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Thailand

Thailand: a bloodbath and afterwards?

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On Wednesday May 19th, the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva finally launched an assault on the Red Shirt camp in the neighbourhood of Rachaprasong. Television stations from around the world broadcast brutal images of assault tanks destroying the bamboo and tyre barricades and soldiers armed with rifles firing live ammunition at demonstrators. The disproportion between the images of war and the faces of the demonstrators, mostly peasants and urban workers, is striking.

The media have had much to say about the violent elements among the Red Shirts, which is profoundly abject when one sees the resources employed by the military to "cleanse" the neighbourhood. Since the beginning of the demonstrations, the government has used all kinds of violence against the demonstrators, including the use of snipers, and during the "final assault", the soldiers were authorised to kill. It is not surprising in this context that the demonstrators expressed their hatred and rage by violence against the military and the symbols of wealth.

As in 1973, 1976 and 1992, the ruling élites have responded to Thai aspirations to democracy and social justice with a bloodbath. The balance sheet is the heaviest since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. The authorities acknowledge 80 deaths and nearly 2000 wounded since the beginning of the demonstrations in the capital on March 12th.

Around mid-April, the government proposed a five point roadmap to resolve the crisis. It included the perspective of elections on November 14th. The Red Shirts, while accepting the plan, requested guarantees and that the Vice Prime Minister, Suthep Thaugsuban, be charged for the civilian deaths which occurred during the repression of April 10th. But for the government, the roadmap was offered on a take it or leave it basis. A strange way to seek to resolve such a sharp political crisis. The date of the proposed elections, November 14th, would allow Abhisit to be in power at the strategic moment of the restructuring of the top command of the army. Also, charges of terrorism and conspiracy against the monarchy were maintained against leaders of the Red Shirts.

This tactic proved successful for Abhisit. He profited from the divisions inside the UDD on the approach to follow and appeared as a democrat who had extended a hand to the demonstrators which had been rejected. Thus after being assured of the support of the coalition partners, he could employ strong arm methods to send back to the countryside the "rural hordes" who had invaded the capital.

However, it was still possible on the eve of May 19th, to avoid the military repression and the deaths which followed it. Around fifty senators were in discussion with the leaders of the UDD to organise a truce. But this attempt was rebuffed by Abhisit. From the beginning, he was among the members of the government who advocated repression rather than openness to negotiations. Remember that Abhisit and the Democrat Party had refused to participate in the snap elections organised in April 2006, when Thaksin had sought a new mandate after several months of opposition demonstrations calling for his resignation!

The government was strengthened in its determination by the position taken by the United Nations. After several days of confrontation from May 13th to 16th, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, stated in a press release: "to prevent further loss of life, I appeal to the protestors to step back from the brink, and the security forces to exercise maximum restraint in line with the instructions given by the Government". It could not be clearer that he was giving the government the green light to use force. A far cry from Pillay's statements claiming that the High Commissioner is the spokesperson for victims everywhere.

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At the international level, silence has dominated. Thailand is not China, Iran or Venezuela. Massacring peasants and workers in the streets of Bangkok does not arouse as much indignation as killing demonstrators on Tiananmen Square. Obama has not said a word on the political crisis or the civilians killed but the US government has condemned the Red Shirts for "damaging private property". It is true that the Thai élites can count on the support of the US governments whatever happens. After the end of the Second World War, the US made Thailand their main base to contain the development of Communism in Asia. That involved the setting up and financing of authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships. The withdrawal from the military bases in the 1970s did not mean the end of this cooperation. Military agreements continue, as shown by the annual joint military operations and the fact that the military base at Udon Thani was used by the US in 2003 to illegally interrogate (and torture) detainees in the context of the "war against terrorism". Thailand remains a strategic country for the US which is seeing its power in the region threatened by that of China.

With the crushing of the camp at Rachaprasong, the traditional elites may have obtained a respite but the struggle is far from over. The roots of the Thai crisis are deep: growing social inequality which is among the highest in Asia, a two speed justice system, an increasingly authoritarian regime. The rage and hatred filling the hearts of the Red Shirts and their sympathisers is more fundamentally that of all those, and they are in the majority in the country, who aspire to democracy. Thailand is undoubtedly not a dictatorship but democracy "Thai style" is an authoritarian democracy. Democratic liberties are conditional on submission to the established order and this rests on censorship, emergency laws and judicial or military coups against governments which do not please the élites. The violence of the repression and the disproportionate means employed show, if there was any need, to what extent the establishment has been shaken by this movement which has liberated political discourse in a country where to declare oneself a republican or a Communist is forbidden by law. The bloody repression of May 19th is a sign of the weakness of the government.

Thai society is for now in an impasse. Authoritarian democracy Thai style is stricken. Thais no longer believe that genuinely democratic elections can be organised to contribute to a resolution of the crisis. On the one hand the "enlightened elites" think that only they know what is good and necessary for society and its uneducated and uncivilised citizens. They are sure of losing the next elections. Hence the choice made by some of them to repress in order to stay in power. On the other side, the majority of society, which aspires to a genuine democracy and respect for the ballot box. Their struggle is handicapped by the fact that there are no real parties representing their interests. Their votes have been used by Thaksin to provide a basis for his power and to advance his own interests, at the price of numerous abuses.

Finally, the old Thai political order resting on the symbolic function of the king, guarantor of unity and holder of power of last resort is threatened. The events of recent weeks could well have very seriously shaken the almost godlike image of the old monarch. In a country where portraits of the king in public spaces are omnipresent, their absence in the Red Shirt camp in Rachaprasong is revealing of the breadth of their disillusionment with the monarchy. Their repeated appeals to arbitration from king Bhumibol remained without response and the idea that he supports the existing regime is increasingly widespread even if it cannot be debated openly. One of the obstacles to a real democratisation of the country resides precisely in the role attributed to the constitutional monarchy. To counter the idea which appeared in the late 1990 that "sovereignty emanates from the people", the royalists put forward the idea that "sovereignty belongs to the people"... although in the final instance it resides in the monarchy. The succession of Bhumibol by his son Vajiralongkorn, detested by the people, could lead to a new period of conflicts and the challenging of the established order if mobilisations do not come before.

The élites have won a battle but not the war and history is not on their side. Or as the Thai proverb says, "who escapes the tiger meets the crocodile"...

End to prosecutions!

Most Red Shirt leaders surrendered during the assault to avoid further bloodshed. They risk the death penalty if found guilty for terrorism or at least a sentence of 3 to 15 years in prison for the crime of lèse-majesté. Hundreds of demonstrators have been arrested and are held by the army. Their fate is uncertain to say the least. Their only crime is to have opposed the established order. We should bring our support to all the demonstrators and leaders detained and to urgently organise a solidarity campaign to obtain their immediate liberation and the end of the prosecutions.

Sunday 23rd May