The Story of Thaksin Shinawatra

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The populist Thaksin who all wins elections but the elites and the army forbid to exert power in Thailand

The man who came closest to persuading me of the virtue of toppling a democratically elected government was a former investment banker and English public schoolboy called Korn Chatikavanij. All the foreign journalists in Bangkok know Korn, and a conversation with him is one of the pleasures of any reporting trip to Thailand. You meet him in the lobby of one of the big hotels, or in his office above a coffee bar – a tall, self-deprecatingly dashing figure with high cheekbones and exquisite shirts. He is brilliant, charming and droll, and his presence works like air-conditioning on the perspiration and stench of Thai politics. Over the course of an hour with Korn, it resolves into the clarity of a well-turned op-ed, a tutorial with a bright young don, a conversation at a metropolitan dinner party. Then you step outside, and it is all blood-heat and anguish again.

Korn went to Winchester, then to St John's College, Oxford, then to S.G. Warburg and J.P. Morgan. His great friend and confrère Abhisit Vejjajiva, the leader of Thailand's Democrat Party, was at Eton (where he was known to contemporaries such as Boris Johnson as Mark Vejj), then at St John's with Korn. A former Democrat MP from a younger generation, Akanat Promphan, now spokesman for the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee, was educated at Charterhouse and Oxford. The first time I met Akanat was at a vast government office complex in central Bangkok which had recently been taken over and occupied by protesters intent on driving the elected prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, from office. I had just come from a very different scene on the other side of Bangkok, a sweaty open-air stadium filled with Yingluck's supporters in the pro-government Red Shirt movement, many of them country people from the north of Thailand. But Akanat and I drank cappuccinos among a visibly more affluent crowd. Some of them stood outside in the sun, listening to speeches of ear-dunning volume from a battery of amplifiers. Many of them curled up in the air-conditioned atrium beneath the immigration department, passing the time on tablets and smartphones.

Thailand's political crisis is a sorry tale of bad losers and a broken political system. But it is also an old-fashioned, 20th-century-style class war. Above all, it concerns one of the great dilemmas of democracies: what to do about unacceptable politicians who, for all their obvious iniquities, are elected fair and square. Which is to say that it is the story of Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thaksin became prime minister in 2001, after making a billion in telecoms, and early on distinguished himself with the kind of policies that could have been designed to alienate Western governments and liberal public opinion. In southern Thailand, he launched a brutal campaign against Islamic insurgents which left scores of innocent people dead. In his version of the war on drugs, the police were permitted to shoot anyone whom they suspected of being a dealer. He bullied his critics in the media, and deployed his wealth to political and personal advantage. (In 2008, in a verdict that may or may not have been political in nature, he and his wife were convicted in absentia of a multi-million-pound property cheat.) He was cheerfully unabashed about diverting government largess towards regions that voted for him, and depriving those that didn't. 'Democracy is a good and beautiful thing,' he once said, 'but it's not the ultimate goal as far as administering the country is concerned. Democracy is just a tool … The goal is to give people a good lifestyle, happiness and national progress.'

'Democracy, but …' has been the unvoiced slogan of postwar authoritarians across South-East Asia, and it has generally been tolerated so long as happiness and progress are indeed delivered. Like earlier leaders in Singapore and Malaysia, although in double quick time, Thaksin changed the lives of millions of Thais for the better. Unlike them, he was not merely feared and respected for his efforts, but adored.

His cheap healthcare programme gave many poor villagers access to affordable medical treatment for the first time. A micro-credit scheme allowed them to lift themselves out of subsistence-level poverty. His energetic response to the 2004 tsunami – hugging victims, directing the aid effort, galvanising bureaucrats and politicians – made him a hero. Until Thaksin, no Thai prime minister had served out his allocated term. Thaksin won, and then won again with an increased majority, and after he was deposed in a coup, his supporters won too, and went on winning.

The horrified loathing that he excited in the minority was partly political, the response of an established ruling class that found itself abruptly and indefinitely locked out of power. Thaksin's populism – the fact that he put into effect policies that many voters supported – was held to be a hideous confidence trick perpetrated on credulous people of inadequate education. The shock of defeat became entangled with older, atavistic feelings, an unacknowledged contempt on the part of the 'light'-skinned, prosperous merchants of the centre and south for the poor 'dark' farmers of the north-east, with their distinct languages, and ethnic affinities with the historic enemies, Cambodia and Laos. By the mid-2000s, an anti-Thaksin campaign, the Yellow Shirt movement, mobilised against him and in support of Abhisit and Korn's Democrat Party. In September 2006, the tumultuous demonstrations they unleashed became the excuse for the generals to step in.

The Korn argument was that in order to preserve Thai democracy in the long run, it had first to be saved from Thaksin, and from itself. The vast Shinawatra wealth and Thaksin's strategy of appointing his own placemen to powerful government jobs was rotting the country's institutions from within. This was the justification for tolerating the 2006 coup (Korn said at the time that it made him 'sad', but raised no objection). Ever since then, to an almost comical degree, Thai people have been demonstrating over and over how strongly most of them disagree.

After the coup, which shooed Thaksin off into exile in Dubai, the generals convened an assembly of tame delegates who rewrote the country's constitution to give the Democrats a better chance of winning. An election was held, but Abhisit lost again, to a party of self-declared Thaksin supporters. The Yellow Shirts responded with a new campaign of mass protest and disruption, occupying the prime minister's office and then Bangkok's international airport. Soon Thaksin's proxy prime minister, Samak Sundaravej, was forced out of office for the crime of having appeared on a cookery programme, in violation of new rules about politicians having two jobs (in an earlier incarnation, he had been a well-known TV chef). After a few months of confusion and more court rulings in his favour, Abhisit, with Korn as his finance minister, ended up in power – without the bother of having to win an election. Thaksin's Red Shirt supporters mounted huge demonstrations of their own, which were suppressed by the army with the loss of 91 lives. But, inescapably, the moment came for Abhisit's Democrats to do what they have always done least well, and fight an election. In 2011, they lost again, to Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, a businesswoman with no political experience.

Thaksin referred to Yingluck as his 'clone' – and this was exactly what many of those who voted for her wanted to hear. Not surprisingly for one so green, she struggled as prime minister, badly mishandling the response to a season of devastating floods. Even more serious was a catastrophically misjudged rice 'pledging' scheme in which the government bought the crop from farmers for about 50 per cent above the world price, in the belief that by cornering such a large supply, it could move the market. When prices remained stubbornly low, the government found itself unable to pay the farmers, and – thanks to the atmosphere of jeopardy engendered by the political crisis – unable to borrow money from the banks. There were stories of desperate farmers hanging themselves in their barns: a policy intended to help the Thaksin family's most loyal rural supporters inflicted grievous hurt on them instead, and gave more ammunition to Yingluck's enemies.

Her worst mistake, though, was a bill that would have delivered a broad amnesty for crimes associated with the political turmoil of the post-coup years. Among its beneficiaries would have been Abhisit, who has been charged with child murder in the aftermath of the 2010 crackdown on the Red Shirts – and at this even some of Yingluck's own supporters jibbed. The opposition insisted that it was a ploy to get Thaksin off his own criminal conviction and allow him to return to Thailand and to politics. By the time the government abandoned the bill, crowds of more than a hundred thousand had taken to the streets of Bangkok in protest.

At this point, the end of November 2013, the opposition faced a choice. Yingluck, out of her depth from the start, was doing more harm to the Thaksin brand with every month she remained in office. At this rate, the Democrats would have a chance at the prize that had eluded them since 1992: victory in a democratic election. Not the next time around perhaps, but maybe in the election after that. With a few more of Yingluck's cock-ups, and a lot of well-organised, patient campaigning in Thaksin country, it should have been possible to re-engineer for good the polarised demographics which had done such damage to Thailand. This, as he more or less admitted to me in February, was Korn's intention. 'After we'd won the first round [when Yingluck dropped the amnesty bill], a lot of us thought that was the time to channel our efforts to winning an election,' he said. 'But we didn't do that.' Instead, Abhisit and Korn had the reins of opposition torn from their hands by a very different figure – Suthep Thaugsuban.

Suthep is a Democrat, but the opposite of Abhisit in image and temperament: a pot-bellied man of the people, a sneering, relentless demagogue, fizzing with gleeful cunning. A former local headman from Surat Thani in southern Thailand, where his family were big in shrimp and oil palm, Suthep had been deputy prime minister under Abhisit, and is blamed by many for the brutality of the suppression of the Red Shirts in 2010. He had led the charge against the amnesty bill. Now, instead of banking his winnings, he threw the entire pot on the table in a wild, all-out effort to force Yingluck from power.

The crowds that had marched in such numbers to knock down the amnesty bill found themselves summoned again to demand the immediate resignation of the cabinet in favour of an unelected People's Committee made up of 'good people' who would 'reform' politics (again) in preparation for a return to some kind of vaguely democratic system at an unspecified point in the future. The intention – to find a way of neutralising Thaksin's majority support in the country – was transparent: no elected government could accept such terms. When Yingluck offered to talk, Suthep refused. He wanted the army to step in and enforce his demands in another coup.

Suthep's people invaded government ministries, blockaded Yingluck's office and built encampments at traffic intersections in central Bangkok. The campaign ebbed and flowed, but from last December the atmosphere of disorder and low-level violence was constant. Twenty-eight people, including anti-Thaksin protesters, loyalist Red Shirts and policemen, have died since then, many in mysterious drive-by shootings and grenade attacks. The point was to make it as easy as possible for the generals to use the traditional pretext of coup-makers – the need to restore order. But the army commander, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, proved stubbornly resistant.

Since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, Thailand has averaged a coup, or an attempted coup, every four years, so it could almost be regarded as one of a general's ceremonial duties. But even Prayuth – a former head of the Queen's Guard and, by reputation, a reactionary conservative – could see how disastrous for Thailand the 2006 intervention had been. The sickening polarisation of Thai society did not begin then, but it received a jolt of malevolent energy when Thaksin was precipitated from power. Overnight, he went from being a dodgy quasi-authoritarian – a tackier version of the rulers of Singapore and Malaysia – to a democratic martyr, an elected leader driven out at the point of a gun. Inside Thailand and abroad, those who had disdained his methods and style found themselves compelled to take his side. The reproaches from foreign governments, and the suspension of US military aid, made the anti-Thaksin forces shrill and defensive. And the whole costly effort turned out to have been futile: having fixed the system to the best of their ability, the opposition lost at the ballot box again. 'This is a political problem that needs to be solved by political means,' Prayuth said last November. 'Don't try to make the army take sides because the army considers that all of us are fellow Thais, so the government, state authorities, and people from every sector must jointly seek a peaceful solution as soon as possible … However, we are monitoring from a distance.'

The distance lessened drastically on 22 May when Prayuth unilaterally suspended the constitution, dissolved the senate and arrested, for a few days at least, everyone who was anyone in Thai politics (including Abhisit, although not Korn, who deftly remained above it all). So far, at least, this coup has been as bloodless as the last, although the post-putsch atmosphere is darker and more strained. More than five hundred people have been detained, the junta refuses to say how many of them are still locked up or where, and Prayuth, a humourless, epauletted Dalek, has made it clear that anyone who annoys him can expect to join them. (In the firing line are Thai journalists, two of whom were called in and threatened for the offence of pressing him with 'inappropriate' questions as he stalked off the stage

during a press conference.) ‘Our intentions are pure, and we will remain transparent,’ Prayuth said, brandishing a document apparently signed by King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the *ex post facto* licence for sedition without which no Thai junta could flourish.

It is still not clear why Prayuth changed his mind about intervening, but he is already showing signs of the haste and naivety that make many military men unsuited to politics. He laid the ground for the coup two days in advance when he declared martial law, and ordered the government and opposition to a meeting to resolve their differences. For a moment it looked as if this might work in the Thaksinites’ favour: negotiation was what they had been calling for all along. Predictably enough, the first session did not accomplish very much. When there was no narrowing of differences the following day, Prayuth stormed out and had everyone in the room arrested. A wilier and more patient man would have made a bit more effort to cajole and bully the two sides into a compromise.

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Unclear as always – and the subject of heated disagreement among observers of Thailand – is the influence on public events of Bangkok’s royal court. As a constitutional monarch, King Bhumibol has ruled for 67 years, and has become the repository of deep-seated longings for authority and stability. To describe him as adored is inadequate: there is no deeper or more enduring cult of leadership outside North Korea. He is 86, and up until last summer had spent four years, on and off, in hospital. His heir, Maha Vajiralongkorn, is protected by lèse majesté laws which mandate a punishment of up to 15 years in prison for anyone judged to have insulted members of the royal family. Take what follows, then, as prudent understatement: the crown prince may not be quite as popular as his father.

It is a widely held conviction among opponents of Thaksin Shinawatra that he exerts a sinister influence over Vajiralongkorn. Their fear is that when the crown prince succeeds to the throne, he will use his influence to oversee the political and legal rehabilitation of Thaksin, who will return to Thailand and pick up where he left off so abruptly in 2006. As the US ambassador, Ralph Boyce, wrote in 2005, in a cable published by WikiLeaks, ‘the king will not be around for ever, and Thaksin long ago invested in crown prince futures.’ This apprehension may be what has driven the anti-Thaksin campaign in the past seven months, and what motivated General Prayuth’s coup last month: if Thaksin is not stopped soon, it may be too late.

In 2006 the generals got in, wrote their new constitution within a year, and got smartly out. The National Council for Peace and Order, as the junta calls itself this time around, speaks of a vague ‘roadmap’, including a three-month cooling-off period and the drawing up of another new constitution, leading back eventually to ‘full democracy’ in 15 months or so. By shutting down the protests, the coup has improved traffic in Bangkok, and may eventually calm investors and tourists (the economy shrank by 2.1 per cent in the first quarter of the year). But it is impossible to see how it will do anything but aggravate Thailand’s long-term problems, which derive from the inability of a minority, and an entrenched political establishment, to accept the will of the majority.

Thaksin himself has remained prudently quiet, but there can’t be any doubt that support and sympathy for him have increased even more since the coup. After the last one, the Red Shirts embarked on a campaign of peaceful civil disobedience which was quelled with bullets. Having been foiled for a second time by the army, they have an even stronger case for taking violent and radical action. A band of Red Shirt escapees has already established in Cambodia what may turn into a government in exile, while the junta has announced the seizure of guns and explosives, and put in front of a court martial 22 Red Shirt ‘terrorists’ accused of plotting attacks in the north – of course the existence of such a threat helps to justify the curfew, censorship, indefinite detention, and other offences against civil liberty the coup has brought with it. I don’t yet credit the talk of a Red-on-Yellow, North-on-South civil war.But a scenario of that kind is no longer the crank fantasy that it seemed to be even a year ago. This coup will further polarise the country. Either it will end like the last one, in another victory for the Thaksin side, which will be even less inclined to compromise and forgive. Or the coup leaders will succeed in finding a structural way to suppress the will of the pro-Thaksin majority, which will embed deeper still its sense of injustice and rage.

Many people bear responsibility for Thailand's divisions, prominent among them Thaksin, who must dearly wish that he had rubbed his enemies' noses in it a bit less gleefully during his years in office. But the suave villainy of the Democrat Party, and of men like Abhisit and Korn, is insufficiently recognised. They understand how democratic opposition works, and how defeat, over time, strengthens losing parties, by purging them of what is unrealistic and superfluous, and forcing them into congruence with the aspirations of voters. Twice they have had the opportunity to reject military force and to insist on the primacy of elections; twice they have held the generals' coats for them, and watched civil rights being trampled on, in the hope of gaining some respite from their own chronic unelectability. The Democrat Party's leaders – young, attractive and cosmopolitan – could have positioned themselves as mediators between a corrupt, complacent old elite and a corrupt, arrogant new power. Instead, they chose their natural side in the class war, and achieved the feat of losing the moral high ground to a man such as Thaksin. Their responsibility, and their disgrace, are very great.

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