

## In Defense of the Thai-Style Democracy

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For the Thai public, the 19/9 coup by the Council for Democratic Reform (CDR), which effectively dethroned the Thaksin administration last month, was not unexpected. Most of the Thai media's immediate reactions to the coup were of no-surprise.<sup>1</sup> Rumors about the coup had circulated in Bangkok for months. There were even 'direct calls', especially from leaders of the People's Allies for Democracy, for the military to intervene in order to put an end to the political deadlocks, which King Bhumibhol described in late April as the "worst crisis in the world." What does the coup mean to Thailand? How can Thailand as a people make sense of it? For most Thais, the coup brought immediate sighs of relief. The public overwhelmingly welcomed the military's move since it was endorsed by the King and General Surayud Chulanont, one of the Privy Councilors, was appointed as the Prime Minister. According to the Suan Dusit Poll released on September 22, 2006, 82% of respondents from Bangkok and 86% of those from the provinces supported the coup (Kavi Chongkittavorn 2006).

At the outset, the gentle, bloodless 19/9 coup appears like another power game at the top of the Thai political pyramid. However, this coup has ignited heated debates and contestations among the community of public intellectuals and scholars both inside and outside Thailand. I have been caught up in a gulf of remarkable differences between two communities of interpretation. One belongs to my international colleagues including most *farang* and some overseas Thai scholars, some leading public intellectuals at home, and most international media, who without hesitation point out that the coup was wrong. It went against democratic rationality and philosophy. It has damaged the country's path toward a liberal democracy and a just society. I may call this camp the "protagonists of Western-style democracy". On the other side, there are the "protagonists of Thai-style

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<sup>1</sup>"Coup No Surprise to Thai Media." *BBC News*. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5363618.stm>, accessed October 11, 2006.

democracy,” comprising of large numbers of Thai public intellectuals and the local media, who try to make some constructive sense out of the “necessary evil” (Kavi Chongkittavorn 2006). People like Saneh Chamarik, who is in charge of the country’s human rights affairs, and Prawet Wasi, a highly respected senior citizen, argued that the coup is rather a Thai way of solving internal political problems. In an open letter dated October 6, 2006 protesting at the U.S. government’s intervention to Thailand’s internal affairs, lecturers, civil servants, employees, and students from leading universities in Bangkok urged the U.S. to “respect the modality of problem solving in the Thai democratic system under a constitutional monarchy that differs in many aspects from the system of democracy in the United States.”<sup>2</sup> The coup has become “the modality of problem solving,” indeed. Thongchai Winichakul slammed this argument as “short-sighted and self-defeating principles” (*mak ngai-kit san*) and that “thirty plus years of democratization [since 1973] have been wasted [by this poorly-validated coup].”<sup>3</sup>

Both camps of protagonists agree that Thaksin’s days in office were numbered prior the coup. There were signs pointing to the decay of his regime. How and when he would step down from power, and by what means, were the subjects in question. Both camps also agree that the coup is a bad solution, but their difference is that the coup is seen as a “bitter solution” by the protagonists of Thai-style democracy, while it is completely rejected by their other counterparts. The coup demonstrated how Thai elites from the King, people in the “monarchical networks” (McCargo 2005), down to those involved in the anti-Thaksin campaigns had lost faith in the “Thai electocracy” (Kasian Tejapira 2006), dominated by Thaksin and his party. They had run out of options to get rid of him and thus turned to the military forces. The BBC News observed that “with new elections set for later this year, they seem to have decided to act swiftly, taking advantage of the fact he was out of the country at the UN’s General Assembly.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>“Open Letter from Lecturers, Civil Servants, Employees, and Students from Universities in Thailand and Doctornurse Alliance for Democracy.” *Manager Online*. Available at: <http://www.manager.co.th/asp-bin/Printnews.aspx?NewsID=9490000125805>, accessed October 9, 2006.

<sup>3</sup>Thongchai Winichakul. “Bad Excuse for the Coup.” Available at: <http://www.midnightuniv.org/forum/index.php?topic=977.0>, accessed October 9, 2006.

<sup>4</sup>“Q&A: Thailand’s Coup Impact.” *BBC News*. Available at: <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-...>, accessed October 9, 2006.

I do not mean to defend the coup, but how it is politically and morally justified in Thailand amid the international concerns needs to be understood properly. I argue that the protagonists of Thai-style democracy have built their rationality based on the Thai Buddhist-based cultural paradigms, which emphasize improvisational, compromised, and flexible adjustments to their social world. Thongchai Winichakul argues that the 19/9 coup is not a military coup, but a “royalist coup with purposes” including “toppling Thaksin” and creating desirable transitions from the present to the next reign (e.g., a popular choice of heir, a submissive government, and a strong Privy Council). “Thaksin threatened the royalist plan. To royalists, he seemingly sought to adopt for himself the role of kingmaker. The royalist coup consolidates power to General Prem and the royalists, putting their plan on track.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, engaging in this type of interpretation is prohibited by law and almost unthinkable for the protagonists of Thai-style democracy and most, if not all, Thai subjects.

Thongchai’s radical interpretation of this coup may or may not be valid, but I think the people, by whom Thongchai and his colleagues were heavily criticized, are not politically naïve or short-sighted. Rather, they are more practical and realistic, focusing on the nation’s integration, security, and spirituality. They have sought for some conventional frames of reference and produced explanations, which have conformed to dominant political discourses as the Foucauldian regime of truth in Thailand. Let me cite three possible ways of making sense of the 19/9 coup, which have been adopted by the protagonists of Thai-style democracy in Thailand.

First, the protagonists of Thai-style democracy have turned to Buddhist morality and principles to justify why people like Thaksin and his infamous “Thaksinomics” (*rabop thaksin*) must be terminated at all costs. Thaksin represents an “amoral capitalist leader/agent,” whose five-year regime had abused the country’s democracy, corrupted and divided the nation, and been unpatriotic. In this respect, Thaksin has been “dehumanized” as “Mara” (*man*) (Buddhist personification of evil) and prominently displayed thus in the media in the last few years. He was often compared to some great

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<sup>5</sup>Thongchai Winichakul. “Bad Excuse for the Coup.” Available at: <http://www.midnightuniv.org/forum/index.php?topic=977.0>, accessed October 9, 2006.

demons destructive to both Buddhism and the monarchy. Sulak Sivaraksa wrote these following lines in the acknowledgements of his latest book on “*Trans Thai Buddhism*”.

“I hope I shall live that long to be able to witness the return of Thai democracy to its roots in the Buddha Dhamma—despite the destruction of Thai Democracy by Mara who happens to be the chief executive of the Thai nation at present” (Sulak Sivaraksa 2004:9).

In the mind of leading public intellectuals like Saneh Chamarik, Sulak Sivaraksa and Prawet Wasi, the novel form of Thai democracy must be based on Buddhist principles, which include the ideas of good governance, a righteous ruler, and Buddhist Dhammic kingship. King Bhumiphol, after ruling for six decades, is at the apex of his undisputed charisma as well as political authority. When Thaksin’s radical endeavors to overhaul the country’s power structure was widely interpreted by his opponents, especially by Sondhi Limthongkul and the People Allies for Democracy, as a direct challenge to the King’s authority, he had to succumb to fight a losing battle. The 19/9 coup is thus interpreted by many as “Thaksin [the Mara] versus the [Dhammic] King.”<sup>6</sup> Sulak Sivaraksa argues that Thaksin is arrogant and foolish to fight against the King. Thaksin “used his money and [amoral] power, but didn’t realize the palace is more subtle than that, and has a lot of quiet power.”<sup>7</sup>

Second, they have looked into the roots of the so-called “Thainess”, especially the country’s political culture, to explain why Thailand’s leadership has always ended up in the hands of either corrupt politicians or military dictators throughout the rough, seventy–four-year history of democratization. They conclude that Thai culture, especially its cultural construction of power, is by and large incompatible with the Western-style democracy. Hanks (1962) is still correct with his argument that the Thais view power (*amnat*) suspiciously or negatively. Wright (2006) recently shows that there is no widely-employed, single Thai terminology to mark the distinction between power and authority.

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<sup>6</sup>Kate McGeown. “Thai King Remains Centre Stage.” *BBC News*. September 21, 2006. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5367936.stm>, accessed October 9, 2006.

<sup>7</sup>Kate McGeown. “Thai King Remains Centre Stage.” *BBC News*. September 21, 2006. Available at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5367936.stm>, accessed October 9, 2006.

In the realms of male-dominated politics and bureaucracy, Thais are more familiar with the exercise of power (*phra det*) rather than authority (*phra khun*). The Thais' ambiguous construction of authority partly determined the fall of Thaksin. Authority is referred to in the Thai language by the terms like *amnat saksit*, *bun*, *barami*, or *tham* (*Buddhist Dhamma*). Some Thai scholars, like Saneh Chamarik and Yos Santasombat, prefer the term *sitthi amnat* or *sitthi tham haeng amnat* for authority or legitimate power. When King Bhumiphol was crowned in 1946, his famous pledge was stated as “*rao cha pokkrong phaendin doi tham*” (I shall rule [the nation] by righteous *dhammic* authority--my own translation). I think his term *doi tham* contains multiple meanings. People usually interpret the term Dhamma or Buddhist teachings in religious term, but it is indeed a very political one. It refers to authority or legitimacy, which is conferred upon him by the people (through the constitution), the tradition/convention, and the symbolism surrounding the monarchy institution itself.

Thaksin's deep crisis of legitimacy, despite having full control of power, reflects the fact that he had failed miserably to convert his power into the Buddhist ideal of moral and political authority. Wealth and legalized power did not always guarantee his political legitimacy and stability. Thaksin's conflict of interests, record of corruption, immoral leadership, and his populist style throughout his business and political careers are quite well-documented. In the eyes of his critics, Thaksin is severely demonized. He follows the military strong men's model and has sustained tensions and conflicts against the Palace and the King's men. In the eyes of the media, academics, and urban middle classes, he is representative of the leader who is fond of exercising his masculine, raw, and physical power (*phra det*), not legitimized or righteous power (*phra khun*). He is the man with money, arrogance, and greed, who has never hesitated to put his own family, relatives, and cronies first.

Thaksin and his party won acceptance and votes from rural villagers through the use of *phra det* more than *phra khun* power. His heroic image as the man with money and vision had deeply impressed the villagers. *Chao ban* do not take Thaksin's side in terms of class triumph over their urban counterpart. They do so because (1) they are indebted (*pen ni bun khun*) to his money (or their own tax money) and some material interests; (2) they more and more subscribe themselves to his model of success in life. With his

money-politics success, Thaksin is their hero; and (3) they are impressed with his down-to-earth and populist political performances. The middle class media and scholars are struggling to truly understand the *chao ban* and their moral economy. Why do they fall easily into Thaksin's populist traps? However, the bottom line is that Thaksin has not yet achieved his righteous status in the Buddhist ideal of leadership despite his large-scale state-funded vote-buying. The power which Thaksin possessed was still *amnat kanmuang* or *phra det* rather than *bun barami*. His political power stemmed from his wealth and was often associated with amoral/supernatural/magical Buddhist sources (e.g., consulting magic monks and fortune tellers). He is rarely described as a man/leader with merit or charisma. He suddenly becomes a poor Buddhist leader as far as his *bun barami*, or *thamma* is concerned. The best Thaksin could achieve in this moral or spiritual realm is perhaps an ambitious political leader or a worldly hero for his supporters. The amoral capitals of wealth and power he has suspiciously held do not permit him to transcend beyond this mundane leadership. In other words, he is no way close to acquiring an aura of Buddhist righteous charisma, enjoyed by the King and his men (e.g., General Prem Tinnasulanond).

Finally, the protagonists of Thai style democracy have re-examined the national historiography of modern Thailand and pointed out that the national memories are written based on the elitist heroism. Thailand is too elite-oriented and too hierarchical to be successful in its attempts to establish strong democratic structures and culture. Since Western-style democracy was introduced to Thailand through the 1932 revolution by the People's Party, the nation (*chat*) has preceded democracy (*prachathipatai*), but the monarchy has always prevailed above all symbolic national pillars including *satsana* (Buddhism) and *ratthathanun* (the Constitution). The Thais would try by all means to glorify or defend the King and the nation, even if they have to halt the development of democracy. Nidhi Aeusrivongse (2006:16) argues that Thailand is not a nation born out of the common history from below. Its modern biography did not contain a series of long struggles against adversaries or foreign occupations, which could have nurtured a sense of popular nationalism among its populace. Its official historiographies are full of linear historical plots, in which the royal heroes and elites led the whole nation through the struggles against neighboring groups from the premodern straight to the modern era. Thai

history is the histories of great heroes and their monumental achievements, not the histories of the commoners with common national missions. Nidhi concludes that “the people with this type of national spirit always look to the leader/the hero to solve the nation’s problems. They have never thought of themselves as a people with full potentialities to overcome crises on their own.” The 19/9 coup confirms the Thai-logic or “modality of problem solving” by welcoming the heroic action, engineered by the leaders in the monarchical networks and executed by the military, which is always the proudest defender of the monarchy and the nation, if not their own livelihood and social honor.

In my attempts to put the 19/9 Thai coup in perspective, I have made a brief review of two different communities of interpretation between the protagonists of Western-style and Thai-style democracy. I argue that the protagonists of Thai-style democracy try to make sense of the coup based on (1) their Buddhist-oriented frames of reference to validate the coup as one of a necessary political act of problem-solving, (2) the cultural construction of power, which disqualifies Thaksin in his ambitious attempts to dismantle the existing structures of politico-economic power and culture, and (3) the particularly impatient character of the Thai elitist leadership and the public, which has been historically shaped by the social memories produced in the hero-oriented national historiographies. The Thai as a people and as a nation are constantly structured to yearn for the great elitist leaders, who are morally qualified and charismatically capable of performing their masculine heroism for the good of the nation (not the democracy). The 19/9 events consolidate the thesis that there is still a long way to go in the grass-root struggles for civic, transparent democracy, because the fundamental aspects of Thai political structure and culture seem not to work that way.

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