

The Social Bases of Autocratic Rule in Thailand

Written by Craig Reynolds

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CRAIG REYNOLDS, JUN 11 2010

The political disturbances in Thailand over recent weeks ended with a military crackdown in the third week of May. At least 89 people, including two foreign journalists, died in the clashes, and over 1800 were injured. More than thirty buildings in central Bangkok were set on fire. The guns have fallen silent, and the curfew has been lifted, but an emergency decree still in force allows the government to arrest and detain individuals for up to 30 days without charge. An election may or may not be called before the end of 2010. Attempts at reconciliation have so far come to nothing, and unless injustices and inequalities are addressed by policies of the national government, further unrest is unavoidable.

The country's modern history is distinctive in Southeast Asia. Although Thailand was not formally colonised, its sovereignty was compromised in various ways by the Western imperial powers even as the Siamese kings continued to rule as well as to reign. Since the absolute monarchy was overthrown in 1932, many governments have come to power by military coup d'état and have produced a new constitution to tilt the balance of power in a self-serving manner. King Bhumibol, the constitutional monarch since 1946, has involved himself, sometimes discreetly and sometimes publicly, in arbitration between opposing sides of a conflict, although this did not happen in May 2010. Following the latest coup in September 2006, a former army general, who is a member of the Privy Council which advises the king, was appointed prime minister while a new constitution was written. These links between the palace, the army, and the political system have been vividly described by the British political scientist Duncan McCargo as 'network monarchy'.

The recent conflict generated prolific comment in the blogosphere where the term 'fascist' was used to describe both sides in the conflict—the government and the protestors, most of whom were rural people from the north and northeast. While fascism does not seem applicable to Thailand's modern history, the prominence in mainland Southeast Asia of one-party governments and strongmen with military backing suggests that there may be social bases to autocratic rule beyond this country alone. Autocratic rule continues to thwart popular yearnings for democracy, and sets limits on participatory politics. Those already in power figure out how to use democracy to ensure not just longevity of rule, but permanency of rule.

Thai writers and academics have been known to hurl the fascist epithet at Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram, the first military prime minister from 1938 to 1944. Indeed, the Phibun government, which continued unscathed through the Japanese occupation, was much taken by Japanese militarism. Popular patriotic literature during the 1930s drew on the Japanese martial code of *bushido*, and Japanese journalists and ministers were received hospitably on visits to Bangkok where they were invited to view plays with pan-Asian themes celebrating the solidarity of Asian civilizations against the West.

Although a fascist party never took root in Thailand, Thai ideologues quickly latched onto Mussolini's fascism for its anti-communist ideology. A Thai biography of Mussolini, an adaptation of a French book by Louis Roy, was published in 1932. But rather than the ideology of fascism, it was the personal style of the strongman, or a softer variant in terms of heroic leadership, that attracted Thai political thinkers. Other world leaders such as Eamon DeValera, Stalin, Hitler, Gandhi, Nehru, Chiang Kai-Shek, Mao Zedong, and Zhou Enlai also commanded attention, a seemingly bizarre list of nationalists, communists and pacifists as well as fascists. In the success literature of the

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1930s such men were admired for their strength of mind, powers of concentration, self-confidence and will power.

Throughout the decade before World War II the Great Man theory of history was popular elsewhere in the region as an inspiration for nationalists struggling for independence. Vietnamese nationalists, for example, were captivated by the exceptional lives of powerful Western and Asian leaders. Sidney Hook, who trumpeted 'event-making men' in his *The Hero in History* (1943), identified a leadership ideal that had currency in many parts of the world, an ideal with a very long half-life in Thailand. Spotted recently by a journalist in a Chiang Mai cafe were portraits of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Che Guevara. Next to them was Thaksin Shinawatra, the astonishingly wealthy, electorally successful Thai ex-prime minister and the *éminence grise* behind the protests in Bangkok who now resides in a Montenegro villa as a fugitive from Thai law. The list, along with the earlier pantheon, suggests that these men have charisma, a strange yet compelling alchemic compound in any society.

The juxtaposition of democracy and autocracy runs very deep in the Thai elite psyche. Just days before the 1932 'revolution', which brought an end to the absolute monarchy, the seventh Bangkok king mulled over the possibility of granting a constitution, all the while clinging to the hope that the Thai people could be encouraged to support an absolute monarch. 'Our country uses a "dictatorship" system of government', he wrote, 'but our system is not like other "dictator" systems. On the contrary, it has many characteristics of a "democracy". Thus it is a sort of half-and-half, and we haven't really decided which system we will follow.' Political scientists both Thai and Western have written volumes on 'semi-democracy' in Thailand ever since. In light of what happened in Bangkok in April-May 2010, the king's remarks in May 1932 seem prophetic.

Looking at the socio-political landscape in Southeast Asia more broadly, I do not think that fascism, while it may have resonance with nationalist aspirations during the 1930s, comes close to identifying the social bases of autocratic rule or militaristic leadership in Thailand. Instead, the personal style of leadership that one is inclined to label fascist is better understood in regional terms. There is a definite Buddhist element in this leadership style. The strongman, with or without a background in the military or security services, is sometimes of ascetic demeanour, and much admired for his personal discipline and powers of self-control. Several prime ministers, and some would-be prime ministers, fit this description. A Thailand-based columnist has described this variant of leadership as an amalgam of monk and gangster, the ascetic and the strongman in the one individual—always, of course, male.

Yet another way of characterising this type of personalised leadership draws on the concept of 'big men' familiar in other parts of the world, including societies in the Pacific. The 'big man', or 'man of prowess' as it has been glossed in Southeast Asian contexts, rested his claim for authority not on lineage but on performance. Usurpations happened often enough in pre-modern Southeast Asian history, with half-brothers in these polygamous societies eager to advance their claims to the throne. The man of prowess rewarded supporters with land grants or suzerainty over subjugated populations. He was generous with these rewards, and ruthless in excluding latecomers who had dallied in declaring their loyalty. In this way he built social credit as well as extended his hegemonic arm. Everywhere there were little 'big men', striving to increase their own prowess in competition with each other, ultimately to challenge the 'big man' who had already achieved success. In modern times in Thailand the man of prowess may be a high-ranking general who has risen through the ranks, served the monarchy with distinction, and even become prime minister. Or he may be a successful businessman who has made a fortune selling telecommunications equipment to the security services. Whatever the modality of its transformation in the modern age, autocratic rule in Thailand today has its roots in earlier forms of a political economy of leadership that valorised a man who could be at once generous and ruthless, who would reward his supporters and punish his rivals and competitors. The enduring popularity of this kind of leadership in the region today should never be underestimated.

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