

Two statements on the fourth anniversary of Thailand's coup

1. Statement by Jaran Ditapichai

Mr. Jaran Ditapichai, the former National Human Rights Commissioner of Thailand, has been involved in people movements for democracy and human rights for 40 years. Before the 14th October, 1973, he was a leading student activist and democratic promoter against Thai military governments. After the mass killing of students on October 6, 1976, he joined the revolutionary movement in the countryside. During the last 20 years he has been a human rights advocate. He was arrested in Myanmar in August 1988 for advocating democracy.

September 19th, 2010 marks the 4th Anniversary of the last coup d'état in Thailand which has led to the worst socio-political crisis in Thailand's history. To understand the coup d'état against Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's government one must understand that he is widely considered the most popular Prime Minister in Thailand's political history. His Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) came to power in 2001. It was the first time in Thailand's history that one political party won more than 50% of the house, enabling it to set up a majority government. This party won the election partly because of its aggressive election campaign which focused on issues such as low cost universal health care and low cost loan. These issues were and are of great importance to the rural citizens of Thailand which overwhelmingly voted for the Thai Rak Thai party.

Again, because of the aggressiveness of the TRT, it started to effectively manage its policies, thus infringing on the traditional bureaucratic domain. It was the first time these bureaucrats were forced to follow instructions and policies initiated by elected officials. Former Prime Minister Thaksin's management helped to strengthen the people's belief in possibility of good governance which in turn strengthened their own socio-political beliefs.

The people of Thailand have been encouraged by Thaksin's 5 years in power, that under a democratic system, a citizen can present his or her demands to the government and be heard. Thaksin's policies required that civil servants are there to serve the public, not the other way round. If the traditional bureaucrats had let Thaksin and the ideals he represents persist, the strength of the old bureaucratic institutions would have been drastically weakened. Clearly, Thaksin's policy to strengthen the political base of the rural people was perceived as a threat to the traditional bureaucrats and other "elite" interests.

The policies that Thai Rak Thai campaigned on had for the first time given Thailand a strong centralized government willing to push aggressively for change. The overwhelming popularity of Thai Rak Thai created a political vacuum as the political opposition, Democrat Party, was weak and ineffective at countering Thaksin's surge. There was no legitimate entity or power to balance the political spectrum. At this point, after 4 years the NGOs as well as academics who, by nature,

oppose strong government, found Dr. Thaksin's government to be more and more unbearable. Not only the bureaucrats, "elite" interests but also the army grew wary of the Thaksin's governmental policies.

Prime Minister Thaksin kept his campaign pledge to his rural constituents and his placed priorities on development and social welfare much to the chagrin of the Military which traditionally received a large portion of the government budget. The evidence was clear that military spending was no way near the top of the priority list. With no other avenues to maneuver, the stage was set for the military to build alliances with other interests and begin the process of flexing its political will.

The army waited until the anti-Thaksin's movement built their stronghold among intellectuals, monarchists, social workers of non-governmental organization (NGOs), petite bourgeois, and media publications. It wasn't until these separate interests coalesced into a unified movement that the Military stepped in to take over power.

General Sonthi Boonyaratakin staged the coud d'etat on September 19th, 2006. The coup had special characteristics distinct from previous coup d'états. The first being that it was supported by intellectuals, the middle class citizenry and most major Thai media outlets.

The second characteristic being that a specific "social movement", the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), spearheaded the ideological conceit that justified the coup. Sondhi Limthongkul lead the PAD and its ideology of "New Politics" which was based on "elite" elements of society, supposedly incorruptible, holding sway over much of the Thai political and governmental landscape.

The third characteristic and most alarming is the intervention of the Royal Privy Council in Thai politics. They escorted the Military leaders of the coup to an audience with the King at midnight and get his consent to legitimize the coup.

The junta promulgated a temporary constitution setting up the Government and National Legislative Assembly claiming to be democratic, but those people represented no one but the junta, the elite and the anti-Thaksin movement. When the constitution was drafted, the junta's government conducted, controlled and intervened by the military on August 19, 2007. and promulgated into law.

Meanwhile, the Junta engineered the dissolution of TRT party with the objective of th of weakening the power of politicians elected by the people and strenghten the power of the bureaucrats. Thailand had now turned into an aristocrat dominated country and not a true democracy. It will take so many years to undo the damage to the principle of rule of law.

Based upon this new 2007 Constitution, an election was held and it was one of the most corrupted and fraud election ever. National Election Commission (NEC) who supposed to supervise this election but did perform its duty since they were themselves appointed by the Junta. Nevertheless,

People Power Party(PPP), won and Samak Sunthornvej became the Prime Minister.

Within 3 months, PAD, the group that supported the coup, began to protest and seized NBT (National Broadcasting Television), Prime Minister's office and later Suwannaphum Airport. And at the same time, the Courtiers disqualified two Prime Ministers and People Power Party which will bring about dramatic change in which the political Party who they support, the Democrats, would become the government after 5 years absent from power with the Army appointed Abhisit Vejjajiva from the barracks.

This time, the Red shirt objected to the illegitimacy of Abhisit Government and mounted 6 rallies and the last one from March 12 – May 19, 2010 which was crushed by the Army resulted in 91 death and 2000 injured. Even though the Red shirts protest were brought under control. However, serious questions remain about Thailand's political future.

In conclusion, 2006 Coup brought Thailand back 50 years. First, it did not only stop the democratization which went rather well during the 74 years of democracy in Thailand, but also multiplied the existing political crisis. Second, it provided the Army to return in to politics again. The present government in reality is a civil–military one. Lastly, the coup widened and deepened the division of Thai society in to Yellows and Reds. Until now this division appears everywhere and cut across every organization from the national to families which never happened in Thailand before.

The last point I would like to remind that since the Democratic revolution 1932 which ended the absolute Monarchy to the present, there were 10 successful coups. Even today, the existing political environment is always ripe for another coup to take place. To prevent it from happening again should be the cornerstone for all Thais and citizens of the world who love freedom and Democracy. I demand to international communities to pay more attention to political situation in Thailand.

2. Statement by Giles Ji Ungpakorn

The 19th September coup, four years on... The blood bath at Rajprasong, four months later...

Over this weekend protests are taking place in many parts of Thailand and in many cities around the world. We are Red Shirts and we shall be remembering those who were killed by the Military and those who are in prison. We shall demand Democracy and Human Rights and an end to this brutal dictatorship. The Military Government of Prime Minister Abhisit hoped that by sending snipers to deliberately kill unarmed civilians, they would break the democratic spirit of the Red Shirts. They are mistaken. Their dreams of “stability” and a long secure future for the conservative elites are built on sand.

Yet the Military and the Government talk now about “reconciliation”. But this is no reconciliation. They offer nothing except talks with some politicians from *Puea Thai Party* without any Red Shirt

leaders present. What the junta is really saying is that the Red Shirts must quit their activities. The conservatives have stolen Democracy, they have overthrown elected governments, they have censored all opposition media, they have killed almost 90 unarmed civilians and they have locked up hundreds of political prisoners... and now they say "let bygones be bygones". The scandal is that some *Puea Thai Party* leaders are willing to accept this in order to protect their political professions.

Let us not forget that on the 19th September 2006, the Thai Army staged a coup toppling the elected Government of Taksin Shinawat. Soldiers sported yellow royal ribbons and the military junta claimed that they were staging the coup to protect "Democracy with the King as the Head of State". They certainly were not protecting Democracy, but they were claiming legitimacy from the King. Over the past 40 years, the Military have repeatedly destroyed Democracy and shot down unarmed pro-democracy civilians in the streets 6 times. Each time they claimed legitimacy from the King. No military officer has ever been punished for these crimes. At the same time as the Military were destroying Democracy, the yellow-shirted fascist PAD used violence on the streets of Bangkok, including the seizure of Government House and the two international airports. They were supported in all these actions by the Military and politicians who later joined Abhisit's unelected Government in 2008. Not one PAD member is in jail.

The present crisis has shattered many old illusions in public institutions, including the Monarchy. Yet many foreign journalists, who want to remain in Thailand, continue to trot out the line that "the King is highly revered". In Thailand, people go to prison for 18 years for discussing the King. Since the coup, and the continuous destruction of democratic rights and the rule of law by the Military and the Judiciary, a gigantic pro-democracy social movement has been built at grass roots level. We are the Red Shirts. It is the largest social movement in Thai history and it has branches in communities throughout the country. This is why it was so brutally suppressed by the Abhisit Government and the Army 4 months ago.

In many ways Thailand has moved back to the dark ages of the military dictatorships. Yet history never repeats itself in exactly the same manner. Today we have the Red Shirts as a mass movement of the people. Most Red Shirts now hate the Monarchy. That is a lot of people! The old Peoples Movement which was inspired by the NGOs has withered and become a right-wing pro-dictatorship support group. Even the Army has changed. It feels the need to have a puppet civilian Government, headed by a fresh-faced tyrant who graduated from Oxford University. Military juntas made up of corrupt generals are unpopular. But the conservative elites have a huge problem. They know that if they don't "fix things" they can never win a democratic election. They don't represent the majority. They also know that the King, their only source of legitimacy, will die soon.

Taksin's *Thai Rak Thai Party* (TRT) was modernising and it captured the imagination of millions of citizens. This is why the conservatives hated it. For the first time in decades, a party gained mass support from the poor because it believed that the poor were not a burden. They argued that the poor should be "stake-holders" rather than surfs. "Populist" policies, such as universal health

care, were developed after the 1997 Asian economic crisis and were a result of widespread consultations in society. This was no Socialist party, but a party of big business committed to free-market policies at a Macro and Global level, and Keynesian policies at village or grass-roots level. The TRT Government also believed in using a “firm hand”. This resulted in thousands of deaths in “the war on drugs” and the war in the Muslim Malay South. That is why I never voted for or supported TRT. Never the less, I was totally opposed to the coup and the PAD.

The conservative elites, middle classes, academics and NGO activists believe that Thailand is divided between the “enlightened middle-classes who understand democracy” and the “ignorant rural and urban poor” who are trapped in a “patron-client system”. There was a mistaken belief that Taksin cheated in elections by “tricking or buying the ignorant rural poor”. This was a convenient justification for ignoring the wishes of 16 million people. They also accused Taksin of corruption, while ignoring the corruption of the Military, the Palace and politicians from the present Government. These people must bear a responsibility for the killings that took place at the hands of the Military earlier this year and the fact that Thai jails are over-flowing with political prisoners. Many NGO professionals and academics have now joined Government sponsored reform or reconciliation committees. They are totally unqualified to talk about reconciliation or reform. But they are certainly aware of their own self-importance.

Any genuine reconciliation would require the following first steps:

1. Release of all Red Shirt political prisoners, including those jailed for lese majeste.
2. An immediate end to the Emergency Decree and an end to censorship so that Red Shirt media can function on an equal basis to the royalist media.
3. The setting up of a genuine public enquiry into the 2006 coup, the actions of the judiciary and the April/May 2010 blood bath. The enquiry needs to be staffed by Red Shirts and conservatives in equal proportions. The Prime Minister, deputy Prime Minister and Head of the Army need to stand down while the enquiry takes place, so that they cannot influence its findings.
4. A fixed date for a general election by 2011 must be announced. A new Electoral Commission must be appointed, made up of commissioners nominated by Red Shirts and conservatives in equal proportions.
5. All negotiations must involve all parties, especially the Red Shirt activists.

Red Shirts must tell *Puea Thai Party* in no uncertain terms that they cannot take the votes of Red Shirts for granted. If they want to be the party of Red Shirts they must fight for the kind of Democracy and Social Justice that Red Shirts want. If *Puea Thai Party* refuses to listen, then an alternative Red Shirt Party must be established.

Thai society cannot be reformed and the divisions cannot be healed until we have a return to Democracy. All political prisoners must be released, the generals, politicians and judges who are responsible for the destruction of Human Rights must be punished, and the power of the Military

must be completely dismantled. Some might say that to do this, Thailand needs a social revolution and it also needs to be a Republic so that the Military cannot claim legitimacy from the discredited and unprincipled Monarchy. They would be right.