

The Debate Over a Thai Republic

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Could the country survive without a monarchy?

Is the "R" word a taboo terminology in the Thai political vocabulary? Thailand's political temperature has been sharply rising, particularly since former premier Thaksin Shinawatra appeared on a large screen in Bangkok in a pre-recorded video message attacking General Prem Tinsulanonda and General Surayud Chulanont, both formers prime ministers and members of the Privy Council. He accused them of masterminding the September 2006 coup.

The R word refers to "republic" which has lately emerged as a serious debate in Thailand as the pro-Thaksin movement has grown in numbers and strength. The red-shirted protesters claim that they are fighting for democracy which implies that their opponents are standing on the opposite of their democratic scale. Their opponents include the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva, the military, major businesses, Bangkok elites, and members of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD).

Republic is a scary word in the Thai political domain. After all, Thailand had been ruled by monarchs for over 700 years since the days when it was known as Siam. True, a significant transition came in 1932 when the old absolute monarchy was transformed into a constitutional one, presumably paving the way for democracy to thrive. But it was the military that kept assaulting democracy and snatching political power. Its footprints are evident today in Thailand's failure to develop a full-fledged democracy.

At the same time, the degree of reverence of the present king among the Thais has firmly intensified as the Thai state strove to make the monarchy the main pillar of the nation and its embodiment. The PAD has exploited this king-nation composition for its own political

purposes, using it to accuse Thaksin and his cronies of being disloyal to the king and thus to their own nation.

Driven from power in a coup and a fugitive from Thai law, Thaksin has shown no sign of giving up. Having persisted in returning to politics, and now with a bigger grievance against the Privy Council, which is known to be the eyes and ears of the king, Thaksin seems to have opened a space of possibility in an unpredictable realm of Thai politics. But is an idea of republic a part of such possibility?

To be fair to Thaksin, he has used every opportunity to express his loyalty to the king even when his rivals snubbed him as a traitor. In his latest video message, Thaksin re-stressed his respect for the old establishment. His prostration before a picture of the king while in exile in Hong Kong and his government's obeisance to a sufficiency economy while in office do not suggest republican sentiment.

Michael Connors argued that Thaksin has rarely looked like the bourgeois revolutionary that others have hoped him to be. Ideologically speaking, Thaksin never had a republic in mind, and his continued public declaration of loyalty to the monarchy should not be taken as a ruse.

But why do many Thais believe that Thaksin has endorsed the making of a Thai republic? Giles Ungpakorn, a fugitive Thai academic currently charged with *lèse-majesté*, saw that the red-shirted protesters are transforming themselves into a republican movement. If this observation is true, then what the red-shirts really want is not only democracy but a democracy without the monarch as the head of state.

This observation is however troublesome. Scholars and activists tend to look at the current Thai politics in a black or white scenario; one is either a royalist or an anti-monarchist. The royal institution has been consistently politicized and long abused by various political factions. Even royal symbols including portraits of the king were used to legitimise certain illegal political activities.

At the crux of the crisis lies the question of Thai democracy. The royalists condemned Thaksin and his proxies for manipulating democracy to shore up their power. The red-shirted camp in return has reproached the royalists for ignoring the will of the majority and centralising power in the hands of the minority elites. The solution here is perhaps to tailor Thai democracy to fit the needs of both the masses and the power-hungry politicians. It will be a difficult, but not impossible, task.

Is a Thai republic a viable option? Then the Thais must ask themselves if they can live without a national identity. How will they identify themselves with the nation that has been tightly bound with the monarchy for centuries?

As the thirst for revenge continues, the military and some businesses have offered a bounty of Bt 1million (US\$28,167) for Thaksin's arrest and his return to Thailand. His

supporters have retaliated by staging mass rallies across the country to attempt to bring down the government and the Privy Council.

The only R word that may come handy now is "reconciliation" if all political sides are really serious about putting an end to the protracted crisis.

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