions and clarifications

In some years of crisis, the social and democratic issues have clarified, as have the conflicts raging in the dominant classes.

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”.

What is at stake in the crisis?

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. However, more militant movements mobilised against the putsch in the name of democracy, reflecting very significant divisions among NGOs.

Since then 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.

The Red Shirts. Whatever the initial role of Thaksin Shinawatra it would be wrong to see the popular participation in the mobilisations 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.

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. 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. There is ample evidence as to the sharpened consciousness among the demonstrators of the social inequalities which characterise the kingdom. Just as striking has been the class hatred expressed without reserve by the Bangkok establishment against the "hordes" of the "poor" who "invaded" their capital.

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).

All these demands are legitimate and worthy of support.

The crisis of the dominant ideology

Not having been shattered by a colonial conquest, the institutions of the kingdom have known greater continuity than neighbouring countries. But the current crisis challenges 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. The

reality of social and political conflict appears in broad daylight – and not, moreover, for the first time.

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 (Rama VIII), before Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX), his brother, acceded to the throne in 1946. This was again the case after the bloody coup of 1976.

An “official” description of the Thai kingdom was imposed in the universities and media. In reality, royal prestige was not something “natural”, but was reconstituted very systematically, in particular under the dictatorship of Sarit Thanarat with US aid. More recently, Bhumibol’s authority was strengthened by the role he played during the crisis of 1992. But he has also used his authority to back coups and bloodbaths.

Today, the dominant ideology (“king, religion, nation”) seems again contested and the road is open to the affirmation of popular and critical ideologies. This is not the least important aspect of the current crisis.

International solidarity: an urgent need

Given the violence of the repression and what is at stake in the Thai crisis, it is extremely important that the popular movements receive effective international support. To do this it is however necessary to overcome a triple liability. Despite the participation in the global justice movement of some organisations based in Thailand, there is no existing tradition of solidarity in relation to this country, so it must be reconstituted. Many NGOs present in the kingdom have contributed to giving a very negative image of the Red Shirts in their international networks. Many far left currents continue to associate this movement with Thaksin and do not grasp the social polarisation which exists.

Taking account of these problems, the impact of the first solidarity initiatives is encouraging. This is notably the case for the Appeal published on June 20, 2010. It has now received nearly 700 signatures. Among them are many ThaÃ’s who we had not expected to sign, given the risks. We also note the presence of some renowned experts on South East Asia and the large number of countries represented (around fifty) thanks notably to Thai emigration, but also to the activist networks which have often served as relays to spread this appeal.

There are also a number of signatories who are absent, notably among elected representatives, which poses problems. But it is the first time for several decades that Thailand has featured as a subject of international solidarity. A first step has been taken. Now it is necessary to keep up the pressure so that the regime cannot pursue its repression with indifference and to make this solidarity lasting. It is not only about bringing our support to the victims of repression punctually, but also in the long term.

The Thai elites wish to smother the rebirth of a democratic and popular movement in the cradle. They use all means to do this: prolongation of the state of emergency in numerous provinces, arrests in the hundreds, censorship and recourse to laws like the “crime” of lèse-majesté (punishable by 3 to 15 years in prison) or computing “crime” (which allows the blocking of thousands of Internet sites), institutional counter-reforms, reactivation of far right royalist militias, extra-judicial killings and so on. The regime benefits from the support given by the USA and to a lesser extent Europe which show little concern over the violation of human rights in the kingdom. The Thai activists, the Red Shirts, deserve our solidarity.