

## Report on SOAS event, part I

### A panel discussion on "Thai Political Situation: Wherefrom and Whereto?"

Presented by the Royal Thai Embassy and the SOAS Thai Society

**Location:** Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, SOAS

**Date and time:** Friday, 29 January 2010, 17.30-20.00

**Panelists:** Professor Suchit Boonbongkarn, Professor Duncan McCargo, Professor Peter Leyland, and Professor Borwornsak Uwanno

**Moderator:** H.E. Mr. David Fall



### Professor Suchit Boonbongkarn

Professor Suchit started by explaining the current political situation in Thailand. He said that the

past decade has seen dramatic political changes, starting with the coming to power of Thaksin through election. There was a high hope at that time among the Thai public that the stability of democratic government is possible. However, things did not turn out as expected. Discontents against Thaksin's government grew and were politicised by the mass protests against him organised by Sondhi Limthongkul. The protest turned into the yellow-shirt movement demanding Thaksin step down. Thaksin fought back, and the mass-movement to support him was organised. The conflict between the pro-Thaksin and the anti-Thaksin movements caused deep divisions in Thai society. But the coup in September 2006 to oust Thaksin could not uproot his influences. The conflict showed no sign of ending despite the enactment of the new constitution, and the general election in December 2007. Thai society continued to be deeply divided. Suchit then argued that to understand the nature of the present conflicts, there is a need to look at the roles of the red-shirt and yellow-shirt movements, and the roles of the established political structure including the military.

He started with discussion of the red-shirt movement. He argued that the pro-Thaksin red-shirt movement is a real challenge to the conservative core values of Thai society and the conservative establishment. Such conservative core values include respect for the monarchy and the hierarchical social structure, as well as the maintenance of the tradition and culture based on Buddhism like the concept of *Karma*, *Boon* [merit], and *Baramee* [charisma]. Its core groups include the group of politicians loyal to Thaksin, the republican-advocates, and some business leaders. The movement's cohesiveness is still doubtful. The majority of the movement's members, mostly from the rural area in the North and the Northeast, simply want Thaksin to come back. Some of the movement leaders attack Privy Council Chairman General Prem, and the present government—which they see as being controlled by the aristocrats and the military. This can be seen as their effort to diminish the influence of the conservative establishment. However, the movement is unable to gain support from the majority of the Thais. Most Thais maintain conservative ideas, which include upholding the monarchical institution and traditional culture, as well as preference for evolutionary changes. Thais value democracy, but also want to make sure that democracy works well with the monarchy and traditional culture.

However, Suchit argued that this does not mean that the majority of the Thais are with the yellow-shirt movement, which is anti-Thaksin and very conservative in political thinking. The Thais may be conservative and supportive of some of the yellow-shirt agenda, but there are elements of the movement which they do not agree with. The majority of Thais are the “third-force”, which are not cohesive, and have no leaders and organisation. The present Democrat-led government tries to be the leader of this group, but has been unable to do so. Nonetheless, if the government is able to contain the red-shirt protests, and resolve the economic problems, its strength and popularity will increase. The government's performance in gaining support from the rural people through populist policies is, in the longer-run, likely to weaken the pro-Thaksin group. However, if we allow this conflict to continue, it will develop into an ideological and class conflict.

In relation to the role of the military, he argued that another coup is highly unlikely. The military had

learned from the coup in 2006 of the difficulty that had governing the country. The military has realised that the problems facing the country are too complicated to be resolved by military rule. And they know that there will be a strong resistance against the coup both within and outside the country. In addition, the argument that the present Democrat government is backed or controlled by the military may not be accurate. The military is not strong enough to lead the government, or to ensure its survival. Furthermore, when it comes to political issues, the military is no longer monolithic.

In relation to the roles of the monarch, he argued that the monarch has been very careful not to do anything unconstitutional. When there was the occupation of Government House and the occupation of the airports, some wanted King Bhumibol to intervene. The King did not respond to their wishes, but let the situation be resolved by the courts and the constitution. And as the government has been relatively stable and responsive to the needs of the people, and has been able to handle a few uprisings and demonstrations effectively, the sovereign is not under pressure to do anything. However, there may have been situations in the past where the political violence, uprising, riots, demonstrations, led to political instability and created a situation where the monarch had to intervene. Nevertheless, since he ascended to the throne in 1946, the King has been effective in maintaining political neutrality, while at the same time, making it known that he has also been very concerned with any political problem that may lead to violence and bloodshed.

In terms of the Supreme and the Constitutional Courts, Suchit argued that their recent rulings in relation to Thaksin, Samak, and People's Power Party have been criticised as unfair by the Thaksin's supporters. However, to be fair to the judiciary, these rulings have been done according to the current constitution. However, he pointed that sole reliance on the judiciary to develop good governance will also make the judiciary vulnerable.

He concluded that the latest military coup has failed to launch political reform to consolidate Thailand's democracy. The military coup is now becoming more and more unacceptable. Therefore, democratic development in Thailand has to rely on the people. There is a need in the long-term to reduce political corruption and the patronage system in the election. There is also a need for the institutionalisation of political structure in order to promote ethics and clean government. A strong civil society is needed for the Thai democracy to be sustainable. In the present, the business sector has replaced the bureaucracy as the leading political force, while the Thai civil society is still too weak. The "silent majority", not the red-shirt or the yellow shirt, who wants Thai democracy to work effectively without violence or instability, is the people's sector that needs to be strengthened.

### **Professor Duncan McCargo**

Professor McCargo started by reflecting that, in Thai politics, many of the themes in the past seem to keep coming back again. Chamlong Srimuang has come back as a PAD leader. The lesson in relation to the role of the military in politics looked like it had been learned in the 1991-2 period.

However, Thailand seemed to repeat some of the mistakes and confusion by over-reliance on the ability of the military to address political problems in the new round of conflicts in 2006-7. In addition, in the period around 1996, Thailand was in the process of drafting a new constitution, which in the end could not quite work. And the drafting of the constitution had to start all over again.

He argued that, reflecting upon his past analysis of several issues in Thailand—for example; the role of Chamlong, the 1997 constitutions, the media, the South, Thaksin, and the monarchy—he used to think that the problem was “excessive pragmatism”. Since 1991, there had been many prime ministers, many constitutions, elections, and coups. The question that was asked back then by a lot of research was “why are people just so pragmatic?”; “why are they so flexible?”; “why do they seem to change their loyalty and their mind so rapidly?”.

However, over the past five years, Thailand has moved to a very different scenario. Thailand now seems to have insufficient pragmatism. Thailand becomes a country characterised by incredible dogmatism, where family members and friends cannot speak to each other without something coming up that would cause uncomfortable feelings. The old “*mai-pen rai*” (anything goes) situation has been replaced by the situation where everybody has occupied a polarised position. In the present, the pragmatism that was the problem of past may have some benefits because it implies a “capacity to change” that is now lacking. People are now divided into different sides and the space in between is very difficult to occupy.

In relation to the conflict in Thailand's South, after he had spent his time conducting his research there, he came to the conclusion that the problem in the South is essentially political. It is not about smuggling, drugs, socio-economic deprivation or Islamic-fundamentalism. It is a problem about politics, about legitimacy, and about feelings that people there that they do not have full participation in what is going on. Within the governance structure, there is very limited space for people to carve out their own identities because Thailand remains an incredibly centralised system. Interestingly, many of the senior people in the ministries, the parliament, the police and military, agree with the conclusion that the problem is essentially political. There is a need to do something with the way power is organised. However, people are also very nervous in talking about this. They are afraid of being accused in different ways such as being disloyal to the monarchy or of being separatists. Funnily, people on different sides such as Chalerm and Chavalit on one hand, and Prawes and Abhisit on the other hand, have actually been using different forms of words to express a very similar sentiment: that it is a political problem that needs political solution. So, they say the same thing. However, at the same time, because they are on different sides, they cannot say “we agree”.

He argues that the problem in the South is a good reflection of the wider problem in Thailand. There is actually a lot of similarity in both sides of the conflict. People from the two sides are hardly strangers to each other. Parallelism and mirror-politics actually occur between the two movements. However, despite a substantial shared ground between the two sides, the problem is “who would dare to break the deadlock”. There is, however, potential to break the deadlock, to break the

inability to speak to each other. The Thais used to be incredibly pragmatic, but what has happen to that now that people are locked into different position? Both sides in the conflict have some points, and just beneath the surface there is actually a substantial consensus that just cannot be articulated.

Returning to the South, he argued that there is a way forward for the South, which is some form of decentralisation. The difficulty is, however, “the lack of opportunity to create public space for open discussion”. People are scared to speak out. However, he also believes that Thailand is very changeable. Therefore, he does not believe that the deadlock will continue indefinitely.

**Thorn Pitidol is a doctoral student at Oxford University. His report on the second half of this event will be available from *New Mandala* soon.**