

Justifying a military coup

Thailand's democracy movement lends support

Last year the government of Thailand was toppled by a coup. In an open letter, written in October last year, trade unionist **Somsak Kosaisook** explains why the democracy movement did not resist the coup, and have lent their conditional support to the interim government.

DEAR COLLEAGUES,

I would like to brief you on the situation of the labour movement in Thailand, comprising the State Enterprise Workers Relations Confederation (SERC), the Labour Solidarity Committee of Thailand, and groups from various areas under the umbrella of the Labour Co-ordinating Center.

These are in the forefront of the movement against the domination of absolute global capitalism. Workers are demanding better wages, the establishment of occupational health and safety measures, the ratification of ILO Convention 87, 98, and an end to privatisation.

The labour movement's immediate aim was to join forces with other civic groups in forming the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD, which embraces people from various walks of life.) There were five core leaders of the PAD: myself as a representative of the labour movement; Somkiat Pongpaibool, representing academics; Sondhi Limthongkul, from the mass media; Piphop Thongchai, representing NGOs; and Chumlong Simuang, from the Dharma Force. There were also representatives of students, slum-

dwellers and farmers.

The main reason for the unanimous resolution of the PAD leadership to oust Thai Prime Minister Shinawatra Thaksin, launched on 11 September 2005, was his government's moral bankruptcy, despite winning a majority in the general election. He interfered in the work of independent organisations, misusing his power and state resources to weaken and monitor them.

Thaksin leads a single-party government with 377 of 500 seats in the Thai parliament. He has introduced hard-line capitalist policies, rushing to privatise state enterprises such as the petroleum and electricity industries, and listing them on the stock market for the benefit of his political circle and multinational capital. There has been widespread corruption in large state projects.

Hundreds of thousand of Bangkok residents, and millions across the country, participated in rallies to oust Thaksin. This led to the dissolution of the parliament and a dirty and undemocratic general election on 2 April last year [2004], whose outcome was annulled by the



*Ousted Thai Prime Minister
Shinawatra Thaksin*

Constitutional Court.

The PAD staged several protest rallies in Bangkok. It was planning another mass meeting last year when a coup d'etat took place on 20 September [2005] while Thaksin, then acting premier, was attending the United Nations in New York. So hated are Thaksin and his government that the people reacted to the coup with joy and gratitude.

If the planned PAD rally had taken place, Thaksin would undoubtedly have declared a state of emergency and used force to disperse the crowd with much bloodshed, as has happened in the past. The aim of the coup was not to harm anyone, but to eliminate the effective dictatorship of Thaksin and

his government, the enemies of the people and the labour movement.

The PAD did not support the coup. But if we oppose it, the effect would be to return the Thaksin regime to power. For the time being, we are not resisting the interim government but are demanding that the interim government scrutinise and, if necessary, seize the assets of Thaksin and his cabinet members; disband the management board overseeing state enterprises; put an end to privatisation; and stand firm on the philosophy of economic self-sufficiency espoused by the Thai monarch and which the majority of the Thai people support.

We have also demanded that people from various groups and professions be given an opportunity to participate in drafting the new constitution, so that it empowers the people and strengthens democracy.

The labour movement and the people will keep an eye on the government and follow up on their demands, to ensure they are implemented. This is in line with my initial opposition to the coup and desire to test the sincerity of the Council for Democratic Reform in its professed aim of building a true democracy in Thailand.

My aim is to monitor the performance of the interim government, while striving to maintain the stability of the network that took part in the struggle and implanting consciousness in the people, so that they monitor the power of any future government. For a government to survive, it must work for the benefit of the majority. **LB**

Somsak Kosaisook is president of the Thai State Railway Workers' Union.

Thailand's generals make foul seem fair

Excerpts from a *Financial Times* article, which was written about two months later than Somsak Kosaisook's letter puts the question of whether a coup can ever be justified, even in the face of a corrupt government, in a new light.

Is it time to bring back Thaksin Shinawatra? As one who was appalled by the scheming, unscrupulous and autocratic ways of Thailand's former prime minister, I never thought I would ask such a question. But since he was toppled by a military coup in September, the regime that ousted him has achieved the remarkable feat of making his record look slightly less dreadful.

First, the regime botched the imposition of exchange controls and had to backtrack. Then Bangkok was rocked by bomb blasts, about which the generals say they are clueless. Meanwhile, their expedient of simply saying "sorry" to inhabitants of southern Thailand, whom Thaksin repeatedly brutalised in the name of suppressing Islamist insurgency, has failed to quell unrest there. The generals have been equally ineffectual so far in fulfilling early pledges to root out corruption and write a new constitution before holding elections late this year.

Now there are growing signs of dissent in their ranks. The bombing - which the junta has tried to pin on Thaksin's allies - are suspected of being the work of officers who were denied high office after the coup.

It is increasingly clear that Thailand's new bosses are not just politically and economically leaden-footed; they seized power with no coherent agenda beyond discrediting Thaksin and dismembering his Thai Rak Thai party. They have yet to achieve

even that: the former prime minister may be in exile, but he casts a long shadow over the nation's affairs...

Pledging to run Thailand like a CEO, he did so in the manner of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi; he subverted the country's fragile young institutions and divided its people; he engaged in cronyism on a grand scale; and he revelled in strutting self-aggrandisement alien to the normally restrained nature of his compatriots. Yet his political mastery remains unrivalled.

He was Thailand's first politician to apply modern marketing and mass-media techniques to fighting elections, handsomely winning two in a row. He was the first to build a national power base among the rural poor, long neglected by the political elite...

Even their own supporters doubted they could win against the Thaksin machine at the polls. The question, then, is not whether Thaksin should return to power, but how it can be avoided. The longer that question remains unresolved, the greater the risk that the junta will junk promises to restore full democracy.

Thailand's generals have already proved incompetent. Yet they may unwittingly have done Asia's many shaky young democracies a service by showing once and for all that military regimes are no solution to bad civilian rule.

*Excerpts from *Financial Times*, Guy de Jonquieres, *Business Day* 16.01.2007.*