

# The lessons of Thailand's political upheaval

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The elemental eruption of anger on the streets of Bangkok on Monday has highlighted the political impasse facing the Thai working class. Frustrated at the ruling elite's contempt for democracy, anti-government protestors, many of them from Bangkok's poor, fought pitched street battles with heavily armed soldiers, only to be dispersed by their own leaders, who were fearful that the movement was slipping out of their control.

For three years Thai politics has been convulsed by a bitter fight within ruling circles between supporters and opponents of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. That struggle is now intersecting with the economic and social impact of the worst global recession since the 1930s. Yet, as the events have demonstrated, neither of the competing factions is capable of meeting the aspirations of working people.

The present government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva depends on the conservative elites—the military, state bureaucracy and the monarchy—that ousted Thaksin in an army coup in 2006, then removed two pro-Thaksin governments last year. The military, which helped install Abhisit in December, treated last year's anti-Thaksin protests with kid gloves but had no such compunction on Monday. Troops surrounded the remaining protestors and threatened a bloodbath on Tuesday. The police and judiciary, which took no action as demonstrators occupied Bangkok's airports last year, are now preferring charges of illegal assembly and creating public disturbance against the leaders of Monday's protests.

The government's actions expose the character of Abhisit's Democrat Party, which for decades has postured as an opponent of the country's military juntas. In 1992, the Democrats were the beneficiaries of large protests in Bangkok that forced an end to military rule. In the aftermath of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, the party imposed the IMF's austerity program and

confronted growing public anger over declining living standards. In the course of the bitter infighting against Thaksin, the Democrats have not hesitated to support anti-democratic methods, including the 2006 coup. On Sunday, Abhisit had no reservations in imposing emergency rule and authorising the army to send troops and tanks into Bangkok.

The billionaire Thaksin and his supporters, however, are neither "pro-poor" nor defenders of democratic rights. Capitalising on the widespread opposition to the Democrats, Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thai) party took power in 2001 on the basis of populist promises and pledges to defend Thai businesses. His ability to make limited handouts to the urban and rural poor depended on the recovery of the Thai economy, which, far from being a product of inspired "Thaksinomics," rested heavily on rising exports, particularly to the US. However, his economic policies and nepotism alienated Thailand's traditional elites by cutting across their own corrupt system of patronage.

To bolster his standing, Thaksin launched a reactionary "law-and-order" campaign in 2003, in which the police murdered hundreds of alleged drug dealers. From 2005, he deliberately whipped up anti-Muslim sentiment among the country's Buddhist majority and ordered a military crackdown on Muslim separatists in the southern provinces. As opposition emerged, Thaksin threatened critics and tightened his grip over the media. Anger over his autocratic methods was one factor fuelling large, anti-government protests in 2006.

Both factions of the ruling elite have manipulated popular concern over democratic rights in their struggle for political power in order to determine economic policy in their own interests. For weeks, the leaders of the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) were quite content to exploit popular outrage to exert pressure on the military-backed government. But

they were aghast on Monday as sections of the urban poor began to take matters into their own hands. Having egged on the demonstrators with calls for a “people’s revolution,” Thaksin and the UDD quickly shut down the protests.

What happened was a textbook case, at least in miniature, of the role played by bourgeois leaders in countries like Thailand. The twentieth century was littered with political figures who appealed to the masses on the basis of democratic, even socialistic-sounding slogans, only to disperse or attack the movement when it began to slip out of their control and threaten the capitalist system.

The anti-democratic character of the Thai ruling elites confirms one of the basic tenets of Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution—the organic incapacity of the national bourgeoisie in countries with a belated capitalist development to satisfy the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people. Only the proletariat is capable of championing genuine democratic rights and agrarian reform, through the struggle to mobilise the rural masses and establish a workers’ and farmers’ government based on socialist policies.

The latest political turmoil in Bangkok has demonstrated graphically that the working class has no independent political voice. Insofar as workers have been involved, they have been used as pawns in the factional manoeuvres of the ruling class. The lack of any genuine socialist party is part of the terrible legacy of Stalinism in Thailand and throughout the region. The Maoists of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) based themselves not on the working class, but on an armed guerrilla struggle by layers of the peasantry. Guided by the Stalinist two-stage theory, the CPT insisted that the immediate aim was not socialism, but a democratic government that included “progressive” sections of the national bourgeoisie.

During the student radicalisation of the 1970s, hundreds of activists fled to the jungles and joined the CPT after the brutal massacre of students at Thammasat University in 1976 by the military, police and associated right-wing militias. Most drifted back to Bangkok disillusioned with the CPT, taking advantage of the periodic amnesties offered by the army amid its systematic repression. Some of those activists are now found in the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps, dressing up the right-wing agendas with leftist phrase-mongering. Ex-radicals Phumtham

Vejjauyachai, Praphat Panyachatrak and Surapong Seubwonglee, for instance, became key figures in Thaksin’s TRT and helped to formulate its social policies.

The frightened response to the Thai protests by leaders gathered for last week’s ASEAN summit is a clear recognition on their part that they face similar upheavals at home and need to prepare accordingly. The working class needs to make its own preparations. Above all, this means drawing the necessary political balance sheet of its previous defeats. Throughout the region, workers are confronting the results of decades of misleadership and betrayal by Stalinist parties, particularly of the Maoist type. This is epitomised most starkly by the transformation of China into the capitalist sweatshop of the world by its misnamed Communist Party leaders.

The way out of the current political impasse requires the development of a program and perspective that represents the historic interests of the working class. That is to be found in the protracted struggle waged by the Trotskyist movement—the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI)—for the program of Permanent Revolution against Stalinism and all forms of political opportunism. We urge workers and young people in Thailand and throughout the region to turn to this history and begin to absorb the critical political lessons necessary to forge sections of the ICFI.

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