

Thoughts on Thailand's Turmoil

by James Stent

Background:

In the latter part of the 90's, after the financial crisis of '97, but before the ascent of Thaksin, I was occasionally asked to speak to groups of visiting foreign investment analysts. I set forth the gist of what I used to say to these analysts in italics below, as it gives context to my thoughts on the present turmoil:

Thailand is a country characterized by a high degree of ideological homogeneity, with broad consensus at all levels of society on the core values of Thailand and on what it means to be a Thai. This consensus includes veneration of the king, a leading role for the Buddhist religion, adherence to a free market economic system, support for a hierarchical society that emphasizes respect for superiors and seniors, provides an elevated position in society for army, civil

servants and police, and by implication leaves control of the nation in the hands of an establishment that sits at the top levels of the social pyramid. Over the decades, this establishment has instilled this view of the nation throughout all levels of society, with inculcation starting in the schools and reinforced continually through media, portraits of the royal family, etc. To dissent from the main elements of this consensus is to be “Un-Thai”. In fact, there have been few dissenters, and those that have bucked the consensus are marginalized, either through social pressure, or through police action. This consensus has made for a stable society in which people generally accept their place in life, but which also allows for sufficient social mobility to accommodate the bright and ambitious.

Considerable economic development has occurred under this consensus and stability, and as a result the lot of poor villagers has improved substantially over the past half century. The fears of many that communism would engulf the nation, as it had China and Indochina, have proven unwarranted.

This stable consensus has benefited the elite levels of society, a few thousand members of which control what happens in the country. This elite occupies the key positions in the bureaucracy, the military, police, business establishment (particularly banks), and clergy, in both Bangkok and in provincial cities. None of them seek change in the social, political and economic structure that provides them with such a comfortable way of life and position in society, and which has also led to satisfactory growth of the economy and improvement in the lives of the mass of the population.

Political parties in this system do not have significantly different agendas, much less ideologies, because the people that control the parties all share in the benefits of the system. Thai politics has been about dividing up the pie among the elite, with a certain amount of benefits trickling down to the grassroots. The few people, such as Kukrit and Boonchu, who tried to change the nature of politics to be more responsive to social and economic justice issues, did not have much impact, and civil society was tolerated

provided that it did not push radical reform of the system. A man like Banharn could rise from humble origins through this structure to become Prime Minister, but he did it through playing within the system brilliantly, rather than challenging the system.

The growing middle class accepted this consensus and accompanying political model, as their lives were appreciably improving; the broad mass of farmers and factory workers accepted it as reflecting the nature of the world, and anyway their lot was demonstrably improving over the years, as the cash economy transformed subsistence villages, road networks and electricity reached the farthest corners of the Kingdom, and new job opportunities opened up in the cities as outlets for excess rural labor. Besides that, given the unity of the establishment and its grip on the levers of power, how were farmers and laborers going to change the system even if they had wanted to?

But, if this system of elite governance is to continue to dominate Thailand, then Thailand will

never fully realize its development potential as a nation, because the majority of the population is not fully involved in the mainstream of society. Those Asian countries that have forged ahead-- Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and to a certain extent Malaysia-- have brought the majority of their populations into the middle class, providing them with good education, land reform, social welfare, relatively equitable distribution of wealth and power, etc. Thailand does not seem to have that sort of inclusive vision. In fact, in the mid 90s, when Amnuay Virawan was Deputy Prime Minister and “Economic Czar”, it appeared that labor costs were rising to a level that would reduce the profits of labor intensive factory owners. Rather than encouraging such factories to improve productivity so that they could afford to pay laborers more, Amnuay’s answer to the “problem” was to allow the factories to employ immigrant labor from neighboring Cambodia, Burma, and elsewhere, thereby undercutting Thai wages and forcing them back down. If the broad masses of Thais were brought to the levels of their counterparts in Korea and Taiwan, the

comfortable hierarchical social structure would be jeopardized. And that might undermine the privileged position of the elite, resulting in a more meritocratic social structure.

Those were my thoughts on Thailand during the latter half of the 90s. I recall once giving that discourse informally to a farang friend. When I had finished, he said, “Well, you may be right, Jim, but if you are right, then I certainly hope it never changes, because I like it just the way it is.” That was a very honest statement, because indeed we farang have generally also benefitted from the way the system works, and as a result have found Thailand a most enchanting place to live (and the U. S., as part of its anti-communist efforts in the Indochina region from the 50s through the 70s, played a role in fostering this consensus and supported elite control of the country). I reassured my friend that he need not worry, as I saw very little evidence that anything would happen to change the system much in the next few years—the elite had the country under control, the system was well entrenched, and the honest Thai people of the countryside were discouraged from doing

much about it. After all, from primary school onwards they had been taught that asking too many impertinent questions was counter-cultural.

Today, I believe that my analysis of the system that prevailed in Thailand was correct, but I was completely wrong about nothing arising to challenge it. A man named Thaksin burst on the scene. And Thailand has never been the same since. From being a country of ideological homogeneity, in the space of a few years it became a country deeply divided. Thaksin astutely recognized that the majority of voters were resident in the countryside, and that they had, over the preceding decades of steady economic development, become a sleeping but nonetheless restless giant that was just waiting to be awakened. Once awakened, that rural electorate has not returned to sleep.

It is well to remember that when Thaksin was first campaigning, he was not only supported by the rural masses, but also by a number of forward thinking and responsible intellectuals in Bangkok, who saw in him a new type of politician who

might bring about some of the changes in Thailand that they knew were needed if Thailand were to be a modern nation and competitive in the 21st century. This is significant, as it indicates that a decade ago, a portion of the intelligentsia of Thailand was aware of the need for change in the country, and, despairing of people like Chuan to bring a new vision to the governance of the country, they placed their hopes in Thaksin as an agent of change.

The tragedy is that Thaksin proved to be a false prophet—a venal and egotistical demagogue who had recognized the potential power of the rural voting masses, but did not use this insight to genuinely reform the nature of Thai society. His motivations seem to me to have been a complex mixture of genuine interest in promoting the good of the nation with greed for power and wealth for himself. I see him in shades of gray—neither the messiah that his rural followers take him for even today, nor the devil incarnate that the Bangkok elite see him as being. But whatever his true nature, he did implement several good policies, such as health care for the poor and the “One

Tambol One Product”, but he became increasingly corrupt, intolerant, and dictatorial in his governing style. The press was gradually intimidated, the judiciary and other independent parts of the government were subverted, and human rights violations became increasingly blatant.

Yet in the elections of 2005, Thaksin’s party was returned to power with the largest mandate ever awarded by the electorate to a Thai political leader. The Democratic Party, effectively the only organized parliamentary opposition that remained, proved from the time of Thaksin’s election in 2001 unable to rethink its approach and image, or to present rural voters with any sort of credible alternative to Thaksin. The educated middle and upper classes of Bangkok were seething with resentment, but my own feeling at the time was that either they would have to put up some viable political alternative to Thaksin, or accept that they were going to have to live under the man for some time to come, as the inevitable price they paid for having failed to develop an inclusive national vision that reached out to and

involved the poorer majority of voters who now had turned to Thaksin as their political idol.

Bangkok friends retorted that Thaksin was elected only because of the power of his wealth, and that the voters were bribed. From my own experience in the village of Baan Ton Thi in Chiang Rai, I knew that Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party was indeed alleged to have paid THB 500 to each villager to secure their votes, but in conversations with the villagers, it was apparent that these villagers genuinely liked what Thaksin was doing for them, and felt that he was the first Thai politician who talked to them about their own welfare, and who delivered on his promises. It is a measure of the power of Thaksin's PR machine that among the villagers, all good things that were happening in the kingdom were attributed to Thaksin. When I asked the villagers if it were not true that Thaksin was very corrupt, the amused response invariably was "Of course, he is corrupt—all politicians are corrupt, but this is the first corrupt politician who has done something for us." To this day, the corruption, abuses, and personal wealth of Thaksin are

glossed over by his rural supporters—not denied, just treated as irrelevant.

The Present Conflict:

The tumultuous events that occurred since the Thai Rak Thai Party's victory in 2005, and the recent conflict in which scores of civilians died and hundreds were wounded, are well known and do not require recounting. The result of these events has been a breakdown of the social consensus that had existed in Thailand prior to Thaksin's rise to power. An additional result is that politics, which earlier I described as a game played between different factions of the power elite of society, has now become a mass preoccupation which the average man on the street treats with deadly seriousness. The majority of the population has been politically awakened by Thaksin, has been made aware that the outcome of elections and other aspects of government impact their lives directly, and has come to believe that it is not without ability to influence the outcome of those elections. But equally, rural voters believe that the military coup

that overthrew Thaksin in September of 2006, the two court decisions that successively brought down the Samak government in 2008 (for accepting payment for an appearance on a cooking show on television), and the Somchai government later in the same year (his People's Power Party, successor to the banned Thai Rak Thai Party was banned for electoral violations), and the cobbling together of a new government under the Democrats, led by Abhisit, in December of 2008, all effectively denied them their political rights, and cancelled out their votes. In an earlier era, they would probably have simply accepted that this was the way the world worked in a hierarchical society, and that there was nothing they could do about it.

But times have changed. As Bill Klausner has written extensively, the confined worlds of rural Thai villages that he knew in the 1950s, where spirits and officials were to be appeased and a traditional subsistence way of life was passed on from generation to generation with little change, has radically changed. Now villagers are plugged into the rest of the world via television, mobile

phones, pick-up trucks, and family members spending time working at wage earning jobs in Bangkok. As many taxi drivers, all hailing from countryside villages in the Northeast of Thailand, have told me, “We really aren’t as stupid as the city people think we are. We used to be stupid, but no longer.” They have concluded that the institutions of government were all being mobilized against them, to protect the interests of the establishment (now called the amat in Thai): the army which launched the coup against Thaksin, and which sat by idly in 2008 while the yellow shirts occupied the international airport and took over government house, but later sent the troops in to suppress the red shirt demonstrations in 2010; the new constitution, more or less foisted on the country under the period of military control in 2007 and designed to change the political game to favor the amat; the court decisions in the political sphere that always seem to favor the amat and take little account of the interests of the common man; and the back-room dealing conducted by the military that in December of 2008 brought the Democrats into power in unlikely coalition with one of

Thailand's more unsavory politicians, Newin; and, as the vicious attacks on Privy Councilor Prem indicate, even elements of the palace have come under suspicion of partiality.

As mentioned above, there has been impressive economic development in Thailand over recent decades, which has caused the lives of villagers to change immensely, giving them a sense of potential empowerment and a clearer sense of their rights and interests. Thailand is no longer a poor country, and Bangkok has become a wealthy and cosmopolitan city. But the political institutions of the country have not evolved with the economic and social progress. Since the revolution of 1932, which changed the country from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy, the political history of Thailand has been a history of gradual swings of the pendulum, with dictatorial conservatism, generally backed by the army, alternating with more democratic rule. When a period of democratic rule results in excesses, it is replaced by military rule, always with a promise to restore democratic rule at the right time. The pendulum has swung back and

forth between the two, but with each swing of the pendulum in the democratic direction, access to political power has broadened, so that by the 1990's the new urban middle class was fully engaged in the political process and was generally quite happy with the directions in which the country was moving.

But economic growth and social modernization greatly outpaced the evolution of political institutions. Thaksin recognized this and used it to his advantage to become the most successful politician Thailand has ever seen. Despite his authoritarian ways and demagogic style, he was opening the political sphere to the prospect of full participation of the lower classes of society, both in the countryside and in the city. Partially because this threatened the Bangkok amat and its allied urban middle class's control, and partially because of Thaksin's excesses, the amat struck back, first with the anachronistic army coup of 2006, and then with a series of actions designed to thwart the parties that were supported by the majority of the electorate. The establishment could not accept the political implications of the

changed social and economic conditions of the country, and has tried to turn back the clock, restoring the status quo ante—in other words the comfortable world they had controlled and enjoyed before the advent of Thaksin, and which I have described at the beginning of this paper.

Looking at examples from history around the world over the last two centuries, once the middle class becomes entitled, as has happened in Thailand, then eventually the lower classes demand just treatment and a fair stake in society, economy, and polity. In some countries, the elites and middle classes acceded, and the incorporation of the majority of citizens fully into the mainstream has occurred peacefully, resulting in stability, prosperity and buy-in to the system by everyone. Most western European nations followed this path, as did the U. S. with the New Deal, Fair Deal, and Great Society. In other countries, such as Russia and China, change only occurred with a violent revolution and radical social transformation. But in either case, change happened. (One easily forgets the dire poverty that existed in large parts of America in the 20s

and 30s. As recently as 1964, when I first studied economics in university in the U. S., a major issue considered in our studies was how to lift the bottom 20% of American society out of abject poverty, with readings such as Michael Harrington's *The Other America*).

Many of the elite of Thailand, believing in Thai particularism (of which more later), does not reflect on the implications of these historical processes of other countries. Thousands of Thais, mostly drawn from the elite and middle classes, were willing to devote their time and money to the illegal occupation of Government House and Bangkok's two international airports. They felt that they "know better" what is good for the country, and that therefore an illegal coup and illegal take-over of public property were justified in the cause of preventing Thaksin and his supporters or nominees from ruling the country. When I suggested to some of these people that they were attempting through force to repudiate the results of a properly elected and constituted government, they would retort, "But, Jim, those voters are uneducated," implying that one cannot

leave decisions on who should run the country up to uneducated farmers. Of course, being uneducated does not equate to being stupid, nor does it mean that one is not capable of recognizing where one's interests lie; moreover, if the majority of the country is uneducated, it makes one wonder what the government of the country had been doing over the previous half century if, in the course of economic development, it had neglected to direct sufficient resources to properly educate the majority of the country's citizens. When pressed, these yellow shirt supporters would finally say to me, "Well, if democracy means that the majority of the people elect the government, then I am not in favor of that sort of democracy in Thailand." At least that statement has the virtue of being candid, and it is exactly what the most right-wing faction of the yellow shirts, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), favors—curtailment of the political rights of the majority in favor of democracy guided by the elite. After all, this was arguably what had worked reasonably well over the previous half century prior to Thaksin, and probably was most successful under the

leadership of Prime Minister Prem in the 1980's, when the country was peaceful, stable, and everyone was optimistic about the future of the country and in agreement on the directions of development under capable technocrats.

However, having described the major historical forces that seem to be at work in these protests and made a case for the legitimacy of many of the protesters' grievances, one must take account of the significant level of violence that occurred in Songkran of 2009, on 10 April 2010, and on the afternoon of arson on 19 May of 2010, within hours after the red shirt leaders had surrendered. Aside from the violence, there is of course the fact that occupying and closing down the commercial heart of Bangkok for several weeks is clearly an illegal act that had massive negative consequences for the Thai economy and for the lives of the many Thai employees who worked in the hotels and stores that were closed down. Four comments on these issues:

1. The precedent of civil disobedience by illegally occupying public space was set in 2008 by the

yellow shirts when they disposed the Prime Minister of his offices at Government House for several months, and subsequently closed down for a few days Suvarnaphum and Don Muang airports, damaging both Thailand's international reputation and the Thai economy. They did not consider that the other side could copy their tactics.

2. As Thongbai Thongbao has written in the Bangkok Post, if the red shirts were to have peacefully occupied a public park somewhere in Bangkok where they did not inconvenience the public or disrupt the economy, the government would have paid them scant heed and eventually they would have wilted under the dry season tropical sun and failed to accomplish anything. If you are protesting against an entrenched and intransigent establishment, then you need to do something that will force it to pay attention to you, otherwise your efforts are in vain.

3. The arson on the final afternoon was clearly planned in advance by the red shirt leaders, and went beyond what can be justified as legitimate

civil disobedience. The same can be said of sniper and grenade attacks, at least a portion of which came from the red shirts (such as the attack on the Dusit Thani Hotel).

4. Some commentators have written that the arson and other violence with assault weapons deprived the entire red shirt movement of legitimacy. I do not agree with that. One is not condoning the mindless mayhem by noting that the overwhelming majority of protestors were, as mentioned below, peaceful, orderly, and committed.

One final point related to violence. There has been some criticism of the army for using excessive force in dispersing the protestors. I am not an expert on such matters, but it is clear that the army resisted being called into the fight for many weeks, insisting that political problems should be sorted out by political means. When Commander in Chief Anupong finally acceded to Abhisit's request to clear the protestors, it appeared to me that every effort was made to carry out this difficult task while using the

minimum of force. But in any event, military movements are by nature not peaceful affairs, and some casualties are inevitable no matter how much caution is exercised. The final responsibility for the 89 deaths and hundreds of wounded rests with the political leadership that chose a military solution.

The Red Shirts:

In all the emotion-charged debate over Thailand's political travails, perhaps nothing is more confusing, or raises more controversy, than the nature, composition and leadership of the Red Shirts. At one pole are those who say that the protesters are paid to attend, and are heavily infiltrated by well armed "terrorists" who are under the direction and control of extremists taking their orders from Thaksin. While allowing that many of the protesters are decent farmers from the northeast and north, this school of thought maintains that they have been "brainwashed" or at least misled by Thaksin's disciples through community radio and the endless speeches at Rajaprasong, and that they do

not have the educational qualifications to be able to see through Thaksin's propaganda. In other words, they were manipulated pawns in a cynical game. Since the protest was obviously well organized and financed, and since violent acts were perpetrated by some members of the protest group, this school of thought cannot be dismissed as entirely false. On the other side of the debate are those who would paint the protesters as entirely peaceful, which is obviously not true. The truth probably lies somewhere between these two poles.

To get a better sense of the situation, on Sunday, 9 May, prior to the military blockade commencing, I strolled through the Red Shirt encampment, speaking with protesters. With the exception of the black uniformed security guards, they were friendly, polite, and extremely committed to their cause. And the level of organizational competence that was required to have supplied and looked after thousands of protestors encamped on the streets of Bangkok was impressive.

As for the motivations of the genuine protesters, there appear to be three main explanations offered:

1. They were paid to attend. Although many were subsidized, I do not believe that financial compensation would induce those farmers to live for two months camped on the street in Bangkok's sweltering summer, much less risk life and limb, so I rule out financial compensation as the significant motivating factor for most of them.

2. They were motivated by desire to improve their economic lot in life—hoping that a change in government would bring about an improvement in their economic lot. Some western commentators have quoted international statistics to demonstrate that Thai farmers are much better off than many of their counterparts in other parts of the world, that absolute poverty among Thai farmers is quite low, and that the level of inequality in Thailand is unexceptional by international standards. Absolute poverty may be low among Thais, but Chris and Pasuk Baker have pointed out that the income gap in Thailand

between the richest 20% and the poorest 20% is 13-15 times, and the wealth gap is 70 times. Clearly, there are major income distribution and wealth inequality problems in Thailand, but the Red Shirts with whom I spoke did not seem to me to be desperately impoverished.

3. They were motivated to seek a more just political system—to end the political control of the amat, and end the double standard in Thailand, whereby the rich and powerful can get away with anything, and the poor have little recourse for redress of grievances or full exercise of their political rights.

Contrary to Yellow shirt claims that the Red Shirts are uneducated and manipulated, in my conversations with farmers, innumerable taxi drivers (almost all of whom come from villages in the northeast), my Bangkok housekeeper (every foreigner's favorite source of insight into Red Shirt political thinking!), and a variety of other interlocutors, I find that the Red Shirts and their sympathizers are articulate and have clear ideas as to what is wrong with the country and

with the Democratic Party government led by Abhisit. While discussing to a certain extent economic issues (my village in Chiang Rai is fixated on crop prices, and feels that Thaksin would be aware of these issues in a way that Abhisit is not), most of them dwell primarily on resentment of the amat, on double standards, and on the fact that their vote has been nullified by military coup, court decisions, and political backroom dealing. Despite their slogans, they do not necessarily have a sophisticated understanding of democracy, but they do have a keen sense of exactly how their political rights as citizens have been trampled upon, resulting in the favoring of the rich and powerful by government.

Their articulateness on these issues stems, I believe, to a great extent from community radio, which is rural based. Perhaps this is the “brainwashing” that the Yellow Shirts refer to, but it offers a challenge to the “consensus” which has been inculcated into all Thais from an early age. And it has changed many rural Thai people from being politically passive to highly politically conscious. Whether that is a good or a bad thing

depends on your perspective and where your interests lie. Over the previous half century, the government had brilliantly inculcated the “consensus” described above, but over the past two years the red shirts have done an impressive job of organizing political resistance at the grassroots level in the northeast and north and raising questions about the consensus in the minds of people at the grass roots levels. The establishment, of course, has always been happy to have rural people politically inert and docile, and now resents the fact that farmers should think that they deserve a real voice in the running of the country.

But the red shirt movement is no longer exclusively composed of farmers and urban laborers. It also begins to attract a portion of the urban middle class, including some Sino-Thai shopkeepers, and also a few members of the elite as well. These new supporters remain adamantly opposed to Thaksin, and also decry the violent methods that were employed by some red shirts on the final day of the protest at Rachaprasong, and the ill-considered searching of Chula

Hospital. But the protests have caused them to think deeply about what is wrong with their country, to become receptive to the idea that major changes are necessary, and to be willing to consider that the red shirts protests may have arisen out of legitimate grievances, even if they do not approve of their methods or respect many of their leaders.

One point worth mentioning is the presence in red shirt leadership of some individuals who had been members for a few years of the communist resistance of the late 70's—the so-called October 1976 generation. These idealists, as students faced with military brutality, had literally fled to the hills to join the small hard-core communist insurgency for a few years. A combination of disillusionment with the communists, and the generous amnesty engineered by Prem and Kriangsak, caused them to return to normal lives in the cities, some to become bankers and brokers, some to channel their idealism into the “rural doctors” movement to serve the health needs of the rural poor, and some to join politics. But their experiences in the 70s were formative,

and some who are in the forefront of the red shirt movement today have the emotional scars and bitterness left over from that earlier era of right-wing oppression.

A reasonable amount of ink has been spilt over the question of whether the turmoil has been a form of class warfare, of whether it can be classified as urban-rural conflict, or Bangkok versus the rest of the country. There has been criticism of foreigners who (like me in this paper) have talked about the “red shirt-yellow shirt” conflict, saying that this just shows how little foreigners can understand the complexities of what is going on in Thailand. Indeed, the situation is very complicated and confusing, and every generalization that one makes will prove to have exceptions and to be somewhat misleading—there are some elite supporting the red shirts; there are poor people in Bangkok, not just in the provinces; and not everyone easily fits into the red shirt and yellow shirt categories. Nonetheless, one must make some categorizations and generalizations in order to understand what is going on, and surely it is true

that the red shirts' principal base of support is in the provinces among farmers; if it is not class warfare, then at least most of the protestors are relatively less well advantaged than the amat they attack; and red shirt versus yellow shirt is short hand commonly used by most Thais as well as foreigners to describe the two main camps in this complicated strife. So I believe that it is not worth engaging in semantic quibbling over what to call the strife.

Another issue worth mentioning is that the turmoil presently facing Thailand is described by many as unprecedented. No less eminent an authority on Thai society than Charles Keyes has said that recent events require him to reexamine how he has viewed Thai rural society in the past. Clearly the levels of direct confrontation and the use of highly inflammatory language and reluctance to compromise appear counter to the generally accepted view of Thai society. But I would suggest that it is not entirely unprecedented, and that there is a strain of violence and intolerance lurking beneath the surface in Thai society. One must recall that

during the late 60s and early 70s, there was a high level of conflict and violence in some parts of rural Thailand, with Red Gaurers and other right wing groups ruthlessly murdering those they suspected of communism; the incitements of the anti-communist monk Kiiti to kill communists, in clear violation of the tenets of Buddhism; and of course the massacre of the students at Thammasart in 1976.

How does Thaksin fit into the equation today? Clearly he continues to play a major role behind the scenes, and most of the Red Shirts continue to express their support for him, despite revelations of his corruption and the criminal convictions against him. Nonetheless, the movement that he started now seems to be increasingly taking on a life independent of Thaksin, and Thaksin's goals and the Red Shirt movement's goals are diverging. Thaksin appears primarily concerned to recover his sequestered assets, to clear his personal legal issues, and to be willing to sacrifice everything (and anybody) to achieve these goals. Perhaps this is one reason why the Red Shirt leaders were unwilling to accept

Abhisit's proposed compromise, with promise of elections on 14 November. Elections would not further Thaksin's personal agenda; he preferred a violent showdown with no compromise, and possibly may have given Red Shirt leadership orders to scuttle the negotiations.

I believe that history will judge Thaksin to have left a mixed legacy. On the positive side, he brought the majority of Thai people into politics, so that the old clique-filled world of political games that was played among the elite no longer goes unchallenged. And he introduced several policies aimed at improving the lot of the poorer people of the country. He will, however, also be judged for his dictatorial style, for his maltreatment of Muslims in Southern Thailand, for his extra-judicial killings of suspected drug dealers, and his willingness to sacrifice the lives of others to achieve his objectives.

But the government and Yellow Shirts have demonized Thaksin. The Abhisit government has spent a tremendous amount of time and effort in attacking him, culminating in the recent charges

that he is a “terrorist”. I recall in 2009, when Thaksin accepted an appointment as advisor to the Hun Sen government, the government thought that this act would discredit him in the eyes of his followers. I was at my farm in Chiang Rai at the time, and was skeptical of this view, so when I boarded a flight from Chiang Rai back to Bangkok, I asked the middle-aged, middle class Thai lady seated next to me (a Chiang Rai resident) what she thought about Thaksin’s Cambodian appointment. She sighed, and said “Doesn’t this government have anything better to do than to go after Thaksin. You would think that they should be spending their time running the country well to win people over to supporting them.”

Many people make the mistake of thinking that if only Thaksin could be neutralized, then the red shirt movement would collapse and everything would go back to the simpler times prior to Thaksin. But the genie is out of the bottle, and there is no putting it back in again. The status quo ante will not be restored, even if Thaksin were to genuinely renounce politics and retire to enjoy the

secluded pleasures of his seaside home in Montenegro. The more that the government demonizes Thaksin, the more Thaksin serves as a potent symbol for the discontent of the red shirts. One wonders what Abhisit will do if Montenegro actually decides to extradite Thaksin back to Thailand, as requested by the Thai government. The trial would become the focal point for renewed demonstrations and protests.

One problem the red shirts face. Aside from Thaksin, who is too divisive and morally compromised to lead the nation again, the red shirts are not offering up leaders who show promise of being able to effectively lead the nation, even though some of them showed considerable tactical skill in organizing and leading the protests. Nor do the red shirt leaders show any greater potential for projecting a new national vision or achieving reconciliation than does Abhisit (discussed below). This became apparent in the post-protest debates in parliament, which were a very unedifying blame game between the two sides. The prospect of red shirts taking control of the government inspires no more

confidence or enthusiasm than does the present leadership.

Yellow Shirts:

The composition of the yellow shirts is as complicated as that of the red shirts. Most of the elite is yellow, and probably a large majority of the Bangkok middle class is well. The up-country middle class appears to be split between red and yellow (except for the south, which is more yellow than other parts of the country). And a small portion of villagers are yellow, following ingrained instincts of loyalty to traditional institutions.

But the core of the yellow shirt movement lies in the Bangkok aristocracy, senior business community, and upper levels of the bureaucracy. Many of these members of the elite are extraordinarily intolerant of the red shirts, do not distinguish the legitimate grievances of the protesters from the interests of Thaksin, and are dismissive of the protestors as a ragged bunch of paid hooligans with whom it is useless to

negotiate. Most have rarely had interaction with villagers or workers, so do not know what they think. They have not even had the opportunity to hear the opinions of taxi drivers, as they do not ride taxis. Their intransigence seems to me to be the largest obstacle to reconciliation in the country.

Abhisit Government:

The first point to consider is whether or not the Abhisit government was legally constituted. Strictly speaking, it is fatuous to say that the government was not legally constituted. In the early days of the Abhisit government, even the BBC journalist in Thailand commented that the government was not legally constituted, as it was not elected by the people. The BBC should understand very well that Thailand has a parliamentary system of government under which the electorate votes into office the members of Parliament, who are then legally free to select any person who meets the legal requirements to be the Prime Minister. That is exactly what happened in the U. K. recently with the formation of the

Cameron/Clegg government, which was not elected by the voters, but put together by the party chieftains after the election.

The same legal process took place when Abhisit formed a coalition government with the support of Newin and others from the Bhumjaithai, Peua Phendin, and other parties in December of 2008.

But at a deeper level, many red shirts do not accept the legitimacy of the Abhisit government, and do not feel that it represents them. The last election was held in early 2008, under a new constitution that was designed to limit the ability of the successors to Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party to win elections. But the People Power Party, successor to the banned Thai Rak Thai, nonetheless received the largest number of votes, and was able to put together a coalition government. The establishment struck back, using the court system to first declare Prime Minister Samak unqualified to be Prime Minister, and then banning the entire People's Power Party at the end of the year. This court ruling, combined with months of protests and illegal occupation of

Government House and then of the International Airport, brought to an end the Thaksin nominee government of Samak's successor, Somchai. Under the guidance of Commander-in-Chief Anupong, during a series of back-room negotiations allegedly held on a military base, Newin, who had been banned from elections but was the power behind the Bhumjaithai Party, was induced to desert Thaksin and form a coalition government led by Abhisit of the Democrats.

Thus, one can understand the feelings of rural supporters who feel that a judiciary system, which has double standards in its application of the law, and the military have thrown out the government they voted for, and installed in its place a government led by Abhisit, whom most of the rural electorate do not support. They feel that Thaksin was first overthrown by a military coup, which is of course illegal, but was post facto legitimated by the new constitution passed in a referendum under somewhat suspect circumstances; that then the Thaksin nominees, whom they had voted for, were maneuvered out of power, again by military intervention, albeit

through secret negotiations rather than through elections.

The way to resolve this issue of legitimacy would be to submit the Democratic Party's government to a new election. This, Abhisit has been reluctant to do, presumably because he fears that his party would not fare well at the polls., although he has come up with a variety of other reasons for not calling elections. If, when he took office in 2008, he had backed up his reconciliation rhetoric with an amnesty for the 111 banned politicians who were followers of Thaksin, invited the best and the brightest of the red shirt leaders to participate in a government of national unity, announced that in one year a new election would be held, and taken steps to end the double standards in application of the law, particularly with regard to the leaders of the PAD who had seized the international airport, then the events of the past 18 months might have unfolded differently.

Having missed the opportunity to undertake genuine reconciliation upon assuming office, one would have thought that the events of Songkran

2009 would have been a wake-up call, and would have prompted Abhisit to focus his government on the country's most fundamental issues, which are reconciliation of the yellow-red divisions, and of the conflict with the Muslims of the far south of the country.

But Abhisit governed as if the times were normal. Instead of focusing on domestic reconciliation and winning over the majority of voters to support the Democrats, he remained aloof, and spent considerable time on trips to major foreign capitals and conferences, which did nothing for his domestic standing. In fairness, he and Finance Minister Korn have shown reasonable competence in governing, seem to understand that policies must be put in place to reduce wealth and income inequality in the country, and are willing to adopt well-considered measures to accomplish that. Despite the political turmoil, their economic policies are bearing fruit, with the economy on track to rebound from contraction in 2009 to 6% growth this year.

Unfortunately, however, some of their policies, such as the THB 2,000 per head hand-out, while perhaps justified as an emergency stimulus measure, appeared to be politically motivated attempts to compete with Thaksin's legacy in the area of populist measures. If so, it was unsuccessful. There is no lack of ideas circulating within the academic community, among NGOs, and elsewhere on what needs to be done to improve economic opportunity for the poorer segments of society. These need to be packaged in clearly understandable ways, and then implemented. Presumably property and inheritance taxes should be priorities.

But passion, fast action, and boldness of vision are also required. That is what Thaksin offered. But Abhisit is unable to travel safely in major areas of the north and northeast of the country, and when this year's protests began, he took up residence in a Bangkok army base. To the red shirts, this only confirmed their view that his government rested entirely on the support of the army. Apparently the symbolism of moving into an army base did not bother Abhisit.

Why has a well-educated, well spoken, honest and hard-working man like Abhisit failed to understand what the times demanded? Why has he been so intransigent in dealing with the red shirts, and why has he now turned up the heat rather than lowering it, failing to show tolerance and reach out to the other side? Why has he been unable to communicate effectively with the mass of Thai voters? A few possibilities suggest themselves.

1. He is temperamentally unable to empathize with people who do not share his ordered and rational way of looking at the world. Many Thai voters of the lower economic echelons instinctively sense this, and do not identify with him, even if what he is saying makes sense. A foreign journalist who was given a private interview with Abhisit told me that when she asked Abhisit what was his favorite book, he responded with the title of his favorite economics text. This anecdote gives a clue to the psychological make-up of the man.

2. He is an intensely private and self-controlled man, whose only soul-mate has been his wife.

3. He has never been exposed to people with different backgrounds from his own “Sukhumvit-Oxford” background. I wonder how many Thai villagers he has ever spent time with, or how often he has had real conversations with ordinary working folk, listened to what they said, and pondered on what he could learn from them? He appears to have massive self-confidence in his own rectitude.

4. The attempt on his life during the Songkran riots of 2009, and the smearing of blood on the gate of his house may have deeply embittered him, rendering him inflexible.

He is an enigma—so smart and attractive, so effective in parliamentary debate, so cool in the midst of crisis, yet seeming unable to show emotion about the tragedy he has dealt with, unable to reach out to the victims in a personal way, and temperamentally averse to patiently finding compromise and negotiated solutions. To

compound the problem, he has surrounded himself with advisors and aides who do not compensate for his weaknesses in these areas, and are unable to fill in for him in communicating with the other side. One has the feeling that the Abhisit government has in fact attempted to put forward some useful, progressive policies, such as the property tax that Korn is advocating, but they have been poorly packaged and presented. Whether for or against Thaksin, one could always immediately name the initiatives that Thaksin was undertaking when he was Prime Minister, conveying a sense of energy being applied to resolve national problems.

It has been apparent that Abhisit has always been more comfortable rubbing shoulders with international political and business leaders than he has been chatting with his fellow-countrymen in the provinces, and he certainly undertook a large number of trips abroad to wave the Thai flag in his first eighteen months in office. A small but revealing news item appeared in the 4 June Bangkok Post. The paper reported that Prime Minister Abhisit would fly to Vietnam on 6 June

“to attend a two-day World Economic Forum on East Asia” and went on to say that the Prime Minister “said the priority for government was to restore confidence among the international community since political problems impede economic development.” The blood is barely dry on the streets of Rachaprasong, but Abhisit’s priority is speaking with international investors? The priority should be 100% on reconciling domestic divisions and restoring harmony to the country. If progress on this is made, the international business community and tourists will regain faith in Thailand without Abhisit attending international conferences.

Unfortunately for Thailand, Abhisit lacks the skills and personality to lead a genuine reconciliation, or to project a bold vision for the future development of the country that would have a chance of uniting most of the country behind him. He, almost as much as Thaksin, has made himself a divisive rather than harmonizing leader.

Thai Particularism:

Over the past two months, members of some of Thailand's most prominent families have fired off emails to their friends around the world, bitterly complaining of the biased (pro red shirt) reporting of the foreign press, particularly CNN and BBC. While some foreign press reporting has been inaccurate, selective and uninformed, much of the mainstream reporting has, in my opinion, been substantive, balanced, and nuanced, particularly considering the complexity of the situation. The foreign press has had some stupid reporting, but so has the Thai press. My housekeeper, glued to the television every day during the crisis, despaired of getting balanced credible reporting—so it depends on your own biases as much as it does on the biases of the reporters, be they foreign or local.

The complaints fit into a pattern of belief on the part of members of the Thai elite that Thailand has a unique and special culture, not easily understood by foreigners. They have used this special culture as an argument for defending their own special class status in a hierarchical society,

and this allows them to dismiss any negative foreign commentary on Thailand as uninformed. And Thais who argue that too much is made of the “uniqueness of Thailand” are immediately dismissed as “too westernized”.

Of course, the culture of every country has unique aspects, but there are also commonalities and universal patterns as well, and it is possible for foreigners to make informed comments about other cultures, as Tocqueville proved with his writings about America.

When examining their critiques more closely, it is apparent that they see only one side of the present conflict, and regard any favorable reporting concerning the red shirts as unacceptable.

An unfortunate aspect of this sense of Thai exceptionalism is that it leads to limited interest in examining other national models of development for relevant lessons, or to view their own society with a sufficient degree of dispassionate objectivity. This is in contrast to China, which, as described by David Shambaugh

in his recent book *The Chinese Communist Party*, has for the last twenty years been assiduously studying examples from all over the world in an enormous range of subjects for relevant models that it can adopt and adapt for use in China, and has also continuously subjected itself to self-examination to determine how it can improve its performance. China, of course, faces a multitude of enormous problems, but one of the reasons for its success is the forthrightness of the leadership in identifying these problems, and systematically but quickly developing appropriate policies to deal with them, often drawing on experience that they have studied from other countries.

Several other nations offer excellent examples of successful coping with the problems that Thailand has been facing. Spain has dealt with considerable success with many of the same issues that Thailand has faced over the past thirty years, and it has been very creative in coming up with new ways of dealing with them, ranging from the role of the army in the state to decentralization of powers to regions and provinces. South Africa is a model of how to deal

with deep societal divisions. Indonesia's resolution of its Aceh separatist issue is worth studying. In the U. S. during the 60s, the violence that arose in Watts and Detroit was perhaps even more mindless and shocking than what has recently happened in Thailand, but it did cause the U. S. to reflect deeply on the underlying issues that gave rise to such rioting, and ultimately to attempt to address those issues. And there are a host of other examples for Thailand to examine.

Reconciliation:

If nothing else, it seems to me that the turmoil of the past two months, and the deep social divisions and political dysfunction that the turmoil reveals, should provoke deep consideration on the part of the entire nation as to how the Thai state should be constituted in the twenty-first century. One hopes that the elite establishment will recognize that the old consensus on the nature of Thailand has broken down, and that constructive thinking is needed to build a new basis for moving forward in the challenging decades ahead. The elite will

be well-advised to work cooperatively with red shirt leaders in seeking solutions, lest they be excluded in the future from playing a role in the development of a new national model. Thus far, however, I see more recrimination than reconciliation, more short-sighted defensiveness than long term creative, constructive thinking.

Unfortunately, at this point animosities between the two sides are stronger than ever, making reconciliation more difficult than ever to achieve. Preliminary indications are that Abhisit plans to continue to govern as he has over the past year and a half, and that over the next year prior to new elections he will suppress red shirt activity rather than engage with red shirts. He will then hope that improving economic conditions and the passage of some sound economic and social reform measures will improve the chances of the Democrats to be voted back into office. Even if this strategy brings electoral success, I do not think that it is the best course for the country, as it will leave behind a legacy of bitterness, and will not resolve some of the fundamental issues of the country that need to be addressed.

What should be done? I would suggest the following as a few of the things that Abhisit should do, but no doubt others can suggest many other steps that should be taken to really achieve the reconciliation goal:

1. Address some of the immediate, glaring double-standard issues, most particularly the failure to move forward with prosecution of the leaders of the yellow shirt illegal activities in 2009. That is a minimum requirement for any expression of sincerity towards the red shirts, and would send a signal that the law henceforth is to be enforced equally on one and all. It will send a powerful positive signal that will be understood at the grass roots level of the red shirt opposition. Such a measure will require guts on the part of Abhisit, as it will be opposed by lots of powerful interests, but he should make it an issue over which he is prepared to resign if need be. If he does not do this, then his calls for enforcement of law and order are hypocrisy.

2. Another double standard issue that needs to be addressed forthwith is censorship and blockage of opposition radio stations, websites, and other forms of media. This censorship is in stark contrast with the democratic values which the Abhisit government claims to be upholding, and is a blatant example of double standard since the equivalent yellow shirt outlets are not blocked or censored.

3. Give maximum cooperation to the independent commission investigating the violence of the past two months, especially the six deaths in the temple, ensure that it is genuinely independent, and accept its conclusions with good grace.

4. Reach out in a high profile manner to certain of the more responsible red shirt leaders, and to respected experts in a range of fields, to work together on proposals for social, political, and economic reform. Demonstrate openness to suggestions, and work in bipartisan fashion to implement as much as possible.

5. Take a serious look at what other nations confronted by similar divisions have done to achieve reconciliation. As mentioned above, Spain and South Africa come to mind as excellent models, but no doubt there are others.

6. The Democrats need to work hard on communicating effectively with voters—package their programs better, and choose spokesmen who will be credible with the man in the street.

7. Ignore Thaksin—stop making him into a martyr.

8. Call elections within a reasonable time frame—November 14, or whatever, but announce a date, without a lot of conditions, stick to it, and stop offering excuses on why the election has to be postponed. Much more is at stake than just trying to win this election—if the Democrats lose, then they can compete for the next election.

I am not optimistic that Abhisit will wholeheartedly opt for the sort of program that I outline above. Nothing in his nationwide

reconciliation address in the evening of 10 June would indicate that he has such an agenda in mind.

No one is foolish enough to predict how events will unfold over the next months and years in this complicated and volatile situation, but I will hazard a few thoughts that are relatively optimistic:

1. The good sense of the Thai people will prevent Thailand from drifting into failed state status, will keep civil war from breaking out, and will steer Thailand away from reversion to anachronistic military strongman rule.
2. Barring unexpected breakthrough, the reconciliation process will take several years, with intermittent turmoil, sometimes violent.
3. Gradually reform will be implemented, the older generation yellow shirt die-hards will fade away to be replaced by a younger, more broad-minded elite, and the authoritarian traditions of Thai politics will give way to more stable

democracy, as the political structure is brought into line with economic and social development, and tolerance for double standards decreases at all levels of society.

In conclusion, I am in the short and medium term very concerned about how reconciliation can be achieved and lack confidence in the leadership abilities of Abhisit to heal the wounds of the nation, but longer term I am confident that Thailand will find its way again, as it always has in the past, and that the turmoil of the past few years will, in the longer view of history, prove to have been a painful but necessary transition for the country from an increasingly outdated and dysfunctional political structure to a structure adapted to the needs of the majority of the Thai people—a structure that will equip Thailand to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Returning to the thoughts that I had been expressing in the 90s and which I outlined at the beginning of this paper, now Thailand is facing up to the internal obstacles and inequities that have thus far restrained the Thai people from fulfilling their full potential as a nation. Just

imagine a future Thailand in which the charm and subtlety of the culture and the innate capabilities of Thais as individuals were joined with the dynamism of a fully engaged and empowered citizenry! That should be a vision that unites all Thais in searching for solutions to the problems that bedevil the nation today. But perhaps it will take some time and a new generation to take the reins of leadership.

James Stent

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