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The 2006 Anti-Thaksin Movement in Thailand: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the mass protests against Thailand's billionaire Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. Over a series of several months, hundreds of thousands of people took part in demonstrations that created a deep political crisis and forced Thaksin to call snap elections. This political crisis was partly a result of intra-elite conflict between the old power elite and Thaksin's "CEO-style" rule, which opened up space for a broader politicisation. However, a closer look at Thaksin's own mass support and a comparison of his populism with Venezuela's President Chávez leads us to the analysis that the crisis resulted from deeper contradictions within Thaksin's "post neo-liberal" capitalist restructuring project. The movement against Thaksin thus drew on and brought together different sections of Thai society rebelling against Free Trade Agreements, privatisation and authoritarian, corporate-dominated politics. The article concludes with some reflections on the movement and the question of royal intervention and the coup d'état.*

KEY WORDS: Thaksin Shinawatra, People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), anti-Thaksin movement, populism, post neo-liberalism

In March 2005, after a landslide election victory, Thailand's billionaire Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra seemed invincible. His Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) gained 19 million votes (more than 60% of the votes cast), substantially improving on the result achieved in 2001. Social and political activists were dejected, even intimidated, by this result. By March 2006, the situation had changed completely. A massive and sustained protest movement occurred, with rallies of 50,000-100,000 people on a weekly and sometimes daily basis over a period of three months. The movement on the streets opened up political space for debate and criticism that would have been unthinkable only a few months previously and forced Thaksin to dissolve parliament and call snap elections on 2 April 2006. Six months later, a military *coup d'état* ended the career of one of Thailand's most successful premiers. How can we explain this rather sudden and deep crisis of the Thaksin regime?

At first glance, the crisis appears to have developed as a struggle between different sections of Thailand's elite. Intra-elite conflict was obviously one key element in Thaksin's downfall. This is epitomised, first, by media mogul and former Thaksin

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supporter, Sondhi Limthongkul, whose open-air talk shows at Lumpini Park at the end of 2005 sparked the initial movement. More importantly, the crisis represented a conflict between Thaksin and what McCargo (2005) has coined the “network monarchy.” The *coup* itself was orchestrated by members of this network and the ground for it was prepared for by direct interventions by the king and Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanonda (see Hewison, 2008). However, we argue that intra-elite conflict is an insufficient explanation for the dynamics or the social base of the protest movement, unless the hundreds of thousands of demonstrators are simply seen as royalist followers of protest leaders Sondhi Limthongkul and Chamlong Srimuang.¹

It has become common to define the anti-Thaksin protests as a middle-class movement. This term is used loosely and lumped together with “the urban elite,” implying that Thaksin was supported by the poor in the countryside and opposed by the relatively rich in the city. This is the basic line followed by newspapers such as *The Nation* and the *Bangkok Post* and is also argued by Kasian (2006: 32) and Pasuk and Baker (2008). Songpol Kaopatumpit (2006: 1), an editor of the *Bangkok Post* wrote of “the urban elite and like-minded activists – those who were on the streets demanding Mr Thaksin’s resignation”; while *The Economist* (8-14 April 2006: 14) projected a “spectacle of an urban elite overthrowing an elected leader.”

Reflecting these popular views, Kasian (2005: 132) drew on Anek Laothamatas’ (1996) “Tale of Two Democracies”, to argue that there is a deep conflict between the rural “electocracy” (who buy votes along patronage lines) and the urban, free-market, liberal democracy. He characterised “the city” in terms of a capitalist agenda: “the city’s greater purchasing power plus undemocratic economic freedom to trade, invest, consume, overspend, exploit, and pollute,” calling this the “urban uncivil society” that exploits the countryside. Thus, he sees the anti-Thaksin movement as a conflict, as another turn in the never-ending “vicious circle” of Thai politics, where the rural population elects an inept and corrupt premier and it is the task of the urban population to drive him out of office.

In contrast with these perspectives, in this article we argue that the Thaksin conflict was not simply one between a pro-poor, populist premier supported by the mass of the rural poor (a kind of Asian Hugo Chávez) against an urban, royalist elite. Instead, we will try and show that the anti-Thaksin movement was rooted in the contradictory nature of Thaksin’s project itself, which combined populist programmes with a deeper restructuring of Thai capitalism. Inherent contradictions explain the dynamics involved in the emergence of opposition and in the transformation of former supporters into enemies.

The characterisation of the anti-Thaksin movement as “middle class” does not do justice to the complex make-up of the protest movement. It will be shown that the dynamics of the protests led to a broadening of its social base, and opened the space for discontent towards Thaksin, which had grown over the preceding several years, to emerge in activist form. The People’s Alliance for Democracy represented a coalition between heterogeneous groups (including elite factions, grassroots organisations, social movements and NGOs) against Thaksin. Elite opposition combined dissatisfied business groups that had lost the political patronage necessary for economic success (see Ukrist, 2008) and the old network of civil servants around the king, who were losing out to the Thai Rak Thai’s takeover of the state apparatus (see Hewison, 2008).

As we will show, the opposition from below, on the other hand, arose from conflicts around different economic, social and political questions and issues. Rather than a coincidental collection of single issues, we argue that these questions and issues were connected and interrelated, because they all arose out of the inherent contradictions of the Thaksin project. We introduce the term “post-neoliberal restructuring” to analyse the Thaksin project, rather than populism. We then try and show that this contradictory restructuring project gave rise to different oppositions at different times during the TRT government. These were to re-emerge as part of the PAD-led mass movement in 2006.²

The Mass Movement against Thaksin

The anti-Thaksin movement was huge. Over a period of two months, from the beginning of February until the end of March 2006, hundreds of thousands of people took part in a series of demonstrations that were led by a coalition called the “People’s Alliance for Democracy” (PAD, *Phanthamit Prachachon Phuea Prachathippatai*). The PAD was able to organise a series of rallies and demonstrations with between 50,000 and 300,000 participants in Bangkok (11, 26 February; 5, 17, 25, 29 March), some of which lasted overnight or for several days, as well as protests in many other parts of Thailand (including Chumphon, Surat Thani, Hat Yai, Songkhla, Patthalung, Pattani, Trang, Khon Kaen, Nakhon Ratchasima, Surin and Ubon Ratchathani (*The Nation Online*, 11 and 27 February, 2006).

The PAD was an alliance between a wide range of sections of Thai society and between diverse political organisations. One wing was made up groups who could be described as an urban elite or as conservatives, such as disgruntled royalist civil servants who were being marginalised by the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) Party, or sections of business who were not part of Thaksin’s patronage system (see Ukrist, 2008). Another wing (and this is what we will focus on in our argument) was made up of social movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with a grassroots base, such as workers, farmers, teachers and students. The PAD thus brought together elite and grassroots opposition to Thaksin.

Urban elite and royalist opposition to Thaksin was epitomised by media mogul and former backer of Thaksin, Sondhi Limthongkul, whose Lumpini Park talk shows from September 2005 were one source of the anti-Thaksin movement. Sondhi’s Manager Business Group had been resuscitated under Thaksin, but Sondhi fell out with Thaksin after he was not given privileged business opportunities (see Kasian, 2006: 33) and when his increasingly critical talk show “Thailand Weekly” was cut off after intervention by Thaksin, he began to hold his shows at Lumpini Park, attracting up to 30,000 people. In January 2006, Sondhi led around 2000 people in a march on Government House and several hundred demonstrators pushed into the compound after midnight (*The Nation Online*, 14 January 2006).

Parallel to Sondhi’s open-air protest talk show, another protest movement against Thaksin’s free trade policies was gathering steam. In December 2005, massive protests against the 6th WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong brought together protesters from across South-east Asia. Based on interviews by the authors, the hundred-odd strong delegation of Thai activists was made up of representatives of farmer networks such as the Alternative Agriculture Network and the Northern Farmers

Alliance, the Southern Federation of Small Scale Fishers; HIV-activist groups; and various NGOs. Apart from making headlines in Thailand by getting arrested in Hong Kong, they returned with new inspiration to take on the free trade agreement (FTA) talks between the Thai government and the USA.

A coalition of NGOs called FTA Watch had been organising against FTAs for several years. In January 2006, they mobilised 10,000 demonstrators against the US-Thailand FTA 6th round of talks in Chiangmai. The size of the demonstration, for the most part small-scale farmers and HIV activists, was remarkable given the much smaller turnout at previous FTA talks. A new militancy was also evident. Protesters adapted the militant tactics of Korean farmers in Hong Kong, first by swimming across a river to reach the hotel in which the negotiations were taking place (the Koreans had jumped into Hong Kong harbour), and then by breaking through police lines, nearly storming the meeting (*Bangkok Post*, 11 January 2006). This led to the premature closing of the talks (which then shifted to a nearby golf course) and, as Thanong (2006) argued, probably to a more general de-legitimisation of the Thaksin government.

The spark for a more generalised movement against Thaksin, and an alliance between these two independent strands, was the Shin Corp sale. At the end of January 2006, it was announced that Thaksin's family had sold their Shin Corp business to a Singaporean government investment company in a tax-free sale. The deal involved a shadowy investment firm called Ample Rich that had been set up in the British Virgin Islands tax-haven. Sondhi immediately took up the issue. Because he had been the most outspoken critic of Thaksin, he was now in a position to lead the massive public outrage over the Shin Corp deal, and his demonstration on 4 February attracted 50,000 participants.

Sondhi's agenda was to criticise Thaksin for corruption and for not respecting the king (on the latter, see Hewison, 2008). The royalist colouring of his movement was symbolised by the wearing of yellow shirts, associated with the king's birthday. However, Sondhi had also taken up issues around the FTAs with China and Australia (particularly after the Chiangmai protest), alleging that Thaksin had negotiated the deals for his own private interests and to the detriment of Thai farmers (*The Nation Online*, 13 January 2006). He now actively wooed FTA Watch and other NGOs to join him.

Immediately after Sondhi's first big demonstration on 4 February, Suriyasai Katasila, the secretary-general of the Campaign for Popular Democracy, announced the formation of the PAD with an aim to oust Thaksin. According to Suriyasai, the PAD was formed by 40 organisations representing "academics, businessmen, farmers, urban poor, non-government organisations, labour and students" (Supalak and Subhatra, 2006). The PAD's leadership consisted of five men: Sondhi Limthongkul; so-called Dharma Army leader and former Bangkok governor and one of the 1992 democracy movement's leaders Chamlong Srimuang; President of Campaign for Popular Democracy Phipop Thongchai; the veteran trade unionist Somsak Kosaisuk; and university lecturer Somkiat Phongpaiboon; with Suriyasai as co-ordinator.

The contradictory nature of the PAD coalition was epitomised by the debate around the demand for royal intervention and the reference to Clause 7 of the 1997 Constitution (see Connors, 2008). This was highly contested from the onset, and was

one of the reasons for the hesitation of many grassroots organisations to join the PAD. Because of general scepticism about Sondhi Limthongkul who was seen as a royalist conservative, some groups decided not to join the PAD at all (e.g. some smaller student groups and the Thai Labour Campaign). The important activist network known as the Assembly of the Poor also did not join. Its position was that the organisation was created around concrete problems such as large development projects and so was not directly involved in “politics.” After long discussion, it was decided that the Assembly as a whole would not actively support the PAD, but that individual groups of the network could, which they did.

Even so, many organised activist groups and social movements did join with Sondhi to create the PAD. This was based on the consensus that the demand for Thaksin’s resignation, and not the demand for royal intervention, was the unifying element. The Midnight University, Phipob Thongchai and the Student Federation of Thailand were among those within the PAD who publicly rejected the demand for royal intervention, and initially at least, calls for royal intervention to oust Thaksin did not form an official consensus position of the PAD (see Piyamiton, 2006).

The first big rally of the new alliance on 11 February 2006 reflected the broad spectrum of the movement. Apart from senators, such as Kraisaak Choonhavan and Chirmsak Pinthong, and politicians, such as the former Palang Dharma Party leader Chaiwat Sinsuwong, speakers included state enterprise trade union leaders Phien Yong-nu and Somsak Kosaisuk, Angkhana Neelapaichit (the wife of abducted, presumed murdered, lawyer Somchai Neelapaichit), Supinya Klangnarong, Secretary-General for the Campaign for Media Reform and Kochawan Chaibutr, the Secretary-General of the Students Federation of Thailand. Notably, Sondhi Limthongkul was restrained in his calls for royal intervention, focusing instead on Thaksin’s use of power for personal profit, his alleged tax evasion, and the sell-off of “national assets” – Shin Corp operated most of Thailand’s satellite communications – to a foreign country (see the account in *The Nation Online*, 11 February, 2006). Other issues addressed at the rallies were the negative social effects of the FTA with Australia, media censorship and violence in southern Thailand (*The Nation Online*, 11 February 2006).

For the first time during Thaksin’s period in government, a mass movement was articulating different criticisms against him at the same place and time. Previously, he had tended to face criticism on single issues. Moreover, the public and mass nature of the criticism, broke through the previous apathy and fear that Thaksin’s powerful hold on the media and government had generated, and opened up space for politicisation and self-organisation. The single issues became connected to each other through the common demand for Thaksin’s resignation. Students were now protesting side by side with state enterprise unionists, and listening to speeches about the violence in the south. A new self-confidence was born out of a mass movement, where previously, solutions to particular problems had seemed unattainable because of Thaksin’s dominating position.

A range of protests ensued. School students developed initiatives, university campus demonstrations were held, women’s marches were organised, and rallies, marches and protests in towns and cities up and down the country were held. There was talk of strike action, and the countless and ongoing discussions and organising meetings meant that politics became everyday fare for hundreds of thousands of

people over a period of several weeks. In the south of the country, local PAD branches could fill sport stadiums with political meetings (Nok Parkpoom, pers. comm., Trang, 18 October 2006) and, despite martial law, students in the Muslim-dominated Pattani province could even organise a small, technically illegal, demonstration on their campus (interview, Student Federation of Thailand, Pattani, 16 October 2006).

The large demonstrations gave a focus for different groups to develop their own initiatives and self-organisation. On the eve of the 4 February demonstration, lecturers from Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Political Science signed a public declaration calling for Thaksin's resignation. After Professor Amara Pongsapich, Dean of the Faculty, supported the declaration, she was leaned on to resign by pro-Thaksin government officials in the Political Science Alumni Association. In support, faculty members threatened to resign in protest if Amara was punished (Wattana, 2006; *The Nation Online*, 7 February 2006). Meanwhile, students at Thammasat University launched a campaign to collect 50,000 signatures calling for Thaksin's resignation and Thammasat professors organised a controversial mock trial of Thaksin on his conflict of interest as prime minister and businessman. The Student Federation of Thailand kicked off the first PAD demonstration on 11 February 2006 by marching from Thammasat University to the Royal Plaza, in defiance of the government ban of the rally.

The teachers groups who had been organising mass protests against the "decentralisation of education" (Funston, 2006) also joined the movement against Thaksin. On 26 February, Uaychai Watha, a leader of the teachers' campaign against the transfer of schools to local authorities, threatened strike action if Thaksin refused to resign (*The Nation Online*, 26 February 2006). School students also became increasingly politicised, launching a new organisation called "Students for Democracy."

EGAT workers and workers from other state enterprises soon joined the anti-Thaksin protests in an organised fashion. During the second PAD demonstration on 26 February, 5000 state enterprise workers gathered in front of the Democracy Monument and threatened strike action to force Thaksin to resign (*The Nation Online*, 27 February, 2006). During the 14 March demonstration, thousands of state enterprise workers, including a large delegation of EGAT workers, marched *en masse* from Sanam Luang to Government House (as witnessed by the authors, see also *Bangkok Post Online* 17 March 2006).

Some rural networks also joined the protests. By the 4th PAD demonstration on 14 March, activists from the Southern Community Forestry Network, the Federation of Small Scale Fishers from the south, the Isan Network of Small-Scale Farmers and the Northern Peasants Federation had joined the movement (interviews, 14 March 2006).

As the movement progressed, the royalist yellow T-shirts became less evident and the protests became more active in their character, while elements of civil disobedience, such as road blocks, became more pronounced. The 14 March demonstration was no longer an extended Sondhi talk show but resulted in the blockade of Government House for many hours. The participation of organised groups became more apparent and, while some authors have argued that participation by organised labour was limited (Ji, 2007: 36), our observations on

14 March 2006 were that trade unionists from EGAT, the railways and the post offices, and teacher activists in their hundreds and thousands participated (see also *Bangkok Post Online* 17 March 2006). This demonstration brought together many groups, was not dominated by royalists and boasted a large number of self-made banners, placards and demands. The protests on 29 March blocked the Rama I road for several hours (*The Nation Online*, 29 March 2006).

The mass movement against Thaksin was not simply made up of royalist followers of Sondhi and nor was it comprised of an urban, free-market elite as suggested by Kasian (2005: 132). At least part of the movement was made up of self-organised groups of workers, students, farmers and teachers, and of political activists from social movements and NGOs. The issues that were articulated under the common demand for Thaksin to resign, from media reform to FTAs, from teachers pensions to peace in the south, were, as we will proceed to argue, interconnected and sustained through contradictions within Thaksin's project itself.

Is Thaksin an Asian Hugo Chávez?

In March 2006, the web journal "Axis of Logic" took a *New York Times* article on Thaksin, exchanged the Thai personal and place names with Venezuelan names and showed that the article on Thaksin could have been written about Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez (Axis of Logic, 2006). The reason this was possible is that both Chávez and Thaksin had adopted social programmes and nationalist economic policies that have been criticised by neo-liberal purists as economically unsound, backward and "populist." As with Chávez's "Mission Barrio Adentro" health care programme, Thaksin's tax-financed universal health coverage clashed with the World Bank models of privatised health care.³ Also, like Chávez, when Thaksin was facing recurrent mass demonstrations, his response was to mobilise his own supporters. And the masses he mobilised resembled the huge numbers of supporters who brought Chávez back into office after a short-lived *coup d'état* in 2001 in Caracas.

Faced with the evidently massive support for Thaksin, two interpretations have been made that we will discuss here. The first is that Thaksin *was* a kind of Asian Chávez, that because of his populist policies, he commanded the support of the poor, and that the opposition against him was middle class and elitist (on Thaksin as a populist, see Pasuk and Baker, 2008). The second view, dominant within the PAD itself, was that Thaksin's supporters were either duped by his media propaganda or paid to join his demonstrations; that is, Thaksin was *not* an Asian Chávez because he was not really pro-poor.

As we will now argue, both these perspectives are simplistic in that they look at certain government programmes in isolation from Thaksin's overall project. Thaksin generated *real* popular support with social programmes for the poor and a nationalist response to the Asian economic crisis. This break with the perceived wisdom of the World Bank and the IMF makes Thaksin similar to Chávez. The key difference is that Thaksin's policies were embedded within a bigger project of rapid capitalist restructuring in the interests of large Thai corporations looking for competitiveness on the global market. As we will explain in this chapter, whereas Chávez's economic policy can be described as being opposed to neo-liberal

prescriptions (Gibbs, 2006), Thaksin pursued an economic policy that might be called the post-Washington Consensus.⁴ Because of this fundamental difference in the political orientation of these two leaders, we prefer to use “post neo-liberalism” rather than “populism” as a category of analysis, despite the fact that Thaksin and Chávez show similarities in their highly personalised political style.⁵

One of the Chávez-Thaksin similarities is seen in a capacity for mobilising mass support. In early March 2006, TRT mobilised its supporters to assemble at Bangkok’s Sanam Luang to show their support for the TRT government. Rumours circulated that the people who joined the demonstration were paid 300 or 500 baht (as an example, see *The Nation*, 4 March 2006). Such rumours were never substantiated, and the 200,000 turnout and the enthusiasm for the prime minister demonstrated genuine mass support. People came from all over Thailand and from all walks of life, but the vast majority were farmers, small business people and workers, including a significant group of motorcycle taxi drivers. Despite self-comforting arguments by leaders of the anti-Thaksin protests and their sympathetic press that the Thaksin supporters were ignorant, gullible or bought, the Thaksin supporters had good arguments for their position.

During the demonstration, we talked to participants who had come to Bangkok on their own accord and usually in an organised fashion. Some were rural folk, farmers or small traders, others were workers and management from the Rangsit industrial area or from small rural-based factories, but they were all able to give coherent answers as to why they were there (interviews, Sanam Luang, 3 March 2006). The key arguments, again and again, were that Thaksin was a prime minister who actually helped the poor, with the 30 baht health programme, the one million baht community fund, and other development projects. Argument that Thaksin and his government were corrupt typically elicited the response that many former prime ministers were also corrupt.

Thaksin’s rural support, apart from the impressive turnout to his election campaigns in scores of provincial towns, was symbolised by the “Caravan of the Poor,” a trek of several thousand farmers from the north-east who travelled to Bangkok on foot or on self-constructed tractors. The picture of poor farmers marching to Bangkok used to be the monopoly of anti-government, grassroots movements.⁶ The fact that the same symbolism was used successfully by pro-Thaksin forces is significant. Even more so the fact that the Caravan was led by ex-leaders of the Assembly of the Poor (Luen Sichampho, pers. comm., 16 March 2006).

The point is that Thaksin’s support was real because his rural and pro-poor policies were real too. The debt-restructuring scheme, the one million baht community fund, the 30 baht health programme, and government-funded infrastructure projects had a noticeable effect on people’s lives. The key ideas for these projects came from farmer leaders and aligned progressive academics, some of whom were also incorporated into the TRT government. Former student and NGO activists in Thaksin’s cabinet included Adisorn Piengkes (Deputy Minister for Agriculture); Chaturon Chaisaeng (Minister for Education); Sora-at Klinpratoom (Minister for Information and Communication Technology); and Phumtham Vej Jayachai (Deputy Minister for Transport and Deputy Secretary-General of TRT). Pasuk and Baker (2004: 81) told the tale of how much of Thaksin’s rural programme was adapted from a three-page fax sent to him by a former student

activist from the 1970s. Kasian (2002: 339) put it succinctly: "...Thaksin's 'populism' was actually begotten by a bunch of ex-communist guerrillas and former student activists among his close aides...". Thaksin's reforms, therefore, represented a serious attempt to incorporate part of the NGOs and social movements into his hegemonic project by taking up some of their demands and offering a consensus based around a new social contract (Hewison, 2003a: 13).

A second similarity apparent in Chávez and Thaksin is their orientation to economic nationalism. Chávez invoked the wrath of the USA by re-nationalising the oil industry and other key sectors of economy. Early in his government's term, Thaksin was criticised by mainstream neo-liberal economists and journalists as representing a revival of protectionist nationalism (cf. Glassman, 2004: 37-8 for a summary of this criticism). It is clear that TRT's election in 2001 was won on a groundswell of popular nationalist reaction to the IMF policies implemented by the Chuan Leekpai government in response to the economic crisis (see Hewison, 2003a). Kasian (2002: 331-5) argued that the 1997 crisis led the middle classes to turn towards nationalism, and that they, together with the "Octobrists," the "Senior Citizens" and "entrepreneurs" formed various "ad hoc loose nationalist groupings" that campaigned against the IMF loan conditionalities and the takeover of formerly Thai-owned businesses by foreign corporations.⁷

As Hewison (2003a: 5) noted, the Democrats, who implemented the standard IMF prescriptions of "privatisation, regulatory reform, liberalisation, improved corporate governance, and further foreign investment" (including, for example, the Foreign Business Act of March 2000, which opened up key sectors to majority foreign ownership) were seen by the politicised populace as IMF stooges. Thaksin, and his aptly named party, was able to exploit this by promising to free Thailand from foreign IMF dominance and by promising that privatised state enterprises would be offered only to Thais (Dixon, 2004: 47, 62).

Thaksin's anti-IMF stance, apart from being a key marketing plank of his election campaign, was based on the support of Thai big business groups, including some of the country's biggest conglomerates, such as the Charoen Phokphand (CP) group and the Bangkok Bank, as well as smaller, export-orientated companies.⁸ Once in power, he broke with the IMF-line followed by the Chuan government. These policies used the crisis as an opportunity to allow foreign multinationals to buy up domestic companies and to let "uncompetitive" businesses go to the wall. Key state interventions in debt restructuring and support programmes for small and medium enterprises helped key sections of Thai capital to recoup and to again engage in the global market (Glassman, 2004: 46-9).

These interventions were quite successful, both in terms of economic recovery and also in preventing a general take-over of Thai businesses by transnational corporations (TNCs) (Dixon, 2004). In July 2003, Thaksin triumphantly declared the repayment of the IMF loan, two years ahead of schedule, and, standing against the background of a huge Thai flag, proclaimed Thailand's "independence from the IMF." Many of the pro-Thaksin demonstrators specified his stand against the IMF as one of their key reasons for supporting him (interviews, Sanam Luang, 3 March 2006).⁹

Although Thaksin was criticised by mainstream neo-liberal economists and journalists as representing a revival of protectionist nationalism (Glassman, 2004: 37-8), Thaksin's project was radically different from Chávez's. While the latter

addresses the problem of social inequality by means of a policy of redistribution that confronts elite interests, Thaksin represents big business, with “a government by and for the rich” (Hewison, 2003a: 9). As Kasian (2002: 339) put it: “Through him, the crony capitalists, especially the telecommunications, media, auto manufacturing and agribusiness oligarchic interests, who are strongly represented in his cabinet and party, have won back their state.” In addition, Thaksin’s form of economic nationalism is different from that pursued by Chávez. Rather than challenging the Washington Consensus by increasing the economic role of the state and integrating an “anti-imperialist” nationalism within a broader internationalist strategy as Chávez has done (Gibbs, 2006), Thaksin was not motivated by a principled rejection of the key components of neo-liberalism, but by an opportunistic reaction of key sections of Thai business to compete successfully within a broad neo-liberal paradigm.

As Glassman (2004: 59) argued, “TRT’s economic nationalism is not only not an effort to construct a highly auto-centred or closed-door (and especially not state-owned) economy. It is not even an attempt to resurrect anything like import-substitution industrialization.” Instead, he characterised Thaksin’s economic policy as mildly Keynesian, emphasising state social and economic support programmes rather than neo-liberal austerity and as a “geographically expansionist neo-mercantilist project,” involving export-orientated industrialisation supported by state intervention (Glassman, 2004: 60). A similar point was made by Brown and Hewison (2005), who analysed TRT “dual track development strategy” as a strategy to protect domestic capital after the shock of the Asian crisis in order to allow its restructuring with the ultimate aim to develop a more competitive economy. The crafting of a “new social contract,” as Hewison (2003b) analysed Thaksin’s social programmes, served as a tool to guarantee social stability which was needed for the process of restructuring – a policy subordinate to the ultimate aim of developing better competitiveness for the global market (Brown and Hewison, 2005: 361).

The big business agenda of Thaksin’s regime was reflected by the endorsement of his election victory in 2005 by key business spokesmen (*Bangkok Post Online*, 7 and 8 February 2005). Corporate representatives also held back throughout the protests, only offering their concern that political stability might be compromised if they continued.

Thaksin’s policy fits into the paradigm of what has been called “post neo-liberal,” which is also reflected in the World Bank’s recent attention to better “balance elite-driven reforms and popular pressure” but which does not go beyond “poverty management within the [neo-liberal] paradigm” (Gibbs, 2006: 266). Gibbs cast doubt on this new political orientation, noting that “it is not clear how they intend to marry their dual goals of promoting market-oriented reform, including ongoing privatisation, with increasing participation by the poor and ‘subordinate’ groups.” It is this difficult marriage that is one of the key contradictions inherent in Thaksin’s project.¹⁰

Internal Contradictions of Thaksin’s Project

The crucial point about Thaksin’s “post neo-liberal” paradigm is that neo-liberal principles actually remained unchallenged and were pursued with force. In fact, as

we will discuss in detail in this section, Thaksin pursued a lot of policies that were basic tenets of neo-liberalism with considerable vigour, and contradicted the “social contract” he offered to the poor. These contradictions gradually unfolded in the course of his premiership. Not, as often criticised by neo-liberal ideologues, between “unsustainable” state-funded projects and fiscal prudence, but between Thaksin’s ambitious capitalist restructuring of economic and social relations in the interest of big business, and the interests of his popular base. We argue that it was precisely these internal contradictions that laid the foundation for the mass movement against Thaksin and his TRT government.

Agriculture

The internal contradictions within Thaksin’s overall project can be illustrated in one of his flagship policies. The rural development programmes, particularly the one million baht per community programme and debt restructuring schemes were not part of a redistribution policy for the poor against the rich, but aimed to accelerate a major capitalist restructuring of agriculture and to lessen the hardships this caused (i.e. “post neo-liberal”). Parallel to debt restructuring, credit programmes, the promotion of local products and help to local infrastructure, Thaksin was basically committed to the capital-intensive, export-orientated “success” story of Thai agriculture and sought to promote this model.

An important symbol of Thaksin’s agricultural policies was his close collaboration with the agribusiness giant CP, and the appointment of Wattana Muengsuk, the son-in-law of CP’s chairman Dhanin Chearavanont, as minister of Commerce (and later Social Development). Under the TRT government, CP Foods, the keystone agribusiness company of the group, received five- or ten-year exemptions on income tax on 29 major projects including feedmills, broiler and chicken farms, shrimp hatcheries and processing plants (CP Foods n.d.: 20-1). Despite the bird flu scare, exports of processed chicken and duck – key CP businesses – doubled under Thaksin, as did pork and shrimp exports (CP Foods, n.d.: 25-31). CP Foods also expanded its global reach during this period, with new subsidiaries in Britain, China, Europe and the USA (CP Foods, n.d.: 94-6).

In addition to TRT promotion of agribusiness itself, the flow of easy credit accelerated the long-term structural transformation of agriculture away from independent smallholders to capital intensive production, aimed, as Thaksin was keen to reiterate, to change farmers into “entrepreneurs.” With the possibilities of higher returns promising an escape from poverty, the trend towards monoculture crops and high-cost inputs such as herbicides, fertilizers and hybrid seed increased. The capital-intensive transformation was epitomised by the expansion of contract-farming, which was pioneered by CP, the latter now having tens of thousands of corn, maize, rice, chicken, broiler, duck, and swine farmers under contract to buy CP inputs and to sell cash crops to CP specifications (see Delforge, 2007).

TRT’s community fund and debt-restructuring schemes were important capital sources for farmers and not only agribusiness profited. However, not everybody had an equal share in the benefits. According to research by Delforge (2007), contract broiler farmers earned an average of only 3500 baht per month (for two workers) in 2004 and, in general, rice farmers did not benefit from higher volumes of rice exports

(which increased to over seven million tons under Thaksin). According to Jacques-Chai (2004: 24), farm-gate paddy prices actually dropped in real terms, from 4663 baht/ton in 1996 to 3667 baht/ton in 2003.

Although Thaksin's easy credit was a godsend to farmers in the grip of loan sharks and assisted some in business start-ups, it could not solve the general problem of indebtedness. Rather, in connection with the promotion of capital-intensive production, debt increased. If 60% of rural households were indebted in 1994/1995, with an average debt of 37,000 baht, this increased to 68,000 baht in 2003 (with the same percentage of indebted households, National Statistical Office Thailand, n.d.). For many Thaksin opponents, the easy credit policy was seen to exacerbate indebtedness, and they criticised farmers for rushing to buy consumer goods such as motorcycles and mobile phones.¹¹

TRT's promotion of export-orientated agriculture – monoculture crops; high-cost inputs such as herbicides, fertilizers and hybrid seed; commercial orientation and corporate-dominated market and production structures such as contract farming – increased the profits of agribusiness but also contributed to high indebtedness, land concentration and the general demise of the independent small-scale farmer. Thaksin and TRT were not interested in alternatives propagated by NGOs and small-scale farmer networks such as integrated, subsistence-orientated agriculture, community forestry and certainly not in agrarian reform. For this reason, organised farmer networks under the Assembly of the Poor umbrella were soon in opposition to Thaksin.

Land concentration led to a new wave of protests and organising, polarising the situation in some rural areas in 2004. In the south, the Southern Land Reform for the Poor Network (SLRP), with a claimed membership of 10,000, organised protests in February, August, October and December, demanding that expired large-scale palm oil concessions be divided up among landless and farmers with little land (Supara, 2004). In the north, partly inspired by the Brazilian landless movement (MST), a wave of land occupations that started before TRT came to power in Lamphun in 2000, spread rapidly under TRT to 27 different places, despite increased repression of this movement by the government (Rangsan, 2006).

TRT's domestic agrarian policy had a counterpart in the consistent movement towards free trade. As an agrarian exporter whose trade positions are influenced directly by the giant agribusinesses like CP, Thailand has long supported trade liberalisation (and was, for example, a member of the Cairns group in the World Trade Organisation). However, under Thaksin, this support for trade liberalisation was taken to new levels. Bilateral and regional FTAs, successfully concluded with Australia and with ASEAN/China, have had negative effects on small-scale farmers. In October 2003, Thailand and China bilaterally accelerated the "Early Harvest Agreement" of a regional FTA, and completely eliminated tariffs on fruit and vegetables. This led to a massive drop in prices for garlic and onions in Thailand, leading to severe difficulties and even bankruptcies for farmers in the north (Pye and Coghlan, 2004). The negotiations for an FTA with Australia led to protests by Thai dairy farmers in June 2004, and to accusations that Thaksin was sacrificing the livelihoods of tens of thousands of dairy farmers in exchange for the liberalisation of Australia's telecommunications industry that would directly benefit Thaksin's Shin Corp (Moxham, 2004).

As noted above, experience with the ASEAN-China FTA, and then the opening of negotiations around an FTA with the USA in 2004 led to the formation of FTA Watch.¹² Although opposition to FTAs was limited initially due to a widespread acceptance of the basic neo-liberal logic behind free trade, with the first demonstration against the US-Thai FTA attracting only 300 people, the anti-FTA coalition developed its educational and networking work in ways that bore fruit in early 2006 when the issue of FTAs became a key element of attacks on the TRT government and with anti-FTA groups taking a significant role in the anti-Thaksin movement. Much of the strength of this attack was based on FTA Watch's attention to negative impacts on farmers.

Health Politics

Another key contradiction of Thaksin's political agenda was in the area of health care. The 30 baht health scheme was tax financed and offered affordable health care for every citizen in hospitals which take part in the programme – mostly public hospitals. The health programme was one of TRT's main appealing campaign planks and remained so throughout its time in government. Indeed, huge posters proclaiming that every illness would be treated for 30 baht could be seen all over Bangkok in the run-up to the snap elections in April 2006.

Parallel to the implementation of the 30 baht scheme, however, Thaksin launched an export promotion of health care services under the title "medical hub project" to lure rich foreign patients to Thailand for medical treatment. The initiative was so successful that the number of foreign patients increased from 500,000 in 2001 to over a million in 2005 (*The Nation Online*, 13 February and 4 April 2006) generating revenues of some 33 billion baht and establishing Thailand as Asia's number one destination for foreign patients even before Singapore (Cha-aim and Suwit, 2006: 313).

Under Thaksin's contradictory policies, the chronic underfunding of public hospitals and the effect that the best medical staff took up better paid job offers from private hospitals led to a large-scale exodus of medical doctors from public hospitals, especially in rural areas.¹³ This "internal brain drain" led to a widening cleavage within the health sector and brought about a paradoxical situation: at the same time when the universal coverage of the 30 baht scheme was implemented, patients with serious diseases who could not afford to go to hospital before, could now go, but would not find a doctor to treat them (Cha-aim and Suwit, 2006). That is why critics of the 30 baht programme re-named it as the 30 baht scheme to cure *some* illnesses, rather than as the government proclaimed it, the 30 baht scheme to cure *all* diseases.

Such criticism goes beyond the early opposition to TRT's 30 baht scheme raised in 2000 and 2001, which focused on financial sustainability. These critics called the scheme "unsustainable" because it was not clear whether the government could afford the expenditure, thus implicitly accepting the IMF and World Bank ideology of a lean state. Criticising it as dysfunctional because of the internal contradictions between a redistributive state-organised health scheme and the export-orientated promotion of health services is a more fundamental critique as it also targets neo-liberal dogma.

The contradictions in the health care scheme are particularly grievous for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLHA). Although their treatment with anti-retroviral

(ARV) drugs was also covered by the state health system – an achievement of the Thaksin administration which made Thailand a shining example in the developing world as far as treatment of HIV/AIDS is concerned – the access to drugs came under attack as a side effect of the Thaksin government's trade policy.

As we have already noted, a central TRT economic project was FTAs. Especially significant was the US-Thai Free Trade Agreement negotiations, initiated at the 2003 APEC summit in Bangkok. The stringent intellectual property rights being demanded by US negotiators during the FTA talks went beyond the already restrictive Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement of the WTO and would have severely restricted the Thai government's pharmaceutical company in its ability to produce affordable generic drugs, including ARV drugs. If put into force, the FTA would have undermined the health care scheme and effectively cut off PLHA from access to treatment with affordable ARVs (Jiraporn, 2005).

The resistance to Thaksin's free trade policies by the PLHA has its roots in a campaign for access to ARV drugs which, during the years 1999-2002, brought together a broad coalition of NGOs, activists and concerned individuals in a legal struggle to revoke a patent on one ARV drug.¹⁴ When, in October 2003, FTA Watch was formed, the PLHA network became an integral part of it.

The Media

Another sector where the internal contradictions of the Thaksin system emerged was the media. The most prominent example was the libel suit taken out by Thaksin against Supinya Klangnarong, Secretary-General of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform, who suggested a connection between the prime minister's policies and the huge increase in profits of Shin Corp in an article in the newspaper *Thai Post*, claiming that Shin Corp's profits soared by almost 40 billion baht between 2001 and 2003 (*Thai Post*, 16 July 2003). Thaksin sued her and three editors of *Thai Post* for 400 million baht compensation in an apparent attempt to silence a critical voice that had dared to challenge the prime minister's cronyism and nepotism. Supinya regularly appeared on stage at the anti-Thaksin rallies and her struggle was often portrayed as a brave and personalised stand for the liberty of expression. However, her case was the expression of a much deeper conflict with the question of how to organise democratic media control at its core. This issue had been highly contested at least since 1992, when a blackout of pro-democracy demonstrations and the violence in the streets of Bangkok in May 1992 demonstrated the extent of state control of the media and its ability to manipulate public communication to a large extent (Ubonrat, 2001: 90-1).

The establishment of iTV in 1996 as an independent TV channel was the direct outcome of this struggle. Its statutes defined it as an independent news station with no more than 30% entertainment programme at prime time, and a limitation that private shareholders would not be allowed to hold more than 10% of the company. iTV developed into a popular channel with investigative journalism, independent news coverage and set new standards for new reporting (Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 149). A second outcome of the post-1992 struggle were Articles 39 to 41 in the 1997 Constitution which guaranteed freedom of expression and defined frequencies as a public property that would be allocated by an independent regulatory body.

However, the economic difficulties created by the Asian crisis permitted an alliance of state agencies and newly established private media companies to alter iTV's statutes in a way that paved the way for a take-over of iTV by Shin Corp between 2000 and 2003 (see Ubonrat, 2001: 93). Thaksin's ultimate goal was to reshape iTV as an entertainment channel and to expand his telecommunication empire into the rapidly growing entertainment business (see McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 47ff.; Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 218ff.). Reshaping iTV as a profit-making entertainment channel followed a pattern typical of Thaksin's use of his government's power to promote his family's economic interests: After Shin Corp had acquired the majority of the stake in 2001, in early 2004 the licence fees were lowered to a fraction of the existing level and the restriction on the proportion of entertainment at prime time was circumvented by simply redefining prime time (see Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 119-20). With this new favourable framework, iTV was listed on the stock exchange and generated considerable profits (McCargo and Ukrist, 2005: 50; Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 219-20).

Taking over iTV and reshaping it into a commercial channel served Thaksin's project in two respects: first, in a purely commercial sense, Thaksin achieved the diversification of Shin Corp and the convergence of telecommunication and media as a strategic move of his own business empire. Secondly, he knew that media control was important to gain command of public opinion and to create the political stability and government longevity needed to achieve his overall economic project (Brown and Hewison, 2005: 360). As many as 23 critical editors of iTV were fired immediately after Thaksin took over the majority of the shares in 2001, which was only one detail of a broad offensive against critical media coverage (Pasuk and Baker, 2004: 149ff.).

If the incidents in May 1992 were the proof that state control prevents independent and critical journalism, then the ascent of Thaksin as a media tycoon was proof that private ownership of the media could have the very same effect. Against this background, the libel suit against Supinya can be seen as an attack on the Campaign for Popular Media Reform, an outspoken NGO, that had repeatedly criticised the stalemate in the nomination process for the proposed National Broadcasting Commission, the regulatory body for frequencies introduced by the 1997 Constitution (*Bangkok Post Online*, 25 December 2004). For companies like Shin Corp, which were seeking to monopolise the media, this Commission was seen as a threat (Ubonrat, 2004).

Other Issues

If the contradiction between pro-poor programmes and a neo-liberal capitalist agenda were evident in flagship areas such as agriculture, health and media, active opposition to Thaksin was more pronounced in other areas, particularly with regard to labour and to policies implemented by the government in the deep south of Thailand.

Brown and Hewison (2005) have already analysed the conflict between capital, state and labour under Thaksin. One of the key planks of economic liberalisation that Thaksin soon embraced was the privatisation of state enterprises. This policy led to a major confrontation with the state enterprise unions over the privatisation of the

Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT). In February 2004, the government announced plans to privatise EGAT by registering it as a public company on the stock exchange. EGAT workers reacted with demonstrations involving tens of thousands, road blockades, extended “absences from work” and the “patriotic leave from work,” and even storming government house.¹⁵ Their protest was one of the most forceful and militant in recent years and, as Brown and Hewison (2005: 373) pointed out, led to political opposition to the TRT at a time when most of the other social movements were still intimidated and paralysed by the violent oppression of Thaksin’s “war on drugs” campaign. Pien Yongnu, Chairman of the Network of Power and Water Utilities for the Country and the Public, stated that “from now on we will be an enemy of the Thai Rak Thai Party.” At issue was not only expected deterioration of pay and working conditions, but also wider questions of public control and access to water and electricity and conflicts of interest involved in the sale of the shares of privatised enterprises. Their protests attracted widespread solidarity from other state enterprise employees, who felt they might be next in line for privatisation. Finally, the government had to back down. However, in February 2005, Thaksin, getting overly confident after his landslide victory, announced that the listing of EGAT and other state enterprises on the stock exchange would be stepped up, adding that, given TRT’s voter mandate “we won’t tolerate pressure against the privatisation policy” (*Bangkok Post*, 8 February 2005). As we have seen, state enterprise workers joined the anti-Thaksin movement over this issue.

Critics who had identified a lack of democracy due to the increased corporate domination of politics and control of the media under Thaksin saw this as accompanying an increasingly authoritarian and repressive form of rule. This was particularly severe in the south, where Thaksin’s “hawkish approach” (Ukrist, 2006: 73) against insurgents escalated a simmering conflict.¹⁶ While this is not the place to go into detail regarding the southern conflict, it is worth pointing out that while the south had long been a stronghold of the opposition Democrat Party, the escalating conflict led to a widespread rejection of the TRT government in the south.

Already in 2003, Thaksin’s otherwise widely popular “war on drugs” campaign was met by a demonstration in Pattani, as extra-judicial killings by the police and army, the use of blacklists and the increased powers of the police were seen as directed against the Muslim majority in that area (Croissant, 2005: 34-5). After a massacre of people identified by the military as insurgents in the Krue Se mosque in April 2004 and the death of 78 people following a demonstration at Tak Bai (Ukrist, 2006: 75), a pattern of civil disobedience emerged. For example, in September 2005, hundreds of women of Ban Tanyonglimo in Narathiwat Province blocked the military from entering their village, while two soldiers suspected of killing local villagers were held and subsequently killed. One sign read: “Evil has spread since Thaksin’s party came to power. Ethnic Malay people have been cruelly killed by soldiers. They are the real terrorists” (*The Nation Online*, 7 September 2005). In February 2006, 300 villagers took 32 teachers hostage to force the release of a local imam, arrested on trumped-up charges (*The Nation Online*, 11 February 2006).

The issue of state violence in the south not only featured prominently in all PAD demonstrations, but also gave rise to anti-Thaksin demonstrations in the south, as well as participation by grassroots organisations (such as the Federation of

Small-Scale Fishers of the South and the Southern Community Forestry Network) at the protests in Bangkok. The southern electoral chickens came home to roost when, in the boycotted April 2006 election, TRT failed to gain the minimum 20% of the vote required in 38 constituencies (out of a national total of 400). These southern constituencies became centrepieces in the decision to annul the election.

Royal Interventions

As we have argued above, the PAD was a broad alliance. One section of the alliance, led by Sondhi, had a limited, elite agenda to get rid of Thaksin by royal intervention. The common, unifying slogan, “Thaksin *ok pai*” (Thaksin Get Out!), was this group’s programme, and having the king replace Thaksin with his own man as interim prime minister was their favoured means to this end. A large part of the alliance, in contrast, had very concrete agendas and demands (no patenting of medicines via FTAs, pensions, land reform, the situation in the south, democratic media, etc.) that were represented and unified by the common slogan, but which had no similar means of accomplishment.

The PAD managed to unite a wide range of different movements and groups that had not protested together before. This was the strength of the PAD. In a space of a few weeks, many of the protesting groups could achieve more than in previous months or even years of campaigning. Thaksin and TRT were weakened by the movement that provided space for the government’s privatisation policy to be challenged, for Supinya’s libel suit to be quashed in court on 15 March 2006 and, at the end of March 2006, for the Supreme Administrative Court to revoke two Royal Decrees that had laid the basis for EGAT’s privatisation in 2005 (*The Nation Online*, 26 February 2006; Nantiya, 2006).

The unifying force of the PAD demand for Thaksin’s resignation also had its weaknesses. One was the question of how to force Thaksin to resign. As the protests went on, it became increasingly clear that he would not just bow to the opposition; indeed, Thaksin retook the initiative by mobilising his supporters and calling new elections. The reaction of the PAD was to expand the mass campaign of civil disobedience into the electoral arena. Going beyond an endorsement of weak “opposition” parties such as the Democrats (who bowed to PAD pressure not to stand for election) or a passive boycott of the new elections, the PAD organised a hugely successful, active “No” vote, in which ten million no votes were cast against Thaksin and – in a turnabout from the initial PAD consensus not to seek royal intervention – the group called for the king to intervene and to replace Thaksin with an interim prime minister.

In their 6th declaration on 23 March, the PAD called a demonstration for 25 March, with, for the first time, the demand for royal intervention based on Article 7 of the constitution as the “only way to solve the national crisis” and to initiate a “process of political reform” (PAD, 2006).

Does this call for royal intervention justify the characterisation of the PAD as an elite, royalist movement? Does the fact that the PAD as a whole accepted this demand imply that Sondhi’s faction won out within the alliance? We would argue that the demand for royal intervention was a concrete tactical option to overcome the crisis. It was not a statement for a return to an undemocratic political order

(i.e. a general call for prime ministers to be royally appointed or for a return to military dictatorship). This can be seen, for example, by the fact that the same 6th declaration also included demands that an interim government should stop FTA negotiations with the USA and stop privatising public utilities.

Interestingly, where Ji (2007: 36), suggested that Sondhi Limthongkul dominated the other sections of PAD and that only “middle class” or neo-liberal criticisms of Thaksin were articulated by PAD, the PAD took up critical issues that were clearly directed against neo-liberalism. Indeed, it seems to us that Sondhi’s media was pushed to take up issues raised by the social movements and NGOs associated with PAD. For example, the 24 February special edition of the *Manager Daily* criticised Thaksin on a range of issues, including for not paying taxes on the sale of Shin Corp (considered a question of social justice), for using his political power to benefit himself and his family and friends, for his heavy-handed violence in the south, and for the “free trade madness” of his FTAs. The 30 baht programme was criticised not because it was tax-funded but because of under funding and because of the brain drain to the private hospitals in Bangkok.

As we have pointed out, FTA Watch became a prominent player in the anti-Thaksin protests, with a continuous presence by activists who made sure most of the demonstrators had leaflets and “Stop FTA” flags. There were systematic attempts to formulate more grassroots perspectives. In a pamphlet produced jointly by NGO-COD, FTA Watch and PAD (2006), for example, not only was Thaksin alleged to have engaged in massive tax evasion, the massacres at Krue Se and Tak Bai were linked to his policies and claimed to be threats to democracy, and the call for political reform was linked to a range of rural demands such as land reform, alternative agriculture and community-controlled natural resource management.

The call for royal intervention was, for many PAD supporters, merely invoking past experiences of the king intervening against dictatorial regimes in 1973 and 1992. At the time, many of these supporters were unable to propose any other concrete alternative to royal intervention. Key critics of the PAD argued that the alternative to demonstrating for Thaksin’s resignation was to contest elections (e.g. Supalak, 2006; and, retrospectively, Somchai Preechasilpakul¹⁷). Given Thaksin’s electoral power and control of the media at that time, however, the majority of activists involved in the PAD did not see this as being a viable option under the circumstances. Fighting Thaksin in a new round of elections would have been fighting him on his turf, one where his party machine, wealth and media influence would have ensured a defeat for the movement. In addition, the idea of fighting elections rather misses the point that part of PAD’s protestation was about the corporate undermining of a formally democratic system.

While there was some discussion of the option of direct democracy and of “people’s power,” this remained a minority position within the movement.¹⁸ The lack of this kind of independent strategy meant that the longer Thaksin stayed in power, the more attractive an intervention by the king seemed to members of the anti-Thaksin movement.

Demanding and then waiting for royal intervention meant that as soon as that intervention came there was an abrupt end to the PAD as an independent movement. In his speech on 25 April 2006, the king suggested that the courts annul the election of 2 April, but he also rejected the PAD’s call for a royally instated prime minister,

calling this demand “undemocratic” and “irrational” (*The Nation Online*, 27 April 2006). The double nature of the king’s intervention is clear from these comments. On the one hand, he intervened against Thaksin, on the other hand, he made sure that an independent, mass campaign of political disobedience did not continue.

The *coup d’état* of 19 September is indeed a repeat of this royal intervention, but this time backed by military force, after Thaksin refused to back down (reneging on his promise to step down if the king “whispered” to him). The *coup* fulfilled the main demand of the PAD to get rid of Thaksin and, on this basis, the *coup* was certainly enthusiastically supported by the elite section of the PAD around Sondhi. For many of the others associated with PAD, the *coup* seemed to be an unfortunate but necessary solution to an ongoing crisis. However, the deeper reasons for the emergence of the mass movement against Thaksin that were located in the internal contradictions of his “post-neoliberal” corporate project, will not be solved by the *coup*.

Conclusion

Any analysis of the anti-Thaksin movement needs to take account of the dynamics inherent in such a mass movement. Initially led by Sondhi Limthongkul, and exploding onto the streets after Thaksin’s sale of Shin Corp, the protests quickly broadened their social base and the issues they raised. Although there is a clear demarcation in terms of elite conflict, with the “network monarchy” against Thaksin-friendly big business, the generalisations about the movement being “middle class” and opposed to the rural poor do not, as we have explained above, do justice to the complexities of the issues involved. As we have argued, the internal contradictions within Thaksin’s project led to dissatisfaction and active opposition by different groups of society and at different times. This dissatisfaction was both rural and urban, and involved economic, social, political and cultural issues.

One of the greatest achievements of the anti-Thaksin movement, apart from concrete successes, such as the postponement of FTA talks or the halting of EGAT’s privatisation, was to bring these social and economic issues together with a political criticism of Thaksin’s regime. The misuse of political power for private economic gain was the predominant theme, of course, but the corporate undermining of free and democratic media, symbolised by Supinya’s successful fight against the libel charge, was also highly significant. And the fact that Angkhana Neelapaichit could speak to tens of thousands of people in Bangkok was immensely important in connecting the criticism of Thaksin’s repression in the south with the situation of the people in the rest of Thailand.

The involvement of grassroots networks and social movements in the PAD was crucial to expand the criticism of Thaksin to include deeper political and social issues such as repression in the south and FTAs. However, this independent role within the alliance was not coupled with an independent strategy of how to push for those demands. No clear strategy of “people’s power” was developed and no plan for generalising political civil disobedience in the form of strike action, occupations, or of re-appropriating public resources and space emerged. Accepting Sondhi’s call for royal intervention, then, gave the initiative back to conflicting elite factions. The “people” were put back into a spectator’s seat.

The *coup d'état* in September was the fulfilment of the elite opposition to Thaksin – but it was also directed *against* independent grassroots mobilisation. For the “network monarchy,” the political crisis had to be resolved in the interest of political stability, and it was therefore no coincidence that the *coup* took place the evening before the PAD was planning to resume its protests. Although they have been keen to portray themselves as merely executing the people’s will, in the first few months of military dictatorship, the generals showed themselves to be in contradiction to social and political aspirations of many in the anti-Thaksin movement. Their agenda is not more popular democracy, but rather, less democracy. On a policy level, they have made concessions to demands of the mass movement (for example by issuing compulsory licensing for anti-retroviral drugs or their plans to re-nationalise iTV as a public broadcasting company) but in general they have been following Thaksin’s basic “extended neo-liberal agenda”, for example by signing the FTA with Japan.

If an independent but unified formation of the grassroots movements was lacking during the PAD protests, an important step in this direction took place shortly after the *coup*. During 21-3 October, the Thai Social Forum (TSF) was held despite the military ban on political gatherings. It brought together 70 organisations and thousands of participants. Apart from the usual diversity of workshops and meetings, the gathering was significant for the consensus declaration it issued and the fact that this was read out by former Senator Jon Ungpakorn at the Democracy Monument on Ratchadamnoen Avenue before the commencement of a short illegal demonstration against the *coup*.

The TSF (2006) declaration *A New Just World can be Built by the People* is a kind of “transitional programme” that draws together key demands of the anti-Thaksin movement, including those working for peace in the south, media reform and public referenda on FTAs. It goes beyond PAD’s agenda by combining well-known rural alternatives (such as community control over natural resources and land reform) with the demand that the next constitution specifies that Thailand is a welfare state. Pensions, health care and unemployment benefit are demanded as social rights to be paid for by taxing the rich (i.e. through capital, property and inheritance tax). Without mentioning Thaksin or the *coup* directly, the declaration also stresses democratic participation that goes beyond parliamentary elections and the self-activity of the people themselves and that “social, economic and political reform is something that the people must and can do themselves” (Thai Social Forum, 2006). This could be an important starting point for a new mass movement for democracy and social justice in Thailand.

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Notes

¹ Ji Ungpakorn (2006: 1) implied this by characterising the protests as a “conservative royalist movement.”

² The authors spent several weeks in Thailand during the mass movement against Thaksin in February and March 2006, and again during the *coup d'état* and the Thai Social Forum in September and

October. Unless otherwise stated, this analysis draws on workshops, discussions, interviews and participatory observation during this time.

- ³ For both, the central criticism was that using taxes for health care was not sustainable. Before the introduction of the universal coverage of the 30-Baht scheme, one third of the population was without any health insurance at all, so this criticism can be countered easily with the argument of Venezuela's Minister of Health and Social Development: "You can't fail to deal with a disaster because you haven't worked out the specifics of sustainability" (cited in Gibbs, 2006: 272). On the Thaksin programme, see Hewison (2003a: 13).
- ⁴ The term "post-Washington Consensus" is often used to describe a shift in the economic and development guidelines of the World Bank at beginning of the new millennium – away from the narrow agenda-setting fundamentals of the Washington Consensus such as zero inflation, broadening market access and promotion of privatisation, towards the recognition of the role of the state especially for social programmes (Drache, 2002; Williamson, 2000). Whereas some authors interpret this shift as a correction of a failed neo-liberal policy (Kohlmorgen, 2004), others have criticised it as mere window-dressing, where the core of neo-liberal dogma remains unchallenged (Gibbs, 2006). In our analysis of Thaksin's economic policy we follow Gibbs' view.
- ⁵ The weekly television show "Aló Presidente" in Venezuela and Thaksin's weekly radio talk-show being just one striking parallel. For a different approach, see Pasuk and Baker (2008).
- ⁶ For example, the anti-Khor Jor Kor movement in 1992 or the Assembly of the Poor in 1997. Khor Jor Kor is the abbreviation for a military-led plan for the restructuring of Thailand's forest reserves. If implemented as scheduled, it would have deprived thousands of families of their livelihood. On the anti-Khor Jor Kor movement, see Pye (2005).
- ⁷ The Octobrists are activists from the 1973-76 democratic uprising, and the "Senior Citizens" are respected senior or retired officials. Kasian (2002: 333) listed the National Salvation Community, the Bangchak-lovers Club, the United Thai for National Liberation Club, the Free Thai Movement, the *Withithas* Project, the Thai Graduates' Group, the Patriotic People Club, and the Democracy for the People Group.
- ⁸ For a more detailed analysis of different capitalist groups and the connection between domestic capital and Thaksin's ascent see Brown and Hewison (2005: 358ff) and Pasuk and Baker (2004).
- ⁹ At the same time, the Democrats continuous embrace of notions like "good governance" and "fair competition" as a means to solve problems of poverty and underdevelopment explains why their recent turn to a social agenda was not convincing enough to challenge TRT's electoral basis. For a critical discussion of the ideological use of "good governance" with references to Thai political discourse, see Jayasuriya and Hewison (2004).
- ¹⁰ However, the term "post neo-liberal" itself overstates the extent of the paradigm shift. While we agree with Gibbs' analysis, we reject the term "post neo-liberal," as well as the term "post-Washington Consensus" used by other authors for the same phenomenon (cf. Fine, 2001; Kohlmorgen, 2004). The prefix "post-" suggests a paradigm shift away from the doctrines of the Washington Consensus or the neo-liberal principles.
- ¹¹ This critical line was followed by Sondhi Limthongkul's *Phujatkan raiwan* [*Manager Daily*] – see, for example, "Kongthun muban fanrai prachaniyom" [The village fund. A populist nightmare], 24 February 2006.
- ¹² FTA Watch's website is at: <http://www.ftawatch.org>.
- ¹³ In rural areas the proportion of medical doctors per head of population fell to one per 10,000 compared to Thailand's average proportion of one per 2800 (*The Nation Online*, 4 April 2006).
- ¹⁴ The network consisted of Thai Network of People Living With HIV/AIDS (TNP+), Foundation for Consumers, Doctors without Borders (MSF), and many others. For a detailed description of the campaign see Weeraboon (2004) and Ford et al. (2004).
- ¹⁵ The Thai Labour Campaign gives a good chronology of the EGAT protests at <http://www.thailabour.org/campaigns/privatiz/chronology.html>
- ¹⁶ A detailed analysis of this conflict has been offered by Duncan McCargo and his collaborators in a special edition of *Critical Asian Studies* (McCargo (ed.), 2006).
- ¹⁷ In his presentation at the workshop "Botrian thangkanmueang jak rathaprahan 19 kanya" [Political lessons of the 19 September *coup d'état*], Thai Social Forum, Thammasat University Rangsit Campus, 22 October 2006.

- ¹⁸ In an interesting exchange with Supalak in the *Fa Dieo Kan* magazine, Piyamiton (2006) recommended democratising the PAD and the anti-Thaksin movement itself as a first step towards a democratic revolution along the lines of people's councils.

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