

The trouble with Thailand's new democracy





To restore democracy and topple an ‘ancien regime’, anti-junta activism needs to transform into broad-based, anti-fascist movement, writes Jim Taylor.

The “New Democracy” Movement (NDM, sometimes written in English as “Neo- Democracy”), are now at the forefront of spontaneous anti-fascist activities in Thailand.

The group was founded by a core group of 14 mostly students of working class backgrounds from Bangkok and Khon Kaen, whose families benefitted from former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s pro-poor policies.

NDM says it is committed to "fighting for freedom and democracy". Tyrell Haberkorn’s [article in *Dissent magazine*](#) outlines the importance of this group as potential for new democratic leadership. She raises the notion of the NDM as being somehow outside Thailand’s colour code.

The group, declining coded associations, in any case, are not going to paint themselves into a corner; such a move would be dangerous when trying to win over the middle ground sentiment. In general, people do not know about the “red shirts” and if they want to find out more online try, as my students did, a Google search for “red shirts” – all dedicated sites have been infected with viruses!

Any colour sentiments since 2014 that are not “yellow” remain close to the heart, not the mouth. Let’s be clear – ideologically, “red shirts” of whatever orientations adhere to the following values:

- The right to a “one person, one vote” electoral system (and to be able to elect a government of one’s choice);
- The right to social and economic opportunity (especially for the poor: this is one value which really rankles the Thai bourgeoisie who rely on cheap labour);
- The right to freedom of expression and personal liberty; and
- The right to an equitable and fair justice system (ceasing “double standards”, palace commands, and having a more credible and moral judiciary).

I would suggest that these are the core values for democracy in Thailand. It would be hard to see a “colourless” position possible due to intense decades’ long ultra-royalist institutionalised propaganda which has washed away any compromise position.

The *salim* (????????????????), or “yellow-shirts” as they are called (re-coding themselves since 2006 under various royal colours) have appropriated what remains of the middle ground through sheer political cunning and semantics. This includes the use of terms such as “Reform”, “People’s” (implying a “mass” movement), and “Democracy”, used by fascistic street movements firstly PAD and then PDRC when their collective aspirations were far from “democratic”. They have effectively pulled the rug from under the pro-democracy red-shirt movement.

Needless to say, declaring oneself “red” in the current fascistic environment is courting (no pun intended) retribution. There is little space of resistance above the ground for these pro-democracy activists. Around 30-40 academics in Thailand have also been active since 2015 and under constant intimidation. At many universities, the army makes regular incursions on campus during lectures and seminars.

Pheu Thai Party (PTP) and United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) leaders are pinned to the ground, in some cases individual bank accounts were frozen, individuals incarcerated for flippant reasons or under constant surveillance. This is why the NDM have an important role to play on the front stage and as students, the media and international human rights organisations tend to watch over their wellbeing and whereabouts.

The NDM have been in the limelight since demonstrations on the one-year anniversary of the 22 May 2014 coup and in calling for an investigation into corruption allegations surrounding Rajabhakti Park in January 2016.

In a smart move, the regime has since renamed the park’s notorious foundation and placed it under royal patronage to silence critics under Article 112. The military court arrest warrants for six are among the 11 activists accused of breaching the military junta’s National Council for Peace and Order, Directive No. 3/2015 on “political gatherings”.

General Prayuth Chan-ocha's junta and its royalist media lapdogs have been trying to link NDM leader Sirawit “Ja New” Seritiwat with backing from PTP and Thaksin. The fourth-year political

science student lives hand to mouth most days, except for some occasional part-time work. Sirawith, as readers may know, was recently abducted by eight soldiers attached, it seems, to 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment (King's Guard) ostensibly under Section 44 of the interim constitution.

He was bundled into a vehicle without licence plates to be later dropped at a police station. He had been blindfolded, sworn at, beaten, taken to the bush area and threatened with a gun to his head as he heard the clicking sound of the trigger. This intimidation method is frequently used by Thai fascists.

Interestingly, the army abductors demanded to know why he did not call for an investigation into ousted prime minister Yingluck Shiawatra's (highly popular) rice subsidy program, rather than drawing attention to army corruption and abuse of power! The five core activists (Sirawith Seritiwat, Chonticha Jaeng-rew, Chanoknan Ruamsap, Korakoch Saengyenpan, and Abhisit Sapnaphapan) have declared the junta's actions to silence them as "illegitimate". Among the group, 29-year-old activist Abhisit S needs special watching as he is no longer a student and will be taken before a military court.

Another student activist, Chakraphon Phonla-o "Kankan" was abducted from his home on 25 January and taken to Nawamintharachini Army Base in Chonburi Province. He was freed later in the day. Another example of the increasing abuse of power by the junta. We need to observe events closely in the coming days and weeks, as indeed are some international human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are already doing.

To have any impact on a well-armed, cunning and well-financed ancien *régime* there needs to be a shift in focus (if not ideology) among informal segmentary student groups such as NDM towards the creation of a *sustainable* broad-based (anti-fascist) social democratic movement.

"Anti-junta" small group protests are a means to achieving some media attention, but they are readily crushed and the consequence of actions are short-lived. Behind this military junta, there will always be another military junta, similarly tied to royalist apron-strings.

Most silenced red shirts, sickened and hardened by events in 2010, lacking weapons, money and logistics, wait for the inevitable outcome at the palace, or the consequence of a spontaneous battle between two establishment military factions and their respective royal sides.

All the masses can do in the interim is to seemingly wait and endure the social, political and economic consequences of this high-level connivance. Any uprising, should this happen, will be spontaneous in nature.

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