

## Thailand Unsettled #2: Reconciliation (with Jatuporn Prompan and Suriyasai Katasila)—Part 1



### The episode

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Part 1 of the second episode of Thailand Unsettled interrogates the relationship between justice and reconciliation from polarised political standpoints. Since 2017, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) has sponsored reconciliation talks attended by major parties, representatives of the red-shirt United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship and the anti-Shinawatra People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). But as Puangthong Pawakapan notes in [the People's Information Center's fact-finding report](#) on the state's crackdown on red shirt protesters in May 2010:

Not long after the red shirt protest, there were loud calls for reconciliation and peace. These urged the population to help “society move forward”, “make peace” and to “stop persecution and division by political allegiance”. In reality, this was a call to the victims of the crackdown “to forget, to remain silent and to surrender” to injustice itself. Similar ploys have been used in the past by those who suppressed the people—ploys that have almost always ended with an amnesty for those who attacked the population.

How can Thailand “move on” from a decade of mass political contestation—unrest which was halted, but hardly resolved, by large-scale state violence and the military’s eventual seizure of power? What does it even mean to “move on”—or, in the language of Thailand’s military government, achieve “reconciliation”?

### The guests

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Red-shirt leader **Jatuporn Prompan** is the current chairman of the UDD. Jatuporn gave this interview the week after his release from a year-long term in prison for allegedly defaming former prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva (in a speech delivered to protesters in 2010, Jatuporn accused Abhisit of ordering the killing of civilians).

**Suriyasai Katasila** previously coordinated yellow-shirt People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protests and was a leader of the PRDC. More recently, he has been active along with a number of other PDRC leaders in founding the pro-establishment Action Coalition of Thailand Party (ACT), supported by Suthep Thaugsuban as a recruiter and fundraiser.

### Transcript

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*[Editor’s note: I recommend watching the video interview, which captures more fully than the transcript the emotions colouring Jatuporn and Suriyasai’s responses. However, the transcript contains some explanatory notes on references to political events made by the guests].*

<https://youtu.be/XjilV566BCw>

**Khun Jatuporn, you’ve just been released from prison. We’ve invited you for a conversation about the current state of politics, but one that looks to the future and discusses the issue of reconciliation. But I want to begin by asking about the Supreme Court’s guilty sentencing. Previously, the Court of First Instance and the Appeals Court dismissed the charges. What political significance do you see in the Supreme Court overturning those initial rulings?**

Jatuporn: This is something that I’ve tried to explain, and something I came to understand while in prison. While in prison, I told myself that I had to stop dwelling upon who I was in the past and the reasons I was prosecuted. I told myself that once I was out, I would act only on the future. Otherwise, the suffering would be unbearable. So I avoided thinking about such questions, even when reading the court’s ruling. I felt only that when it was time to testify, I would make the oath to the Emerald Buddha, the city pillar and Phra Siam Deva Thiraj—for happiness and prosperity if I told

the truth, and misfortune if I did not. There would have been an oath if I believed in any other religion, whether Christianity or Islam. There would have been an oath. All I know is that I made an oath in accordance with the law. And I maintain that what I recounted in my testimony was the truth.

When the two lower courts dismissed the charges against me, their decision was clear-cut—yet the Supreme Court overturned those rulings. The only thing of which I am now certain is the fate that I predicted for the red shirts throughout the past ten years, no matter what has transpired: if we were not killed, we would be imprisoned. It is a truly unavoidable fate. As such, I have sought to avoid anything that would bring further suffering into my life. I am content to call for justice for others, which brings more contentment than demanding justice for myself. Everything depends on perspective—these questions are no different.

Before the 2014 coup, the PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban announced [in December 2013] that he would boycott the elections [in February 2014]. I'm the leader of UDD. As soon as Suthep's announcement, I declared as a matter of balance that I wouldn't register as a candidate in the elections either. I was content to support the nation from out of office. But in the end, even that was not possible because there was a forcible seizure of power and after that, the constitutional referendum. So I announced that if the constitution passed, I would refuse to register as a candidate in the next elections. This was a promise and I intend to fulfil it. When I was imprisoned, the new constitution specified that electoral candidates must have served out any criminal punishments levied against them at least a decade ago. I still have a long list of cases against me. So it will be hard for me to enter the electoral fray in this lifetime anyway, at least under these regulations.

But that's not even the main point. Really, I explain all of this so that I don't have to go into the details of the case that led to my jail sentence. All I will say is that before I gave testimony, I was like any other witness or defendant who has to make their oath. I still maintain that I told the truth, as I swore to before I took the stand.

### **Do you think the intent of the defamation case was to censor?**

Jatuporn: The thing is, everybody knows that I'm in my element when I'm sitting in parliament. I can really take anybody on in debate, both when pitted personality-to-personality and along factional lines. Of course, [those traditionally in power] saw that as a problem. You know, I was never concerned to cling to a seat in the legislative assembly—if I wanted a seat that badly, I would probably never have declined to run as a candidate on two occasions. But I think that that was a real worry [for Pheu Thai's political rivals]. Sometimes I go on Youtube to remind myself what we used to debate about. When I watch those old videos, I can see why they didn't want me to enter parliament again.

I will continue to inquire into what could constitute justice for all that has transpired over the past

ten years. I find contentment in calling for justice for others. But as I said when I first exited from prison: the royal speech about justice that the King delivered to the courts already elucidated clearly what is most necessary to resolve all the political problems that this country faces—and that includes the reconciliation spoken of by General Prayut. *[Editors note: The speech referred to here was a speech delivered by the current King Vajiralongkorn in March 2018 calling for judges to fulfill their duties through "giving justice, upholding what is right, transparency and by being protectors of the people" . A Thai transcript of the speech can be found [here](#)].*

### **Khun Suriyasai, could I begin by asking you to reflect upon the lessons that should be drawn from the political conflict of the past decade?**

Suriyasai: I've been trying to reach a conclusion about those lessons for the past ten years, even more so when I became a member of faculty at Rangsit University. I sit and think over the history. If I could go back in time, would I choose to fight alongside my yellow-shirt brothers and sisters? I have no hesitations that, in the moment, I made the right decision. Today, I maintain that back then, given several factors—the circumstances, the situation, my political standpoint, the popular masses, the country, society—I was not wrong to make the choices that I did. Nor do I think the red shirts were wrong at all to make the choices that they did. If in hindsight anybody says that the decisions I made were a misstep or a mistake, I maintain that it was impossible for anybody to have felt that they were wrong in the moment.

The question could only have been: when an action is said to be wrong, who is saying so? The courts can decide some actions to be unlawful. But if an action can be viewed as wrong only relatively, as a matter of perspective, then that action is not incompatible with democracy. Nobody agrees with me on every matter.

Why did we protest at the airports [in 2008]? Suppose on that day, you were there coordinating the protest with me. What would your priorities have been? Ten thousand people were in attendance. I was concerned with preventing anybody from entering the airport to set off explosives or steal property. It was exhausting. I don't know who made the orders [to escalate]. Those were the conditions. PAD leaders never made an announcement or publically ordered a shutdown of the airports. We never made such an announcement at all. It was a case of the masses rebelling on their own accord.

If we are to draw conclusions about past mistakes, I think that the one lesson that protesters must face unequivocally is that sometimes mobilisation cannot be controlled. This was a problem that movements of all colours faced. It was not unique to the red shirts, but challenged the yellow shirts too, as well as the PDRC. The PDRC ...

On the day that Suthep promised to turn himself over to the Royal Thai Army Headquarters if the government didn't step down, I sat and thought to myself that Suthep talks big talk. *[Editor's note: Suthep made such a threat on several occasions during PDRC protests against the Yingluck*

*Shinawatra government. Suriyasai appears to be referring to an occasion in May 2014 when Suthep called for mass protests on 23-25 May, promising to turn himself into the authorities if the government hadn't stepped down by 27 May.]* But if that day, he had really been arrested as a self-proclaimed representative of the people, would villagers have turned to rioting and chaos? I wasn't sure, but if they'd taken to the streets, it would have been uncontrollable. Those close to me in the movement would talk about how to diffuse the situation if one day, Suthep really did deliver himself to the authorities. We imagined "D-Day", a million protesters on the streets. How would we diffuse it? We wouldn't have been able to. The situation would have blown up. Would there be rioting in response or not? At the time, we thought about these questions at length. Luckily, the contingency never transpired.

I maintain that movements of all colours struggled with maintaining complete command over the masses. It's important to note that groups with ill intentions tried to infiltrate all sides—another variable. Sometimes we didn't know where the sounds of gunshots were coming from. Sometimes we couldn't find the people behind explosives that went off. I think that uncontrollability is a lesson that all sides have to consider when protesting.

Because the most important thing is responsibility to the lives of the people. I would never desire to fire the first round of shots simply to secure victory. "The sacrifice of ten lives will inspire another ten thousand to rise up". Don't try that stuff on me. That's a teaching from Mao's Long March, but not one to be said seriously. Nobody should die simply because they believe in democracy and see differently. Nobody should have to die, no matter what colour shirt they wear. Our country can't ensure even that basic right and liberty. How can we even begin to set out for democracy and reform?

So I've said that if the Thaksin regime is still substantively intact, speaking about political reform is impossible. There's no use in talking of a "national strategic plan". This is a big issue. The people behind those plans talk big, but won't be able to walk the walk. Today, Thaksin made a statement saying he can still control Pheu Thai and wants 260 seats in the legislative assembly. It's obvious he's still digging his heels in.

**Khun Jatuporn, while you were in prison, there was news that you met Sondhi Limthongkul as well as the former Phra Buddha Issara, and that you faced the difficulties and trials of prison life together. Did your experiences in prison affect how you view the other side, and the possibilities of reconciliation?**

Jatuporn: As I said, I did not carry the suffering of vengeance with me into prison. Nor did I carry it with me upon exiting. For those who still have life to live, there is no more debasing space than the confines of prison walls—it is a graveyard for the living. You are stripped of the mask of who you once were. Once you're in prison, you're nothing more than a criminal who must do as the correctional staff order, no matter who you once were. I wore cropped trousers [the prison uniform] for more than a year. I had to go to sleep and wake at regimented times. I had to follow all the

prison regulations. It didn't matter who you had once been.

We accumulated so many wounds during the conflict of the past decade. But the conflict was never personal. The charges that were laid against me, what I was fighting for entirely, it was always about more than the sum of the individuals involved. So whatever we spoke about when we met, we tried to understand each other sincerely. After all, we had all landed in the cemetery of the living, all of us from different sides. Perhaps some people haven't been imprisoned yet. But a large number of red shirts have been jailed already. Over the past decade or so, I've been imprisoned four times. When there are no masks, when status has been obliterated, there are only prisoners who meet each other as equals. Wherever possible, we from different sides tried to help each other, because prison imposed the same burdens upon us all.

**When it comes to the former Phra Buddha Issara, Khun Sonthi—are you able to now grasp each other's divergent ideologies?**

Jatuporn: It's more that we have to accept reality. The beauty of a democratic system is respect of difference. I have to be able to converse with people who think differently to me. If I'm unable to do that, it means that I am not truly democratically-minded. I have to be able to live with difference. Of course, the question is: amidst our difference, under what political arrangements and regulations should we co-exist? But difference is a beautiful thing. There is no need to be enemies simply because of difference. In reality, much wisdom springs from the meeting of difference.

**Let's talk about reconciliation explicitly. During the protests of 2009-10, state crackdowns resulted in the deaths of countless members of UDD and other pro-democracy protesters. Is reconciliation possible if those responsible for the deaths—whether civilian leaders of from the military—are never made accountable through the judicial system?**

Jatuporn: Court cases and reconciliation are two different issues. When it comes to court cases, we have to face reality. Under the current system, we won't get there.

**Get where?**

Jatuporn: We've seen how cases progress these days. Look at what happened after the completion of autopsies [of bodies of victims of the 2010 crackdown on the red shirts]. The Department of Special Investigations requested that the state prosecutor initiate a lawsuit. No sooner was that request filed, former prime minister [Abhisit Vejjajiva] and former deputy prime minister [Suthep Thaugsuban] protested that such a case was beyond the jurisdiction of the criminal courts, and that only the Supreme Court's Division on Holders of Political Positions could rule. Then courts at all three levels ruled that the case indeed fell under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, but that the case would have to be first processed by the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC). In the end, the case ended with the NACC, who dismissed the request. The case never reached the Supreme Court. The deaths were made to seem as crimes for which

nobody knew who was at fault.

I have tried to call for justice. In parliament, I once gave a speech for four hours, from 10PM to 2AM, on my distrust of the government who represses the people. It lasted so long, because I tried to speak about each and every person whose death during the crackdown has been investigated—which took a long time. Standing in the lower house for four hours is no easy thing, but I managed to describe each and every case.

When the courts examined the autopsy findings, giving an example of six corpses retrieved from Wat Patum Wanaram, even the courts' rulings made it clear that they did not die at the hands of "men in black". *[Editor's note: Jatuporn refers to claims made by the Abhisit government that it was not responsible for deaths of red shirt protesters, but that the violent May 2010 crackdown was precipitated by "men in black": unidentified armed men clothed in black that were photographed sporadically among red shirt protesters. The origins of the men in black have been heavily politicised. The Democrat Party has [insinuated](#) they were hired by Thaksin to kill innocent protesters to smear the Abhisit government. Others view the men in black as intent on sabotaging the red shirt movement by inciting chaos and violence; previously Jatuporn has [referred](#) to photos of men in black mingling with soldiers and photos of men in black with military-issued shoes. Others view the men in black as a radicalised wing of the red shirts. For some reading on the men-in-black phenomenon, see [this](#) New Mandala article.]*

Rather, state security forces had performed duties that they claimed were under the orders of the Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation. The reality is that the case against Abhisit and Suthep should have run its course through the justice system, because the case against them wasn't based on the sorts of illegitimate actions that come under the purview of the NACC. The charges levied against them were of murder. That's the limit that I say we can't get to. In the end, the NACC quashed the case. In the real world, those who are imprisoned are those whose friends and allies have been murdered. A large number of us have served out prison terms already. Many others are still waiting for the court's judgement.

What I was saying is that the repression and murder of civilians was the essence of the case, which has yet to be deliberated according to the evidence. The fact that people died cannot be changed. You asked about justice. We have not given up, but we will have to seek alternative judicial avenues. Our options are limited, but that doesn't mean we have no options at all. Previously, some members of the NACC told us to wait for the response of the International Criminal Court (ICC), probably thinking that nothing would come of it. But the ICC advised that it would first observe whether the Thai judicial system processed the case appropriately. If our judicial system failed to operate effectively, it would reexamine the case and decide its course of action. We will use every avenue available to us to secure justice.

We live in the real world, and so have to accept bitterness of this kind. We will have to find a way to keep the cases moving, to keep the fight alive, to demand justice. In Thailand, murder is a violation

of the criminal code. The autopsy investigation has identified the dead, how they died and who maliciously killed them. Despite all this knowledge, nobody has been brought to account. That impunity applies, moreover, only to the deaths of my red-shirt brothers and sisters. Because of these stories, we will keep pushing the essence of the case through the avenues that remain. We have not given up.

Reconciliation relates to the question of what direction [the country's politics] will take after the elections—which is a separate issue from the deaths that occurred from 2009-10. In reality, those issues may be inextricable from each other. But if are to bind them, there will be no way to move on. I have to accept the reality of that too.

**Just then, Khun Jatuporn, you spoke of the role of the state during the 2009-10 crackdowns. Does the military have to be held responsible too?**

Jatuporn: The NACC dismissed the accusations against state officials, so its judgement allowed for the pursuit of charges against individuals in the military. In this respect, the matter is not over. But when it comes to justice in Thailand, we have to accept the reality of how it would be in the end.

**“In the real world”, using your phrase, Thailand has never held the military to account for atrocities.**

Jatuporn: It isn't for want of trying. The past ten years has taken its toll on me. I'm lucky to be alive. But it's truly ill fortune to have to carry such enormous pain with me always. In my life, two events—1992 and 2010—acquainted me with death. In 1992, I was one of the last who remained. I led civilian protesters to fight at Ramkhamhaeng—by the end, it was a moment of change. *[Editor's note: Jatuporn participated in protests in May 1992 against General Suchinda Kraprayoon, which shifted from Phan Fa Bridge and Democracy Monument to Ramkhamhaeng University by 19 May 1992. On 19 May 2010, the military launched its last assault on red shirt protest camps].*

But on the same day in 2010, I was the one who had to announce the end to protesting at Ratchaprasong. The numbers of people killed were similar, but they were higher in 2010. So it is that I've had to accept reality: though I may be determined, the fight is not as easy as I thought. But this doesn't mean that I have ceased to think, do or try. Over the past decade, I have given my all to anything that was possible, both in and outside of Thailand.

**Sometimes reconciliation and justice sit uncomfortably together.**

Jatuporn: Without justice, reconciliation is impossible.

**There's the difficulty. But have we reached a point where we have to choose?**

Jatuporn: In reality, you cannot have one without the other. But the roots of conflict can only be



resolved by justice. With justice comes reconciliation. That's a universal principle.

**Khun Suriyasai, If we're talking about reconciliation, the issue of justice becomes unavoidable. UDD, PAD and PDRC have all been affected variously by state crackdowns on protest. When we interviewed Jatuporn, he was adamant that reconciliation is impossible if justice is not served. Do you agree?**

Suriyasai: We have to identify what justice constitutes, and whose justice we are talking about. If we were to ask Thaksin about "justice", he would say he should receive amnesty and the return of billions in baht. If we were to ask red shirts, they would ask for the lives of those who died and demand accountability. Yellow shirts would give the same answer. It's unavoidable. How could people who have been shot at, whose protests have been suppressed so many times, not make such demands?

When we inquire into what is necessary for reconciliation, there is always much emphasis on equating amnesties with justice. That focus is misplaced, because amnesties cannot simply be applied to anybody who has committed a crime, especially those embroiled in corruption cases. How could an amnesty be appropriate, when the evidence is so blatant? The question is: can we make reconciliation about more than amnesties? For example, what are the conditions for genuine and civil dialogue [between different sides]? Let's begin with that. The current state of politics completely lacks an *atmosphere* that is conducive to reconciliation. Yet we dare to tackle reconciliation. If we dive even further into debates about restoring justice, the issues get even bigger.

We have yet to create an atmosphere where all sides are willing to come together and really talk. That has to come first. The facilitator of talks has to be somebody who is trusted by all sides. In the past, that's been a challenge. Previous facilitators have struggled to earn the confidence of all sides, leading to several groups opting out of the formal reconciliation process.

Without a doubt, the goal [of reconciliation], at its heart, is to provide justice to all parties. But as I have said, justice lies in the eye of the beholder. The meaning of justice is different for everyone. So if we continue [in this current atmosphere of political division], there are bound to be problems—just like when the PDRC took to the streets in opposition to justice as defined by Thaksin: a blanket amnesty, which many red shirts themselves disagreed with! No wonder the yellow shirts, the PDRC protested against the blanket amnesty. To unpack that conflict, we need to inquire into disparate interpretations of justice and the contexts that inform them.

But I would really warn against molding the aims of reconciliation around amnesties. That's a dead end.

**What about limited amnesties?**

Suriyasai: If amnesties are to be applied, they should begin with villagers and protesters with no criminal records, who did not kill and who had no intentions of shooting at the other side. I think there were cases from all sides where people were arrested simply for being present at protests. Harassment from state security officers was also a problem. Police forces, who constitute the frontline of the justice system, sometimes abused criminal charges to harass opposition groups, which [depending on the political moment] affected both red and yellow shirts. Previously, I gave recommendations on those abuses to the NCPO's Reconciliation Centre for Reform. Both red and yellow shirts have given their input already. Thousands of such cases have affected villagers, and I think that's something on which all colours can agree.

If you recall, when Worachai Hema, a Pheu Thai MP at the time, submitted what was to be the draft blanket amnesty, it was initially to be applied only to civilians. At first, it was a limited, rather than blanket amnesty. But once it was presented to parliament, Prayut Siripanich pushed for the expansion of its parameters. That was the end. Totally self-defeating. Khun Jatuporn knew better than that too. At the time, I was in support of Worachai's draft. If the amnesty had applied only to civilians, I wouldn't have had a problem with it. But political leaders? Cases of insurgency, terrorism, corruption and 112 have to be cordoned off and treated differently. These crimes can't be jumbled and mixed with the actions of civilians, as if it's all the same thing. Most people would find such a proposition [a blanket amnesty] unacceptable.

### **So what should be done with the state and military leaders who played a role in the bloody crackdowns?**

Suriyasai: This is difficult to answer. Many actions are being dealt with in court, including some of my own. Anything I say could be treated as evidence, so I can't say too much. Take the case of red shirts dying at the hands of military forces. The courts ruled that Abhisit and Suthep were not responsible and dismissed accusations against them. Can I accept that ruling? I can. The general principle is that [the Supreme] court's ruling is final. But the ruling is felt as an injustice for the red shirts, who were subject to the violence. What would it take to heal their pain? The answer is not easy. It's as if all sides must face equal amounts of loss for justice to be served. But if justice becomes about the sentiment, "I'm hurting, so you have to hurt too", justice will be difficult. It will be impossible. The issues remain so sensitive.

This all leads me to think that the problem [of justice] should not be framed as, "Who must be responsible?" or "Who should be the defendant?". If we go down that path, the only option will be narrowed down to an amnesty. But suppose we widen the discussion. Some issues can be resolved with fact-finding. There are some issues that we can begin to think about, that we can delve into. For example, what do both sides unanimously demand? Why don't we begin with issues that both sides agree on? If we begin with the divisive issues, there will be no way forward.

### **What do you think of the NCPO's approach to reconciliation, as embodied in [the Reconciliation Centre for Reform \(RCR\)](#)?**

Suriyasai: Honestly, the RCR itself is a good initiative, because there has been very wide participation in the formal process. I myself go almost every time I'm invited. We released recommendations to the government too, though, in the end, it seems they were not taken up.

The thing is, I think at the level of movement leaders, we're able to sit and speak together civilly. Some red shirt leaders have even come up and told me quietly that they feel very guilty for previously seeing me in a certainly light. We may not see eye to eye once we sit before the facilitator, who seems credible, but this kind of space is valuable. The problem is that the NCPO doesn't build upon the utility of the RCR.

To be blunt, the NCPO is not sincere in its reconciliation efforts. We make our recommendations and have no idea if they reach the government or not. I reckon the prime minister doesn't read them at all. Representatives of the NCPO come and make their statements, but NCPO leaders have no idea what they say. It's as if reconciliation requires no effort on their part, so long as everybody participates in the judicial process. Whoever loses has to go to prison. If that's all there is to it, let's not bother talking about reconciliation at all.

**You've had a role in the establishment of the Action Coalition for Thailand Party (ACT or Ruamphalang Prachachart Thai). How is ACT different from the New Politics Party that you had a hand in establishing in 2009?**

Suriyasai: They are different, I think. First, the people involved are different. The people central to the New Politics Party had little experience in political office. They were mostly activists, from NGOs and from civil society. They brought one set of experiences to the party. When it comes to Ruamphalang Prachachart though, Khun Suthep has been at the centre of power and politics for the past 40 years. Perhaps he then brings with him a broader perspective. Second, the political context is different. The New Politics Party was clearly about eliminating the Thaksin regime. But if you pay attention, the Action Coalition has talked about organic farming, education, reforming Thailand, decentralisation, the police. I have to admit, in discussions with the party's founders, I ask, "Is the public really interested in what we're talking about?".

When the election comes, the public might drag us, corner us, and pose ultimatums. Do you support the parties backing the NCPO? Do you support the continuation of the NCPO's power? *[Editor's note: Suthep has gone some way in indicating his stance on these issues. See [here](#)].* Are you willing to compromise with Thaksin or not? I worry the election will be narrowed down to those issues. The Action Coalition has put a lot of effort into formulating policy. We have a committee of academics dividing work between several groups of researchers. All of this is still going on behind the scenes because we're not ready to release policies yet. Even so, I joke around that villagers might not be interested in the issues that we're discussing, and that it'll be the same old game. Of course, there will be people who reject us [laughs].

Look at the last elections for the Bangkok governor. For three months before the election, the

candidates were debating policies every day about reducing traffic, street vendors, crime, pollution and so on. But in the end, the fight between the two candidates revolved around one issue: whether voters would accept a nominee of Thaksin or not.

I'm worried about this fixation. If discourse during the elections can't move beyond old problems, we'll stay stuck in the past. Old problems have old answers. The problem of Thaksin will lead to the same old answers. Let's say Pheu Thai wins and forms government. There will be opposition. Will there be conflict? Nothing will move forward.

### **How does the Action Coalition approach reconciliation?**

Suriyasai: It's too early to say. But we are discussing it. I'm under conditions that I respectfully can't really go into. First, I'm not on the party's managing committee. Second, I'm only a founder. Third, I've made it clear that I hold a position in the party under conditions where I still have several criminal cases against me. I have a feeling that the timeline of some of those cases will clash with the election timeline, which worries me. I don't think I have a great deal of stability presently, so I can't commit too much. But I'll help out with whatever the party asks of me. We're discussing reconciliation, but our stance hasn't crystallised yet.

### **Khun Jatuporn, when we talk about reconciliation, there are always at least two sides involved. Who constitutes the other side when you speak about reconciliation?**

Jatuporn: I've told the committee overseeing the formal reconciliation process, whether the Committee for National Administration under the Framework of National Reform, Strategy and Reconciliation or another body, that the UDD is the organisation that has suffered the most deaths in Thailand's history of state crackdowns on protest. We have suffered the most pain. We have endured the most injustice. Yet even I see the necessity of reconciliation, without which there is no way for the country to move forward. Past conflicts do not have to endure forever.

In reality, there have been so many attempts at reconciliation in Thai political history. This is the first time that no side is boycotting [the formal process]. Everybody participates when we get the invitation. Since the coup, I've never turned down an invitation to talks, not even once. Whenever I'm invited to discuss reconciliation, I make a point of going.

In the absence of reconciliation, elections won't resolve anything. Reconciliation is humbling. UDD bears the weight of those who died, those who were injured and the loss of freedom. We bear the weight of injustice. All the same, we want the country to move forward. The price for that may be a great deal of suffering. Nobody can change the past. But if we keep going as we are, each side accumulating ill will against the other, I won't be concerned with the election results at all. But I'll be concerned about the aftermath of the elections. What if different sides are unable to coexist? We saw what happened on 14 October 1973. We saw 6 October 1976. We saw May 1992. And we say May 2010. I saw there in both 1992 and 2010. I know the rhythms of Thai political history: if the

roots of conflict are not analysed and resolved, there is always more death. The people who lose their lives are always civilians, never politicians or soldiers, or at least rarely. It's civilians more than 90 per cent of the time. The martyrs are always civilians.

Sometimes, reconciliation may be beyond what is capable between those were murdered and those who killed them. But so long as we are still able to have a dialogue, I would like us to come together and contemplate. You know, I believe that if all sides are sincere, reconciliation will be successful. In the event that reconciliation fails, it will be because some sides were not truly invested. Their actions are tokenistic. We talk, we compile conclusions in documents. But our recommendations are not actioned. It is not because people aren't participating in the process. The problem is the absence of implementation.

The war against the Communist Party was no worse than this, right? That conflict engulfed the entire country, and involved the use of weapons on another scale, yet an end to the sound of gunfire was possible. An end to death was possible. But that line of argumentation is political—the argument that people died while protesting on the streets [in 2010], but not in the same numbers as during the war against the Communist Party. But the reality is that the recent conflict manifests in many forms. Once their origins are analysed, dialogue becomes all the more difficult. What matters is that there is dialogue, so that all sides are able to accept whatever the people decide. In the absence of that, elections will resolve little.

## The series

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Thailand Unsettled debates the current state of Thailand's politics, keeping the question of a post-election future at the forefront of discussion. How are new and established political parties gearing up for an election that is stacked against them? Do current red-shirt leaders and former yellow-shirt leaders believe reconciliation is possible in the absence of justice? Does a new reign call for new frameworks of analysis? Tune in each fortnight for conversations with Thailand's political leaders, activists, civil society and academic community.

Thailand Unsettled is filmed in partnership with Prachatai, an award-winning news-site committed to accurate reporting under conditions of limited freedom of expression. For English captions, make sure subtitles are turned on by clicking the "CC" button at the bottom-right hand corner of the Youtube video. An English transcription of the interview is available below. For a Thai transcript of the interview, head over to [Prachatai's website](#).