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Thailand

Thailand: New stage in the “class war”

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For over a week the “red shirts” have been demonstrating in the streets of Bangkok. Coming mainly from the provinces of the North and East, up to 150,000 demonstrators have marched throughout the week in calm and good humour to demand early legislative elections and the return of democracy.

The demonstrators are grouped under the banner of the "National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship" (UDD) , a broad movement composed of supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra (overthrown by a coup in September 2006), republicans and activists for the restoration of democracy.

This "class war", as the demonstrators call it, is indicative of the deep crisis in Thailand since the coup of September 2006. The country remains more than ever divided between the elites of Bangkok and the popular and poorest layers, mostly peasants and workers who live in the provinces of the North and East of the country.

In promoting a coup in 2006, the Thai military, with the endorsement of the monarchy, intended to restore the old political agenda - dominated by the monarchy, bureaucracy, the military and the Democrat Party – which had been seriously undermined by 5 years of Thaksin Government: coming to power to defend his own interests as a billionaire, Thaksin had succeeded in a few years in dominating political and economic life. In a country where business and politics are closely intertwined, Thaksin directly threatened the economic and financial interests of the Royal family and the “big financial families” not related to his own clan. At the same time, he skilfully adopted policies favouring the poor, which had never happened before in Thailand. This earned him the staunch support of the popular classes, a support which directly competed with the popularity of the King and the Bangkok elite could not stand this. The King is the guarantor of the “unity of the country”, which in fact has until recently involved smothering all the demands of the popular classes and the maintenance of the system in favour of the establishment.

Thaksin has learned to his cost that it is difficult and risky to upset the balance of power in the Thai political system. The elites are not ready to accept the verdict of the ballot box if it is contrary to the maintenance of the traditional order.

Since Spring 2006, three democratically elected governments, all involving Thaksin, have been brought down by the military or the judiciary with the support of the monarchy. The current government, led by the Democrat party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, was put in power by the military by promoting a reversal of parliament alliances in December 2008. This party is in the minority in the country and has not won an election for more than a decade. It supported the 2006 coup. Since then, Abhisit has proved a valuable ally to the army on many issues. But, for the army and the monarchy, problems are coming. Parliamentary elections will be held within a year, and the Democrat Party seems unlikely to win.

It is in this political context that we should see the decision of the judiciary at the end of February: 46.6 of 76.6 billion baths belonging to Thaksin and his ex-wife Pojama, frozen since the coup of 2006, were seized by the courts. This is a new episode in the establishment's battle against Thaksin. The military first sought to destroy the Thaksin party by resorting to the exorbitant power of Thai justice. The new constitution of 2007, written under the dictation of the military, indeed offers the judges the ability to dissolve a party if they consider that one of its members have committed a fault. This possibility has already been used twice since 2006 against Thaksin and his party, the Thai Rak Thai (TRT – Thais love Thais) and then its heir the People's Power Party (PPP). Despite his exile, the monarchy and the military have failed to eliminate Thaksin from Thai politics, so they now seek to tackle his other instrument of power, money, in order to prevent the emergence of any other political alternative.

This judicial verdict has been seen by the popular classes as profoundly unjust and illustrative of showing how Thai justice is two-faced. Those responsible for the assault on Suwannaphum airport in support of the coup have still not been brought to justice after a year and a half.

Following this verdict the UDD leader decided to organise the current mobilisations. The objective of bringing 1 million demonstrators to Bangkok, was far from reached and the government did not give way to the request for dissolution of parliament. But contrary to what has been written by numerous commentators who relay the information of the dominant classes, this movement has attained numerous highly significant political objectives. First, the “red shirts” have definitively entered onto the national political scene and the old élites can no longer ignore their weight and their demands. In rallying 150,000 persons, the UDD has shown its capacity for mobilisation and its real popularity. Such a movement, historic according to some analysts, has not been seen since the country became a constitutional monarchy in 1932. Also the Front has widened its social base. It can no longer be said that this struggle opposes the rural hordes of the countryside to the elites and middle classes of Bangkok. A part of the middle classes has become conscious of the high cost of the coup in both political and economic terms and it now supports a movement which seeks to re-establish democracy. The current political system is in full decomposition and the death of the king who is now aged 82 and has been hospitalised for several months with respiratory difficulties could lead to its collapse. The “red shirts” are not alone in believing that only a free election and a minimum of devolution of power to the provinces could begin to resolve the political crisis.

The popularity gained by the “red shirts”, the broadening of the movement's support, is a new step in the long struggle for the restoration of democracy and social justice. Current events show that this is no longer an opposition between different sectors of the bourgeoisie or between the city and the country as it has often been presented. The divisions are deep and based on a questioning of the privileges of the dominant classes, in other words on class differences. The Thai popular classes remain deprived of a political party that truly represents their interests. This movement is a first step which puts an end to the exclusion of the workers from the political sphere. But for a real democratisation of Thai society, they need to completely free themselves of populists of the Thaksin type and develop a genuine programme of social transformation.