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Thailand

An unending spiral of coups?

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The coup d'etat in Thailand on Tuesday September 19, 2006 put an end to nearly six years of parliamentary democracy, the longest period that Thailand has ever known. It is the latest of a long series. Eighteen such coups have taken place under the reign of King Bhumibol, crowned in 1946, not counting those organised by the royalists in the 1930s when fighting for the re-establishment of the absolute monarchy.

Development of capitalism without democratic revolution

How can we explain this sad record and shed some light on current events? A glance at the contemporary history of Thailand highlights the ongoing power struggle opposing the monarchy, the army and the state apparatus. In the wings, the mercantile and then industrial bourgeoisie have chosen their best representatives from among them according to the circumstances. As the following article explains, it was only with the coming to power of Thaksin in 2001 that the bourgeoisie decided to directly exercise power. The recent coup in one way sanctions a return to the rules of the Thai political system and puts an end to the illusions according to which economic development and the end of the cold war would naturally lead to the end of dictatorship. This is not about fatalism or cultural particularism: Thais, like other peoples, aspire to democracy. The mass mobilisations of the 1970s and 1990s bear witness to that fact. But the repression was brutal, imposing defeat and obliging the popular movement to rebuild itself several times over.

The origin of this quasi-permanent authoritarianism in Thailand's political life is to be found in the formation of the economic and political system. The first structuring factor is the belated character of the industrial revolution. In Thailand as in most of the other countries of Southeast Asia, the industrial revolution only really began in the years 1955-1970, with acceleration in the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, the working class remained for a long time very much in the minority as compared to the peasantry and did not exist as a major political actor at the time of the formation of the political system. It was only in 2006 that the Thai peasantry passed below 50% of the active population. Visiting the immense industrial zone from the metropolitan region of Bangkok to the southeast in the direction of Cambodia, one can observe an industrial revolution which is still underway and the formation of a working class of several million individuals, very concentrated geographically, little unionised and above all without political adherence. The poor peasantry, notably in the northeast of Thailand, constantly supported the political forces of social democracy or Communism but without succeeding in influencing the government in Bangkok. The urban working class only emerged as a significant social class from the 1960s and 1970s. It was then harshly repressed to the point where the workers' movement, in the classic sense of the term is today practically non-existent, to the great joy of Thai and foreign private enterprise.

The second structuring factor relates to the specificity of the history of Thailand in relation to its neighbours. Unlike the other Asiatic countries, Thailand was not colonised directly by the western powers or Japan, even if it has been subjected to their influence. This is one of the reasons for the late maintenance of an absolute monarchy, until 1932. In other Asiatic countries, the monarchy had been suppressed or much marginalized by the colonial powers. The wars of national liberation in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, in China, and in another context, the war in Korea or the landing of Chaing Kai Shek in Taiwan in 1949 radically shook up the history of these countries. This was not the case in Thailand which has never been colonised, nor "punished" by the allies for having collaborated with the Japanese during the war. Consequently, there has not been a bourgeois democratic revolution or a major conflict introducing a rupture in the history of Thailand, but a historic continuity whose origin is to be sought in the creation of a constitutional monarchy in 1932.

From absolute monarchy to dictatorship

In Thailand, a palace revolution, which lasted 3 hours, put an end to the absolute monarchy on June 24, 1932. The “1932 revolution”, as it is wrongly known, was led by a group of about 100 people, the “party of the people”, composed equally of officers commanded by Phibun and civilians led by Pridi. Trained in Europe, they aspired to exercise the highest responsibilities in the army and in the state apparatus. But they were conscious that the nobles, often ignorant, monopolised the height of the hierarchy. Far from being republicans, they would attempt to convince the king to share power in the framework of a constitutional monarchy where this latter would conserve important powers. The first government was for example led by a representative of the king, who organised in May 1933 a coup against Pridi when the later proposed a plan for “voluntary nationalisation of land” according to which the nobles would agree to sell their land to the state. Pridi was forced into exile, the officers of the party of the people were dispersed to the four corners of the country, and an anti-Communist law was adopted against “any attempt at partial or total abolition of private property”. The royalist victory was ephemeral, with the young officers of the “party of the people” succeeding in a counter-coup in June 1933 which brought Pridi to power. In October 1933, the royalists organised a new coup, mobilising troops from the provinces who marched on the capital. The troops in Bangkok, commanded by Phibun and financed by businessmen, won the day but the government of the party of the people did not harshly repress the royalists and invited them to resume negotiations with a view to a political compromise. This political instability is the consequence of the exclusion of the population from power struggles which went on according to the influence of the respective factions inside the army. The constitution of 1932 did not bring real democracy allowing the people to choose its deputies, and where appropriate support them. A parliament was certainly created but only half of its members were elected, the other half being nominated by the king and the government made up of the “party of the people”. The formation of political parties was authorised in 1933 and workers obtained the right to create trade unions. But during the first rice mill strike, the union leaders were arrested and the unions suppressed. Political parties were also banned after the attempt by the royalists to create their own party to win a majority of deputies in the assembly. Political liberties were suppressed and the press muzzled after a few months. The years which followed saw three clans in contention: the royalists who sought to re-establish the absolute monarchy against those who they considered to be “communists” and the two factions of the “party of the people” in government, the civilians and the military. Coups and counter-coups followed in succession, without the people ever rising up in favour of one or another faction. The royalists were the first losers. After the defeat of the 1933 coup, the king and most of the nobles left for Europe. The king abdicated in 1935. If it had had the will, it would have been easy for the “party of the people” at the time to definitively suppress a monarchy which was parasitic, discredited and defeated. But the “revolutionaries” of 1932 did not want a republic which could have led to a democratisation progressively allowing the people to participate in politics. The “voluntary nationalisation” of the lands of the nobility was abandoned, even though voices were raised in favour of the sale of the royal domain to finance reflation of an economy hit by the crisis of 1929. The government preferred to safeguard the monarchy and designated an obscure nephew of the king, then aged 10, as successor. But for 16 years, until 1951, Thailand would remain without a reigning king living on its soil.

The civilians led by Pridi were the second losers. The survival of the government relied on the ability of the officer members of the “party of the people” to oppose the battalions of Bangkok to the provincial battalions led by the royalists. The price to pay would be a rise in power of the army once the royalist danger was sidelined. The numbers of the army were doubled, the military budget increased to 26% of the national budget from 1933 to 1937. The head of the military faction, Phibun, became prime minister in 1938, and combined the posts of defence minister, foreign minister and head of the army. Parliament was subjugated and the army share of the budget boosted to a third. Phibun built alliances with the Japanese government and founded a youth movement with the Hitler Youth as model. Theses affirming the superiority of the “Thai race” emerged as well as a racist campaign against the significant Chinese minority in Bangkok and other ethnic minorities. The army also became a source of industrialisation. The ministry of defence created public enterprises in textiles and oil. In 1941, a “national plan of industrialisation” extended the intervention of the ministry to a whole range of industrial, agricultural and transport activities. The objective was to control, indeed expropriate, the enterprises existing in these areas, whose proprietors were often Chinese, “so as to create a Thai economy for the Thais”, for whom a whole series of jobs were reserved. A code of

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nationality was adopted in 1939, obliging ethnic minorities to “become” Thais, by learning the language, changing their name and sending their children to Thai schools. Many Chinese entrepreneurs would thus become “Thai” and would direct new public enterprises. Nationalism would thus allow a joining of the industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie with the civil and military political apparatus.

A palace revolution, the establishment of the institutional monarchy would durably affect Thailand. Beyond the numerous coups and countercoups in the following years, all the structural elements described above would endure and determine the current political life of Thailand.

Pridi and the royalists in exile who fought at the side of the allies came back to power at the expense of Phibun in 1944. The royalty was reincorporated by Pridi in political and economic life following the second world war. Then Pridi was again sidelined and forced into exile because he was no longer useful to the royalists or the military. The royalists, who founded the “democrat party” and the army fought for control of the government. The generals accepted the return of the king in 1951 on condition that he accepted a limitation of his powers. Faced with his refusal, they organised a new coup to impose this power sharing on him through a new constitution. Parliament, where the majority of deputies are nominated, is one of the places which embody this power sharing. The second is the government where the military call the shots, which does not stop the king from negotiating the nominations.

The victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, and the wars of independence in the neighbouring countries were a veritable godsend for the generals, the bourgeoisie and the royalists. The US made Thailand a bastion of the anti-Communist struggle. 45,000 US soldiers were stationed in Thailand in 1969. Three quarters of bombs launched on North Vietnam and Laos between 1965-68 came from Thailand. 11,000 Thai soldiers fought in South Vietnam and thousands were enrolled as mercenaries to fight in Laos. From 1953, US military aid represented 2.5 times the budget of the defence of Thailand, which would strengthen the possibility of the military factions who received it mounting a successful coup. New sectors of industry and services developed to supply the US army making the fortune of the Thai bourgeoisie but also the generals who, in continuity with the 1930s, created enterprises to profit directly from the economic boom or took up posts on the boards of directors to enrich themselves indirectly.

The restoration of the monarchy was organised in concert by the US and the military so as to strengthen national unity and political stability. It was pursued actively starting from 1957, by the dictator of the time, Sarit, six years after the return of the new king, Bhumibol, to Thailand; A new ceremonial was created so that the king could claim a convincing moral and political legitimacy. In contrast to the kings of the beginning of the century who sought to incarnate modernity by adopting “western values” and rarely appeared in public, medieval rituals were updated and king Bhumibol made many tours of the provinces, where he sponsored works of charity and agricultural development projects. That allowed him to become popular in a country where social protection was then non-existent and to appear as the defender of poor peasants, left for dead by industrial modernisation. A royalist was nominated as minister of education and new manuals were charged with presenting the king as the father of the nation and the Thais as his children. The US made their contribution by reproducing on a grand scale portraits of the king which were then distributed throughout the country. The general Sarit used the growing popularity of the king to render legitimate the coup he organised in 1957 to overthrow Phibun. He visited the king on the eve and the day of the coup. Sarit undertook to abrogate a law decided by Phibun limiting the concentration of land and which directly threatened the property interests of the royal family. In exchange, on the day of the coup d'État, the king named him “defender of the capital” then sent him a message of encouragement and support. It was on this occasion that a ritual whose objective is to muzzle popular protests against the dictators was introduced. When the king has given his support, his subjects can only obey. In the future, practically all coups would be organised with the benediction of the king, which allows him incidentally to influence the choice of dictators. That also allows the monarchy to accredit the idea that political instability is not due to the coups which re-establish order, but to parliamentary democracy, this foreign body imported wrongly into Thai society. This idea is today again taken up by complacent observers who affirm that democracy is not a universal value but an element of western culture. Thailand and more generally the Asiatic countries having a different culture, it is normal that democratic freedoms and parliamentary democracy are limited,

and as needs be, suspended by military coups which “repair” the faults of a system which is not adapted to “Asian values” such as the search for consensus to preserve national unity. These “culturalist” explanations serve as supports to the dictatorships who use them to justify their existence.

Reality is otherwise. From their childhood, young Thais are systematically indoctrinated in school and in families in respecting “the king, religion, and the nation” as it was put by King Chulalongkorn at the beginning of the 20th century. Secularism and the republic are concepts which are unknown and dangerous because they are illegal. This brainwashing which now relies on modern means of communication and on a cult of the royal family renders critical thought and the exercise of democratic liberties impossible. How can equality be conceptualised and demanded when one has to respect the numerous hierarchies existing and when one is a subject of the king and not a citizen?

Despite these supplementary obstacles introduced by the monarchical restoration, it is all the more remarkable that popular mobilisations against poverty and in favour of democracy multiplied throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Industrial revolution and renewal of social struggles

These popular struggles were the belated consequence of the social upheavals brought about by the industrial revolution which took shape starting from the end of the 1950s. New social layers were strengthened or appeared. The national industrial bourgeoisie expanded and enlarged the initial circle of the traditional Chinese bourgeoisie and the public industrial sector. The Thai government practiced a protectionist policy, classic at this time, allowing the creation of national industrial enterprises, then later encouraged foreign companies, particularly Japanese ones, to set up in Thailand. Industrialisation was concentrated in and around Bangkok then later towards the southeast, along the Gulf of Thailand which offers an opening onto the sea and facilitates exports.

As a consequence, the population of Bangkok went from 780,000 to 2.5 million from 1947 to 1970, or a tripling in 23 years. Between 1960 and 1970, the working class and the “middle class” employed above all in services increased by 49% against an increase in the active population of 22%; between 1970 and 1980 these figures were respectively 85% and 38%. The student population increased from 18,000 in 1961 to 100,000 in 1972. This new worker, student and urban population in rapid growth demonstrated and went on strike. The official statistics, which underestimate the reality, record 34 strikes of an average length of 2.6 days implying 7,603 workers in 1972, at the height of the military dictatorship. In 1973, when there was an uprising in favour of democracy, 501 strikes were recorded involving 178,000 workers but of a lower average length, 1.7 days. 70% of these strikes took place after October 14, 1973 on the day after a demonstration which, at the initiative of students, gathered 500,000 people in Bangkok to demand the reestablishment of the constitution and an elected parliament. A delegation was received by the king. But on the morning of October 14 the army fired on the crowd of demonstrators which had not yet dispersed, killing 77 people and wounding 857. The strikes were clearly political protest strikes. Despite this ferocious repression, the strikes continued from 1974 to 1976, involving more workers and lasting longer. These were years of intense political debates and of radicalisation where Thai students, discovering and importing the ideas developed in the West by the student movement of 1968, discovered revolutionary ideas, elaborating also their own thought starting from an attempted synthesis between the ideals of justice borne by Buddhism and Marxism. Demonstrations were daily and maintained the pressure on the government. But above all, Thai students joined their struggle with that of the workers and then the peasants. In 1974, they supported 6,000 textile workers in a strike which forced the government to increase the minimum wage and introduce better social legislation which legalised trade unions. The peasants, coming mainly from the north came to demonstrate in Bangkok to win an increase in the price of rice. Here again the government retreated. Encouraged, the peasants founded the Federation of Peasants of Thailand (FPT) which rapidly recruited 1.5 million peasants in 41 provinces. Young monks joined their demonstrations.

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This ascending cycle of popular struggles was intolerable for the most reactionary wing of the army, the bourgeoisie and the monarchy. Following the victory of the wars of national liberation in Vietnam, Cambodia and nearby Laos where the monarchy was abolished, the elites in power could not accept the unification of the popular movements and their joining with the Communist guerrillas.

Formed in 1930 by Ho Chi Minh, the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) remained for a long time a rear base for the Chinese and Vietnamese Communists operating from Thailand towards their countries of origin. It had few Thai members and repression limited its influence in Thai political life. It was during the war that the CPT emerged from marginality through being a very active branch of the resistance to the Japanese army. It held a new founding congress in 1942 with the goal of anchoring itself in Thai society. At the end of the war and the suppression of the anti-Communist laws, it emerged from clandestinity to contest elections, and engaged in trade union work. It coordinated two large-scale strikes in 1945 and 1947 in the rice mills, and organised mass demonstrations on May 1, 1946 and 1947. From this date the Maoist current was in the majority. The CPT began to debate a turn towards the countryside to organise there a guerrilla movement which would then allow the conquest of the cities. This orientation was implemented in 1961. Some guerrilla foci were organised in the hills of the north, or among the Mong, Yao and Lua minorities, in the northeast, the poorest rural region in Thailand, and in the south with a Malay majority in conjunction with the Communist Party of Malaysia. In 1969, the Thai army estimated that the guerrillas had 8,000 combatants, controlled 412 villages, and that 6,000 others were subject to its influence involving nearly 4 million people. The repression of the army was brutal. Incapable of conquering the guerrillas in the forests, the army bombarded the forests with napalm, massacred blindly the village populations, in particular the ethnic minorities, and razed thousands of hectares of forest to deprive the guerrillas of their natural shelter. But if the guerrillas achieved a localised success, they were incapable of exercising a real influence in the cities. The development of worker and student struggles in Bangkok and in the big cities offered it the opportunity to break this isolation. It is this which the army wished to stop.

From the end of 1974, the army, bourgeoisie and monarchy organised their response, creating fascist militias, the "movement of village scouts" and a movement of "vigilantes" who covered the countryside asking "do you love Thailand? Do you love your king? Do you hate the Communists?" These two movements created by the frontier police and the army units involved in the struggle against the Communist guerrillas moved to the urban areas. There they organised camps which attracted nearly two million people, including company bosses, government officials and their families.

These fascist militias organised a campaign of terror, attacking demonstrations, systematically assassinating peasant leaders, workers, the secretary general of the Socialist party, left deputies, carrying out bomb attacks on the offices of left parties. Calls for murder were launched every day on the radios controlled by the army. "It is not a sin to kill a Communist but a duty for all Thais". One of the parties of the dictatorship had as its slogan in the electoral campaign in 1976, "the right kills the left". The dictator responsible for the killings in 1973 returned from exile on September 19 and became a monk in a temple situated immediately adjoining the royal palace. He there received visits from the king and queen. Two days later, workers protesting against his presence were lynched. This campaign of assassination culminated with the massacre of students at the University of Thammasat on October 6, 1976. The "village scouts", the vigilantes and frontier police units attacked the campus with rockets, anti-tank missiles and machine guns. Officially, 43 students are assassinated without counting the wounded, the rapes and burnings alive. 8,000 arrests took place. That night, a new coup was legitimated by the king. The peasant movement was annihilated, and around 3,000 students and workers joined the Communist guerrillas as much by conviction as survival.

Thanks to these reinforcements, guerrilla numbers rose to 10,000 combatants in 1979. The number of confrontations reached a thousand per year between 1977 and 1979. This development nonetheless hid a deep crisis of orientation. The new arrivals, strengthened by their experience of urban struggles, seriously doubted the chances of success in Thailand for the Maoist strategy of conquest of power based on the encirclement of the cities by the countryside. The

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progressive discovery of the horror of the unprecedented massacres committed by the “Khmers rouges”, with whom the CPT had sometimes collaborated, shook a good number of militants starting from 1979. All the more so in that the Khmer refugee camps (which were in fact prisoners of the Khmers rouges) were situated in the CPT's guerrilla zones. The conflict between the “Khmers rouges” and Vietnamese troops as well as the attack by China had a profoundly disorienting and demoralising effect. The CPT split into a pro-Chinese faction and a pro-Vietnamese faction. China was more interested in the reestablishment of political and trade relations with the Thai government and abandoned its support for the CPT. In these conditions, most students and CPT militants accepted surrender in return for an amnesty offered by General Prem Tinsulanonda who as chief of the armed forces became prime minister in 1981. Most CPT units surrendered between 1982 and 1983, the last militants being arrested when trying to hold a congress in 1987.

By the end of the 1980s, the elites in power had achieved their ends. The popular movement was decapitated. There was no longer any centralised workers' trade union organisation, or any united peasant movements of national scope. On the political level, there were no longer any left political parties, whether reformist or revolutionary. The workers' movement has to be rebuilt. Despite all their victory is not total. During the 1980s, new social struggles appeared, of villagers for the preservation of forests, peasants against the construction of dams, workers in the factories for wage increases. But these struggles remained sectoral and scattered. Above all, the aspiration to democracy remained alive. In 1992, new demonstrations took place in Bangkok for the reestablishment of democracy. If the middle class was present in the first demonstrations, it disappeared rapidly after the first violence from the government. The students and workers continued to demonstrate and suffer repression. The army fired again on the streets of Bangkok and the king was sufficiently flexible to project himself as the person who had put an end to the violence. The army and the monarchy make a good mix for the restoration of order. The same would be true in 2006.