



Discussion:

Thailand: The politics of blood

Commentary

In this audio on Thailand's colour coded protests you will hear from the BBC's Asia correspondent, Alistair Leithead and author and historian Chris Baker, both of whom were in Bangkok during the recent protests. Chris Baker begins by explaining, who the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts are.

Chris Baker:

The Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts are two groups of people who have mobilised for political demonstrations and to put pressure on the government since 2005. The Yellow Shirts started out in opposition to the then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. They wanted to get him out of power. And eventually they succeeded in that because there was a coup that threw him out of power and then subsequently overthrew the governments that had been of his supporters. What happened then was that supporters of Thaksin and people, who opposed military rule and military coups, organised in opposition to the Yellow Shirts and they chose to use the colour red.

Yellow is associated with the King. Every day is associated with a colour and yellow is associated with Monday, and the King was born on a Monday.

I think red here has all its usual associations. Being red is very much a colour of the people and of popular protest.

Commentary

The language used by the Red Shirt protesters has a heightened meaning and a symbolism in Thailand.

Chris Baker:

Phrai/prai was the old idea for a serf, if you like, a bonded labourer. And amart is an old word for a noble official, if you like, a bureaucrat.

So this vocabulary has been brought out by the Red Shirt leaders in order to portray very clearly this conflict as between the lower order and the upper order. Now actually it's a little bit more complicated than that, but it's a very clever piece of political rhetoric.

Commentary

But the root of this growing division in society is in increased wealth of the country as a whole as Alistair Leithead explains:

Alistair Leithead:

Thailand isn't overall a poor country. It was the fastest growing country in South-East Asia, there seems to have been this imbalance between both political and economic strength focused on Bangkok, focused on the elite, the establishment, the centre.

Chris Baker

The Red Shirts, by and large, are coming from the lower orders of society, but not totally, it's not quite as simple as being just the poor protesting against the rich. What has happened in Thailand over the last generation, over the last 25 years is that incomes have quite simply tripled. I mean it's an enormous change that has taken place. So everybody really is, is about three times as well off as their parents are. So a lot of what is driving this protest is simply those rising aspirations of particularly people lower down the social order. But also what has happened over this past generation is that it's become more unequal.

Alistair Leithead

There was a rally, which featured most of those who class as Yellow Shirts although they claim not to be any colour. When I was walking round reporting, I couldn't find anyone who didn't speak English when it came to the Yellow Shirts. When it came to the Red Shirts, I couldn't find anyone who could speak English, and that was a really important definition to me as to the difference between the Red Shirts, where they're from, who they are and what they're about and, and the Yellow Shirts.

They are more associated with the elite, the establishment, they're supported by the military. They were supporting the action to the military removing Thaksin Shinawatra.

Chris Baker:

Thaksin is a very complicated and complex figure and he became a sort of classic populist type leader, but didn't start out that way. He started out as a rich businessman who said that he wanted to challenge the kind of old bureaucratic dominated order in Thailand, in order to make the economy grow very fast so Thailand could very quickly become a kind of First World economy.

He started playing around with populist policies because he thought this was simply a way to keep the people quiet while you jacked the economy up.

He did it first by introducing some social reforms which are very very important indeed. The most important one of those is a universal health scheme. And health care is, is very good in Thailand if you've got money, but very bad if you haven't got any money. And he made health care, basic health care, available to everybody at what amounted virtually free.

And as a result of that, he won a landslide election in 2005, and it was that point really, where the middle class and the old elite began to get very scared by him.

Alistair Leithead:

He gave money to the poor, he gave loans, he gave cheap or even free in some cases, health care to the poor people. And they loved him. They voted for him and they thought he was fantastic. In fact, he eroded many forms of democracy.

Commentary

This culminated in the first Yellow Shirt protests over the sale of his shares in Shin Corporation to a Singaporean Government firm Temasek Holdings with Yellow disorder creating the justification for a military coup in September 2006. After democracy was restored and the left won power again as the People's Power Party, the Yellow Shirts sought to destabilise two successive Prime Ministers, Samak Sundaravej and Somchai Wongsawat seen as close to Thaksin.

Chris Baker:

The Yellow Shirts came together with their major agenda simply to get rid of Thaksin as Prime Minister. And they held street protests, they harassed the government, they harassed the Parliament, they called for the judiciary to help get rid of the government which they believed was a bad government.

In order to therefore unwind the crisis the judiciary handed down a decision, which sacked the pro Thaksin government, which had been their aim.

Commentary

The ousting of Samak and then Somchai, with the abolition of the PPP was soon followed by reactionary protests by those who had supported them. Learning from the Yellow shirts, the Red Shirts mobilised on the streets of Bangkok employing symbolic forms of political expression.

Alistair Leithead:

They on one occasion, in April, gave their own blood, poured blood into bottles, and poured. They went to Government House to pour it over the gates

But when ... then they moved into the heart of Bangkok's commercial district, into the centre, into Ratchaprasong, and set up camp and no-one stopped them and no-one moved them, they became stronger and stronger.

Alistair Leithead:

The core of people who camped out in Ratchaprasong in the centre of the Bangkok, outside Central World were peaceful. That was the nature of their protest. There were elements called the Black Shirts within the protest movement, who had some weapons. And we don't know who they are; we don't know, who they were aligned to. They could well have been people who were thrown into the mix deliberately to create problems for the Red Shirts, or they could just be military people cos the military has a lot of problems and tensions within it

There was a lot of firing from the military, there were a few shots from the other side and the military ended up fleeing and leaving armoured vehicles and about out 70 or 80 of their own weapons were taken by the protestors. It was a disaster for the government.

Lines were drawn, the protestors started building barricades out of tyres, sharpened bamboo sticks, razor wire, And that created a face off which was then very, very difficult to end or for either side to back away from. The military had orders to shoot, to kill if necessary if that's what they had to do, and it was very aware that things then gradually started ratchetting up. Every day there was a tension. Would the military come in and move them? If they did, it was clear the protestors were gonna put up a fight.

Commentary

The previous protests by the Yellow Shirts including a takeover of Bangkok's airports in 2008 had, in contrast, gone unchallenged by the military.

Alistair Leithead:

The Yellow Shirts had thousands of people out on the streets and they moved up and they took over both of Bangkok's international airports for a week, peacefully. They sat in. The airport closed down because no-one could operate.

There was a real sense that the army was allowing them to do that.

The Red Shirts then came next and followed exactly the same methods that they'd used, they copied mass protest from the Yellow Shirts. They went out on the streets, but they were treated differently.

Chris Baker

This business of a double standard is very, very blatant indeed. The Yellow Shirts besieged Parliament, they provoked very violent demonstrations, they occupied the airport, which was extremely destructive, and their rhetoric was also in many ways extremely violent.

They had a sort of armed (cadre) of guards in exactly the same way that the Reds have. But while there is now underway a, a quite stringent attempt to suppress the Reds, there has been almost nothing done to the Yellow Shirts or their leaders.

Meanwhile, at the end of the Red protests you have 400 detainees, you have their media outlets closed down, you have their papers closed down.

It's totally different. Why is it different? Well, I think you can explain it in many ways, but I think quite simply that this government and the people who support this government, are broadly sympathetic to the Yellow Shirt cause in a sense that they are opposed to Thaksin.

Alistair

There's a independent, supposedly independent investigation going on; there are a number of bodies set up by the Prime Minister to investigate what happened then and also how things move forward, including reform of the media, and people don't feel that they can be involved in that process. This idea of reconciliation that the Prime Minister talks so much about appears to be very difficult given the fact that who do you negotiate with when all the leaders of the Red Shirt are locked up in prison on charges of terrorism which have death sentences in Thailand, when emergency decree is still in place in, in a quarter of the country. A lot of people think that although they sound very good ambitions to have reconciliation, that it's almost impossible to do so under these conditions.

As soon as those decrees are lifted, people will start to demonstrate again. There is still that simmering anger and it will be back.

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