

Thailand: Thaksin's Red Shirts and the Ongoing Violence

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by Michael Pirsch

March marked the beginning of the sixth month of protests against the corrupt proxy government of Thaksin Shinawatra, the fugitive former prime minister of Thailand, who currently micro manages Thai government affairs through his youngest sister, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and the proxy Phuea Thai political party. He lives in Dubai, but frequently travels to the region around Thailand to give orders to his proxies.



Image: Explosive Ordnance Disposal experts comb the aftermath of a pro-regime attack on protesters in the Thai province of Trat.

2 children were killed in the attack – an attack the regime's "red shirts" cheered upon hearing about at a rally taking place simultaneously in another province.

However, the start of the sixth month was not a festive occasion because a large dark cloud has enveloped Thailand since February 22, 2014. In the early evening hours, unknown gunmen fired grenades and automatic weapons at the People's Democratic Reform

Committee (PDRC) demonstration in the province of Trat. They targeted the area on the perimeter of the demonstration, killing two five-year-old girls who were helping their respective mothers at their noodle stands.

At the same time the little girls were shot and killed, the core members and leaders of Thaksin's red shirt supporters were meeting in Nakhon Ratchasima. One of the Red Shirt leaders, "Dab Daeng" took the stage and proceeded to announce: "I have good news to tell my red shirt brothers and sisters from all provinces. The PDRC members of Suthep at the protest stage in Khao Saming (Trat) were deservedly given a reception by the locals. Five PDRC people were killed and over 30 injured. The locals welcomed them because they love Suthep a lot..." [1]

Upon hearing this news, many of the Red Shirts cheered, pumping their fists in the air and applauding. While the Red Shirts were cheering the cold blooded murder of two five year old girls, the rest of Thailand wept. This was Saturday night, February 24, 2014.

For Thai people, crying time was not over. On Sunday afternoon, three people, including two more children, were murdered in front of a shopping mall they had just left. They were waiting to get on a "tuk-tuk" to return home when they were blasted apart by M-79 grenades. This took place at the far edge of a central Bangkok rally location. Thailand continued to weep. To this date (March 25) no one has been arrested.

These same Red Shirt cheerleaders of hate and violence have emerged as the greatest threat to peace in Thailand since the demonstrations began in October, 2013. The protesters have exhibited a long term commitment to peaceful protest in addition to performing acts of civil disobedience directed at government agencies. The demonstrators have stayed peaceful even though their protest sites, the homes of protest leaders and homes of Democrat Party leaders have been shot at with grenade launchers and automatic weapons dozens of times since November 2013. This is still ongoing.

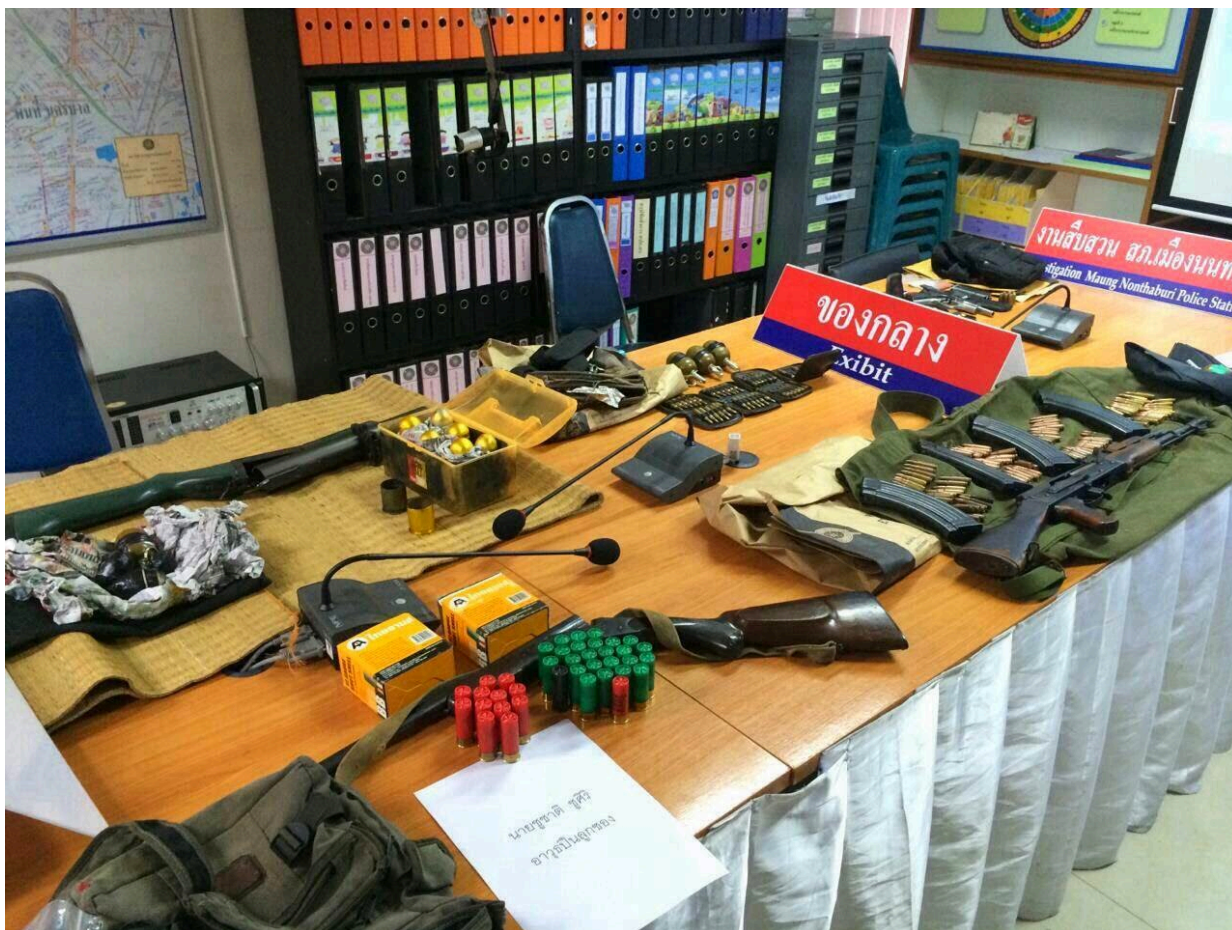


Image: Weapons seized by police from “red shirts” outside the National Anti-Corruption Commission building in northern Bangkok.

The building has come under frequent gunfire and has been targeted by M-79 grenades – both weapons systems can be seen on the table above in addition to RGD-5 hand grenades which have been responsible for several attacks on protesters in recent months.

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Buildings housing the Criminal Court, the National Anti Corruption Commission (NACC), and the Constitution Court have recently been targeted with bombs and grenades late at night. No one has been arrested or charged by the police for these acts of terrorism. The attacks and seeming indifference on the part of the police have resulted in the military setting up checkpoints in the vicinity of the four remaining protest sites and the recently targeted court buildings. Following the murder of four children, PDRC leaders decided to close three protest sites in the interest of providing a safer environment for the protesters. This hasn’t stopped the terrorists as they have continued to attack the remaining three sites, mostly late at night. They have never been caught by the police.

These attacks mirror the acts of terrorism against the army during the 2010 Red Shirts demonstrations in Bangkok. The Red Shirt demands in 2010 were to overthrow the Democrat Party led coalition; to allow Thaksin to return to Thailand without having to face justice for his 2008 abuse of power conviction; to drop all charges against Thaksin from over 25 corruption cases; and to return his money confiscated as a result of the 2008 conviction. The Red Shirts accomplished one of those objectives when Thaksin’s proxy won the 2011 election following Abhisit’s dissolution of parliament. The remaining objectives are all about Thaksin’s wealth and legal standing. However, these objectives are hidden in claims of defending democracy.

The largest group of Red Shirts in 2010 were ordinary people from each region of the

country. The next largest were the Red Shirt guards who were modeled after the “Thahaan Phran,” a paramilitary army tasked with terrorizing members of the Communist Party of Thailand in the 1970s. A much smaller group, the Black Shirts, were described to Human Rights Watch by journalist Oliver Sarbil: “...their job was to protect the Red Shirt protestor, but their real job was to terrorize soldiers... these guys were fearless. They operated mostly at night, but sometimes during the day. They went out in small teams [to confront the Army]...” “They weren’t really ‘black-shirts’ – they were sometimes in green military uniforms and others dressed like Red Shirt protestors. They...weren’t interested in dealing with the Red Shirt leaders...The guys I met knew how to move and shoot. They also had experience handling explosives...The Black Shirts didn’t come to try and take territory – they shoot and then they leave, they hit [the soldiers] and retreat.” [2]

The Black Shirts and the Red Shirt guards were organized by army Major General Khattiya Sawasipol at Thaksin’s request. [3] In addition, the speeches of the Red Shirt leaders advanced violent solutions rather than peaceful solutions. [4] The leaders advocated widespread arson and looting in order to defend Thaksin. Notably, when the army began its operation to take back the Red Shirt rally site on May 19, 2010, the same leaders deserted the Red Shirt protestors, fleeing to the safety of the headquarters of the Royal Thai Police which was less than 100 meters from the rally stage. The protestors were left to fend for themselves and more than 55 were killed that day. None of the Red Shirt leaders were killed or wounded.

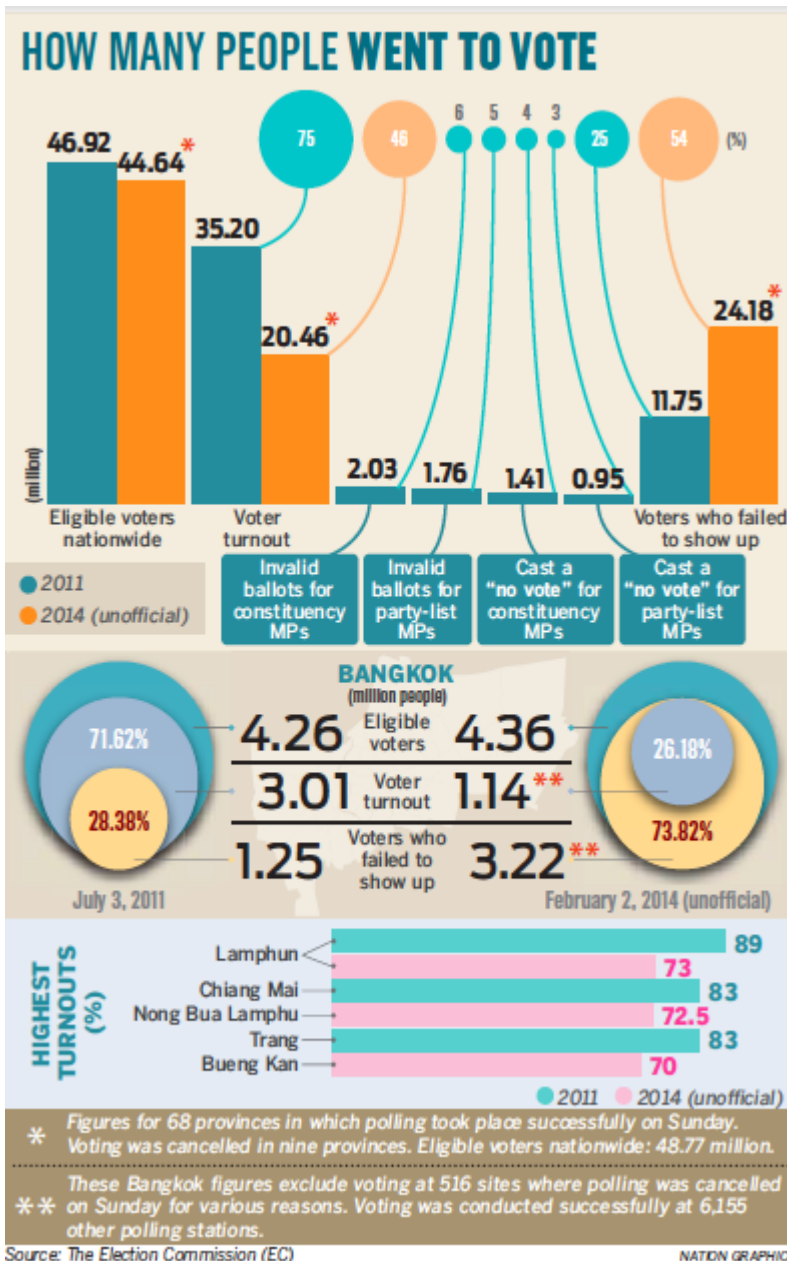


Image: Record low 2014 turnout shatters the myth of Thaksin's "popularity."

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The mood of the anti-Thaksin protestors is different. There is no talk of burning down Bangkok; no talk of "rivers of blood" in the streets; there is only talk of enacting much needed reforms before elections can be held.

On Friday March 21, the Courts ruled the February 2 election invalid as the Constitution requires the election to be held in one day. With the Democrat Party boycotting the election, it was impossible to meet the constitutional requirement. In fact, prior to the elections, the Election Commission asked the proxy government to postpone the elections - which Thaksin refused to do. The February 2 election saw less than 50% of eligible voters take part compared to over 67% in 2011. Even in the proxy government strongholds, the turnout was less than 2011. Many of those who voted, voted no or caused their ballot to be invalidated. The election was an expensive farce. Now it appears there is a chance of exacting reforms before scheduling new elections, providing Thaksin agrees, which is highly doubtful. Instead, rhetoric has taken a turn toward violence exploiting the sharp divisions in Thailand.

Time Magazine ran a story on January 16, 2014 revealing, "...members of the Red Shirts...are readying a cache of arms in case the 46 year old premier (Yingluck) is forced from office by either military or judicial intervention." The article also quoted an unnamed Red Shirt as saying, "There are strong anti-coup and anti-court sentiments among the Red Shirt mavericks who are familiar and experienced with weapon use." [5]

The Economist in its January 25, 2014 issue highlighted the possibility of a break-up of Thailand, reporting, "Thus most Red Shirts in the north and northeast now contemplate – indeed they seem to be preparing for – a political separation from Bangkok and the south. Some can barely wait." [6]

At the same meeting where the Red Shirts cheered the murder of two five year old girls, members of the proxy caretaker government appeared on stage making violent threats against the country. Nattawut Saikua, caretaker deputy minister of commerce endorsed setting up a caretaker government "in exile" in the north or northeast and announced the Red Shirt movement was set to go to 100% combat mode. [7]

Those present also proposed that Thaksin's proxy government commit itself to civil disobedience against "unjust" rulings and decisions by independent agencies, i.e. the court system.[8] This is a unique concept whereby a government announces its decision not to adhere to any court decision not favorable to itself.

Additional threats to the military and courts were made by the proxy caretaker minister of the interior, Charupong Ruangsuwan, who said ten million guns were legally owned by Thai people, "These guns are for self defense. If anyone underestimates the power of the people, you'll know about it. I believe that we must be prepared to enter a decisive situation....In today's fight, lives are at stake. It is not the kind of fight we watch on cinemas. In this fight when people die, it is for real. But I am confident we won't die and we will win." [9] His comments were interpreted by many on both sides of the divide as an endorsement of secession, just as the Economist predicted in January.

Following this meeting, Red Shirt leaders expressed their support of using violence to "protect democracy." In Chiang Mai, Red Shirt leaders threatened violence against anybody who blew a whistle, signifying opposition to the proxy government. [10] Also in Chiang Mai, patrons of night clubs were threatened with violence if the club employed musicians who appeared on any of the stages at the Bangkok demonstrations. In 2009, these same Red Shirts prevented a gay pride HIV/AIDS awareness march from marching. The marchers were herded into an enclosed area while Red Shirts threw rocks and verbally abused the marchers. We have to keep in mind all this is being done to "protect democracy."

The Red Shirt's reputation as stalwart defenders of democracy was blown apart on Saturday March 15 when it was suddenly announced that Red Shirts chairwoman Thida Tawornseth had resigned as leader and Jatuporn Promphan was "appointed" – not elected – to replace her. Democracy is defined as "rule by the governed." Thus, basic democracy must involve the governed in determining the direction and policy of the government or organization. Democracy requires a well educated population. Thailand's education system fails to provide the tools necessary for critical thinking. There are no institutions in Thailand which practice democracy, such as democratic labor unions. Thida's resignation and Jatuporn's ascension were not the result of democracy, but more characteristic of top-down decision-making. The Red Shirts are not a grassroots organization; it is controlled by a few at the top absent any policy-making direction from the bottom.

Many believe Thaksin Shinawatra is the shot caller of the Red Shirts. His vice-like grip on Thai politics is well known, most particularly with the current proxy caretaker government. For example, the 2011 election campaign posters of Phuea Thai Party promised, “Thaksin Thinks; Phuea Thai Acts.” In addition, stories have been written by Forbes Magazine, New York Times, Der Spiegel amongst others which describe how he continues to micro-manage the proxy government led by his youngest sister, Yingluck. [12] No one elected him in 2011 because he was not on the ballot. He was not on the ballot because he is a fugitive from the Thai judicial system. A government which is tightly controlled by a fugitive from justice is not democratic.

Thaksin reportedly even tries to micro-manage the government’s response to the protests. On February 17, 2014, Wassayos Ngamkhom reported in the Bangkok Post that on at least two occasions Thaksin, from Dubai, ordered the arrest of protest leader Suthep who was eating lunch at a restaurant near the Democracy Monument and ordered the dispersal of a demonstration site. Thaksin was not concerned there could be clashes and “losses.” The second order reported by Wassayos was to attack the NSPRT (Network of Students and People to Reform Thailand) stage near the Government House. Police were summoned to the office of Chalerm, the head of the Centre for Maintaining Peace and Order (CMPO), to carry out the orders from the man in Dubai. The Police leadership balked at carrying out these orders out of concern that large-scale violence would break out. Although the man in Dubai was reportedly not concerned about “losses,” the Police leadership apparently was. [13]

Bombings and shootings directed at individuals and institutions continue. Armed gunmen have come out to protect demonstrators on three occasions after demonstrators had come under attack, once by the police and twice by the 2014 model of the Black Shirts. It is this deterrent which has frustrated efforts to cause so much violence the military would have to intervene. An overwhelming number of Thai people do not want the military to intervene, although there may be some who want an intervention in order to justify civil war.

Failing to draw the military into the fray, gunmen are now launching grenades at court buildings and last week fired several grenades at the home of a member of the Constitution Court on the eve of its decision to invalidate the 2011 election. Considering the Red Shirt demand for the government to commit to civil disobedience against court actions, it appears civil disobedience is the carrot and grenades are the stick. Kraisak Choonhavan, former Thai senator, argues the “People’s Courts” are under attack due to their effectiveness and that is why “they are loathed by corrupt politicians, arrogant civil servants and avaricious corporate despoilers of our environment.” [14]

Arguably the appropriate term to describe the political nature of Thaksin’s proxy government, would be “dictatorship of the majority.” The proxy government did not receive the majority of votes in the 2011 election; they were forced to recruit smaller parties to form a parliamentary majority. The proxy Phuea Thai Party has ignored long standing protocols and rules directing the operation of Parliament since taking the reins. It cuts off debate prematurely. Arbitrarily cutting off debate in violation of the operating rules and practices of parliament was one of the grounds two attempts to amend the Constitution were ruled unconstitutional. It is arrogance in the practice of “dictatorship of the majority” that has brought unfavorable court rulings against the government.

The most virulent attacks on the courts have been directed at the National Anti Corruption Commission (NACC). It has been investigating the rice pledging scheme enacted by this

government in 2011. The policy was supposed to pay rice farmers 40-50% over market price for their rice harvest. To date, this scheme has caused losses to the government of between 10-15 billion dollars because the government has not been able to sell the rice at those inflated prices. The government has falsified sales on a government to government basis with China and it still refuses to release all documents relating to sales, citing business secrecy reasons. The money has gone somewhere, but not to the rice farmers who are now coming into their seventh month without payment for rice already delivered. It is safe to say a substantial number of Pheu Thai votes in 2011 came from rice farmers excited about Thaksin's promise of a windfall.

The NACC warned the government when the bill was passed in 2011 about the necessity of transparency in the program which was duly ignored by the "dictatorship of the majority."

In September 2013, the opposition Democrat Party filed a no-confidence motion against the proxy prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra. The motion was based on the apparent corruption and losses related to the rice pledging scheme. Again, "dictatorship of the majority" intervened. She was unwilling to answer questions and unwilling to provide needed government documents about the scheme because she held a majority.

Now she has been charged with dereliction of duty regarding the rice scheme. She named herself chairwoman of the rice pledging committee so she should be on top of all related matters. Instead, when charged with dereliction of duty by the NACC, she pleaded for more time to respond. She and her supporters accused the NACC with being unfair.

She has had plenty of time and opportunity to prepare. She chose not to. She was not transparent about the rice scheme during the no-confidence debate. She didn't need to because she enjoyed protection by the "dictatorship of the majority." However, the judicial system is not parliament.



Image: Pro-Thaksin “red shirts” assault a monk who allegedly condemned their mob in passing. Violence against those who merely speak up against the means, methods, and mission of the red shirts is one of their infamous trademarks.

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That is apparently why there are increasing numbers of middle of the night bombings directed at court buildings and a group of Red Shirts are blockading the building housing the NACC. This week, a group from the Red Shirt blockade beat up a Buddhist monk who admonished them about beating up another person. Thaksin’s supporters, known or unknown to him, are beating up Buddhist monks, killing children, and terrorizing areas of Bangkok with late night bombings in what appears to be a repeat of the lead-up to the death and destruction of the 2010 protests.

Is Thailand suffering simply so Thaksin Shinawatra can get his money back and have his convictions and more than 25 corruption charges dismissed? A virulent anti-democracy movement, the Red Shirts, masquerades as “protectors of democracy.” As options run out for Thaksin, a change in Red Shirt leadership appears out of nowhere with no input from grassroots Red Shirts. The new leader, Jatuporn, still faces charges of terrorism relating to his role in the 2010 violence. Along with his appointment, caretaker government ministers and deputy ministers speak openly about “combat mode” and secession. Even the proxy caretaker prime minister got into the act melodramatically proclaiming, “I’m also the defense minister meaning I’m like a soldier who has to do his duty until the last minute. A soldier has to keep the last stronghold and die on the battlefield. I will die in the democratic battlefield.”[15]

The proxy government’s corruption has caught up with it, rendering the party virtually powerless. Now that the parliamentary path is closed, it appears supporters of the man in Dubai are becoming more violent and dangerous. The leadership of the anti-government protests announced they will call off their protests if the Red Shirts start killing protestors. The numbers who are willing to fight and die in order that Thaksin get his money back and all charges and conviction dropped are diminishing over time.

Thailand deserves much better. Choosing between two sets of elites benefits no one. The idea of reform before elections is now more likely than not. It seems to depend on how much divisiveness and bloodshed the Red Shirts employ. It would be a great benefit if the sensible Red Shirts start thinking about how low income people nationwide can participate on an equal basis in this reform effort. Thailand has a short window of opportunity to address a myriad of serious problems. It is time to recognize the serious problem that has most of the population existing outside of the decision-making process in the Kingdom.

Notes

[1].<http://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/39672/red-shirt-celebration-of-fatal-attack-on-protestors-in-trat-repugnant-says-veera-prateepchaekul>

[2]. Human Rights Watch, “Descent Into Chaos: Thailand’s 2010 Protests and Government Crackdown”, May 2011, <http://hrw.org/reports/2011/05/03/descent-chaos-0> pp 43-46

[3].IBID. pp. 43-46

[4].IBID. p. 5

- [5].<http://www.world.time.com?2014/01/16/bangkok-shutdown-yingluck-supporters-prepare-to-fight-for-democracy>
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- [15].<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/Pm-ready-to-die-on-the-30228118.html> -democratic-battlefield-ying-3022804.html

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