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<b>TODAY</b>
<b>JobJob</b>
<b>Bangkok Post</b>
<b>STUDENT WEEKLY</b>
<b>ALLIED PRINTERS</b>
<b>SMS News Service</b>
<b>English Lessons</b>
<b>YEAR-END 2006</b>
<b>News</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General News</li> <li>• Business</li> <li>• Sports</li> <li>• Outlook</li> <li>• Database</li> <li>• Horizons</li> <li>• Motoring</li> <li>• RealTime</li> <li>• Perspective</li> <li>• Asia Focus</li> <li>• Your Money</li> <li>• Learning Post</li> </ul>
<b>Web Services</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Archives</li> <li>• Forum</li> <li>• Recent Editions</li> <li>• Hotel Bookings</li> <li>• Poll</li> <li>• Restaurant Reviews</li> <li>• Restaurant Search</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post Weather</li> <li>• weather.go.th</li> </ul>
<b>Classified</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Auto</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Property</li> <li>• Sales Service</li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media kit online</li> </ul>
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General news >> Friday February 23, 2007

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## OPINION / THAI POLITICS

### The silence of the intellectual lambs

*The Sept 19 military overthrow of an elected government has placed Thailand's academics in a difficult position*

By **PATRICK JORY**

The political earthquake that has rocked Thailand over the last year damaged more than just the country's political institutions; it has also shaken the academic establishment.

Since Sept 19, 2006, university presidents, deans and professors have accepted positions in legislative assemblies appointed by the military junta; "public intellectuals" write columns legitimising the regime, and political scientists have written revised accounts of some of the most sensitive incidents in Thailand's political history.

In a country where academics can exert great influence over public opinion, the political stance of many of Thailand's best-known intellectuals, both before and after the coup, has been called into question as never before.

Criticism has been especially strong on the webboards and blogs, which, because of the censorship of the mainstream media, have become one of the freest forums for academic debate in Thailand.

The role of intellectuals in the political crisis raises the uncomfortable question: Did their failure to support strongly enough the principle of respecting the result of democratic elections help legitimise the coup and the royalist regime it has put in power?

Did academics, who for so long have portrayed themselves as supporters of the "people's movement", betray the very people they professed to represent, who had voted overwhelmingly for Thai Rak Thai on three occasions?

Last month's publication by the academic journal Fa Diew Kan of a compilation entitled, "The Sept 19 Coup: The Coup for the Democratic System with the King as Head of State", may provide an answer to these questions.

This is a compilation of interviews, articles, statements, letters and even web postings by some of the most prominent Thai intellectuals, including Nidhi Eoseewong, Sulak Sivaraksa, Chaiwat Satha-Anand, Kasian Tejapira, Thongchai Winichakul, Somsak Jiamthirasakul, and many others.

The positions of intellectuals during the crisis can be broadly divided into three groups.

The first group gave their full support to the anti-Thaksin movement, and particularly to the People's Alliance for Democracy.

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They also backed the call for royal intervention to resolve the crisis, through the use of Article 7 of the (now abrogated) 1997 Constitution.

A number of them have continued to publicly support the royalist regime that was installed after the coup.

The second group enthusiastically joined the movement to oust Thaksin Shinawatra, but rejected the call for royal intervention.

This is the group that was subject to withering criticism by Thammasat political historian Somsak in a series of widely circulated webboard postings, which are included in Fa Diew Kan's "The Sept 19 Coup".

Mr Somsak accuses the academics who took this position of "opportunism", since knowingly or not, their support for the anti-Thaksin movement helped pave the way for the overthrow of the Thaksin government.

The third, much smaller group, whose voices were mostly confined to webboard postings, took the position that no matter what one thought of Mr Thaksin, one had to respect his legitimacy based on the fact that he had been elected on three successive occasions by an overwhelming majority of the people.

Sept 19 placed Thailand's intellectuals in a difficult position.

Many of them had a pedigree deriving from the student democracy movements of the 1970s, and played leading roles in the "people's movements" of the 1990s.

Yet in the crisis of the last year they were unwilling to support the democratically-elected prime minister in the face of a movement that had declared its intention to do everything possible, including using extra-constitutional means, to depose him.

How can one explain their lack of support for the democratically-elected government?

Some believed that Mr Thaksin had abused the political system to the point that its check-and-balance mechanisms could not function.

Others were outraged at alleged human rights abuses, particularly over the government's handling of the war on drugs and the violence in the South.

But there is perhaps another explanation.

Underlying these criticisms one can also detect among many academics a deep-seated distrust of liberalism, which explains their discomfort with the principle of elections, politicians, and their obvious distaste for capitalism and globalisation.

Most of these academics had their overseas academic training in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when social-science departments in the Anglo-American academic world were heavily influenced by a variety of anti-liberal theories: classic Marxism, post-colonialism and Third World nationalism (with a good dose of anti-Americanism) and, more recently, post-modernism.

This was the intellectual culture that many Thai graduate students at that time imbibed while completing their PhDs.

On their return to Thailand, where liberal principles have never been able to firmly establish themselves since the overthrow of absolute monarchy in 1932, the Marxist, post-colonial/nationalist or post-modern critiques of Thai society engaged in by these academics were strangely in line with the conservative political culture that has taken hold since the 1970s, which historian Thongchai refers to as "royalist nationalism".

The similarities are striking, and were on display in the academic debate of 2006: a willingness to discount the importance of democratic elections; a loathing for capitalism; an elitist distaste both for elected

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politicians (especially from the provinces) and businessmen; and perhaps most importantly, a belief in the intellectual's right to "speak for the people".

The mantra recited by many of Thailand's intellectuals during the standoff between Mr Thaksin and the forces aligned against him was that "elections are only one part of democracy", "Thaksin had already destroyed democracy", "Thaksin lacked morality", "the villagers sold their votes", or "the villagers are not educated enough".

What is most surprising is that the intellectuals who demonised the elected prime minister week after week throughout the 2006 crisis, have been generally silent on the royalist-military coup of Sept 19.

Some have even accepted positions in the appointed National Legislative Assembly and the Constitution Drafting Committee.

The essays and comments contained in Fa Diew Kan's compilation, "The Sept 19 Coup", may thus read as an attempt by academics to justify the positions they took before Sept 19.

It will therefore make essential reading for those wanting to understand why a majority of academics and intellectuals in 2006 refused to support a government elected by the majority of the people of Thailand.

The writer is with the Regional Studies Programme, Walailak University, southern Thailand.

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