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Thailand: Democracy without Ethics?

The turmoil in Thailand over the past two weeks has special meaning for me, very personal meaning, and, I think, gives all of us an opportunity to reflect on the role ethics plays in achieving social justice.

Taksin Shinawatra, a former Thai Prime Minister elected on a populist, rather jingoistic, platform and subsequently removed from power by a combination of middle class street protest and military coup, leads the “Red Shirts” in demanding democracy. His followers wear red shirts and have been the center of protest in recent weeks.

His version of democratic justice, however, deserves a closer look. In my opinion, it is a vision of democracy without ethics where money trumps all other values.

The moral challenge, therefore, of his politics is to answer the question whether election victories that are bought or stage-managed with well-funded, narrow-minded emotionalism can ever produce legitimate democratic government. Is democracy merely the formalism of elections or does it require more substance to be real?

The Thai people, their culture, religion and history, are very special to my family. We lived there in the early 1960’s when my Father served in Bangkok as Jack Kennedy’s Ambassador. My brother later went back for the Peace Corps. My sister studied Thai music and lived both in Bangkok and Chiang Mai with her husband. As a widow, my mother lived in Bangkok for years studying Thai art history, especially the Lacquer pavilion at Suan Pakkad Palace. 1966 I found a bronze age site in the village of Ban Chiang and have written on Thai culture and politics.

My college roommate was a Finance Minister for the Democratic Party who saved the country financially after the 1997 economic crisis but was smeared by Taksin when he was first elected Prime Minister. It is very fair to say that I have watched Taksin’s politics with considerable cynicism ever since.

A self-proclaimed man of the people like Taksin, who never fights fairly and who uses his elite wealth without restraint, is not someone I take to quickly.

The CRT Chapter in Thailand, led until late last year by former Thai Ambassador Kasit Piromya, took issue with the disrespect for the rule of law and corruption in Thai money politics. Former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun, who was twice asked to help the country move beyond military autocracy to more democratic integrity, is a member of our World Advisory Council. Kasit is now Foreign Minister of Thailand. Both he and Khun Anand were recently public targets of Taksin’s anger and resentment.

The crisis of authority provoked recently by Taksin's Red Shirts, followed by mob violence in central Bangkok, was a very serious matter. Thai society was on the brink of an unprecedented disturbance; the kind of acrimonious breakdown between factions that cannot be easily be healed. Something fundamental was at stake; compromise was out of reach; a breach had been opened between classes in a society that for centuries had used patron client ties to bind many sub parts into a fluid, harmonious cultural process. Social anthropologists referred with wonder to Thai agility in thriving in what was called a "loosely structured social system".

However flexible this social process was, the Thai system held off European colonialism in the 19th century, which was no small accomplishment.

In the recent conflict, however, that traditional patron/client dynamic was manipulated not for common social justice but for factional preeminence. Taksin as an elected Prime Minister converted the entire government structure into his personal patronage machine. Most cleverly he used government budgets to put money into the hands of his clients, whom he proclaimed to be the common people – especially taxi drivers in Bangkok and farmers in the Northeastern provinces.

Previously, Thai politicians, generals, and bureaucrats had never thought of patronage hierarchies on such a grand scale. They mostly used private funds, political party coffers, and only parts of the government to support their associates and dependent clients.

Taksin attempted to suborn the entire government – including the military, the police, and the judiciary – to his personal power structure. Senior civil servants defending their bureaucratic autonomy against his wishes were removed. He sought, as well, to bring the media to heel by threatening publishers with a withdrawal of advertising if they showed too much critical independence. His political party, of course, had ample resources with which to fund campaigns and reward loyalty. As a billionaire, Taksin's largess was instrumental in assembling many small personal factions into an obedient majority party.

Taksin's economic policy as Prime Minister was in large part one of government funded subsidies: people were given cheap access to hospitals and doctors; rural villages each received 1 million baht for development projects; budgets were pumped up to jump start consumer spending and provide quick profits for business owners.

His grand consolidated structure rivaled the ability of the Monarchy to dispense patronage to the people. Royal patronage, though, was more a matter of intangible prestige and Karmic blessings, less substantial than the cold, hard cash provided by Taksin and his subordinates to those who supported them.

Last year, after Taksin's lawyers had left, a brown paper bag was found in a courtroom in Bangkok containing 2 million Baht in cash. Many Thais concluded that the money had been left as a gentle, indirect notice to the judges then considering Taksin's guilt for purchasing land from the government in violation of law. The 2 million baht was to be a down-payment of additional funds that would come their way if their decision would be favorable to Taksin.

And, most likely, the Red Shirts who recently took to the streets in protest against traditional Thai elitism were paid cash by Taksin for their efforts, with their expenses also covered as well. In one of his broadcasts from abroad to his followers, Taksin made reference, I am told, to the inconvenience of his Red Shirted partisans having to line up to get their 500 Baht (some US\$16) per day.

Taksin's fall from power began in 2006 when he sold his family company to a Singapore government holding company, Temasek. The core asset of Taksin's company had been a government license to provide telecommunications services. Such licenses in a patronage driven country like Thailand were traditionally acquired as special favors from patrons in the government. Crony capitalism was a hallmark of many elite business and political arrangements. Taksin was no stranger to these social networks of patronage.

The particular telecommunications license he obtained in the early 1990's had previously been held by the Siam Cement Company. According to Siam Cement officials, their company lost its rights to the business when it refused to pay 50 million Baht to maintain the license after a change of government.

But the sale of his Shin Corporation provoked widespread public resentment over Taksin's arrogance and accumulation of unchecked power. Thousands of Thais emotionally bound to traditional moral values of Theravada restraint took to the streets of Bangkok in protest. They wore yellow shirts and were disproportionately composed of middle class and upper class families. They were from the same social demographic that had previously taken to the streets to successfully oppose military takeovers in the 1990's. They saw themselves as stewards of higher standards for government in Thailand. In their eyes, Taksin's autocratic personalism fell ethically short.

When Taksin refused to find a graceful Thai way out of the conflict and willfully stood adamant on full use of his discretionary rights and powers, the military took over in late 2006. They imposed a new constitution designed to undermine Taksin's political structure and similar uses of money power to trump fair elections and the Rule of Law. Prosecutions for corruption and abuse of power slowly followed, including cases where Taksin himself was party defendant.

The interim military government then organized elections in which Taksin's allies and proxies won a majority of seats in the lower house of Parliament. Protests from the Yellow Shirts resumed. Taksin, now a fugitive in exile, again refused to compromise. The Yellow Shirts staged a peaceful sit-in at both of Bangkok's airports. The continued stand-off with Taksin coupled with court decisions that election laws had been violated caused a break-up in Taksin's coalition. A major faction pulled out and went into coalition with the Democrats to form a new government. It was fluid, loosely-structured Thai politics at work once more.

Taksin's assets in Thailand – some US\$2 billion – were frozen under court order pending his trial for grand corruption and his wealth abroad – at one time estimated at US\$5 billion - had been significantly squandered in commodity speculation or lost in the financial crisis of 2008. He now had less money with which to play politics. Taksin's base of power was shrinking and this was noticed by his clients.

But those who had lost power in the 2006 coup and were now in parliamentary opposition did not forgive and forget in more traditional Thai cultural patterns. Especially keen to recover from his fall was Taksin, still a fugitive abroad and under sentence for criminal wrongdoing. He considered the government to be a kind of personal property that had been wrongfully taken from him.

With his private assets, most invested outside of Thailand, Taksin kept his clients organized and focused on a return to power. His relentless effort to undermine his enemies just culminated in the protests and violence of the past month. Taksin has brought a new dimension of unyielding insistence on personal dominion to Thai culture.

A wise Thai statesman and patron of the arts once told me: “Steve, always remember that Thais are like the actors in Khon masked dramas – they all wear masks.”

What you see, what is intended for you to see, is an actor playing a formal role; you are not shown the real thoughts and emotions of the person behind the mask, much less the intrigues that he or she is up to.

With this psycho-cultural insight in mind, we can cut through much of the misleading Western commentary on the Thai crisis. The current conflict is most definitely not one between, on the one side, forces of democracy unfairly removed from power by a military coup and, on the other side, reactionary institutions of Monarchy, traditional families and the military.

It is, really, a conflict within one elite; it is a struggle for control of public authority between two factions, each with its own set of values and rules by which to play the game of power. The different values are fundamentally incompatible, which is why the conflict in Thailand is so difficult to end.

One elite faction - Taksin's - rests its power on money and what money can buy, including votes and access to police intimidation. Taksin himself comes out of a police background and his wife is the daughter of a police Major General from the old school of authoritarian politics.

Taksin's approach to Thai politics mimics the tactics and appeal of Marius, Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony as they brought an end to the Roman Republic with their populism and their personal legions. The formula for imperial rule then established by Caesar's nephew Octavian was autocratic power in the person of the Emperor and bread and circuses for the common people. But a praetorian guard was provided for the Emperor just in case the people were ever to forget their place and demand a share of real power.

The other elite Thai faction – the Yellow Shirts, the Democrat Party, the former allies of Taksin now in parliamentary alliance with the Democrats, many who support the Monarchy, established families, the white collar middle class, etc. – look to traditional moral codes to govern Thai politics. The ideal supporting this orientation towards social justice is called *baramee* in Thai. The anti Taksin faction argues that power and position should go to those with *baramee*, not to those who buy or bully their way in.

Baramee is supposed to accrue to those who have deserving karma from prior lives. *Baramee* is demonstrated through thoughtful, gracious and reliable patronage of clients. *Baramee* is not self-seeking but is service oriented.

From the perspective of the Caux Round Table ethical Principles for Responsible Business and its Principles for Ethical Government, I would say that Taksin's approach would be found wanting. Public office is not for sale to the highest bidder.

The CRT Principles for Business call upon business to avoid corruption and to support the rule of law and constitutional checks and balances. It is not the office of responsible business to contribute to corruption and autocracy.

The CRT Principles for Government do not support a shallow formalism of unfairly manipulated elections as legitimizing democratic government. Elections conducted without ethics do not produce any democracy worth the name.

Nor do the CRT Principles for Government validate a government if it has no ethics or justice in the way it uses power once in office. The office of just government has to be won day in and day out by the quality of governing. The right to hold office can be forfeited by abuse of its prerogatives. Government without ethics is not good government.

Aristotle made these points many centuries ago when he wrote that democracy like aristocracy and monarchy can be corrupted by those who have few scruples into vile forms of abusive rule.