

[Tim Forsyth](#)

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# **Thailand's Red Shirt Protests: Popular Movement or Dangerous Street Theatre?**

Tim Forsyth  
Development Studies Institute  
London School of Economics and Political Science

[t.j.forsyth@lse.ac.uk](mailto:t.j.forsyth@lse.ac.uk)

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## **Thailand's Red Shirt Protests: Popular Movement or Dangerous Street Theatre?**

Between March and May 2010, nearly 90 people were shot dead and more than 2,100 injured in the most serious street fighting in Bangkok for nearly two decades. Television images showed protestors dressed in Red Shirts using slingshots to fight soldiers armed with guns and tanks while shops and buildings burnt.

To some observers, these events were a class-based movement of poor people from Thailand's rural zones protesting at an undemocratic government and the lack of inclusion in economic development (e.g. Ungpakorn, 2010).

But there is also evidence that these protests – while based on a large component of mass protest from poorer people - were also carefully managed street theatre. Rather than demonstrating the power of a workers' movement, a variety of factors suggest these conflicts represented clever opportunism of the deposed prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra combined with a variety of symbolic actions by the poorer activists. This combination of influences meant that the conflicts in 2010 were not a unified class-based movement, but an alliance of actors using sporadic and not always successful tactics to influence Thai politics.

What insights can the 2010 Red Shirt protests of Thailand offer to social movement studies?

### *Background*

On the face of it, Thailand has good reason to experience political conflict on the grounds of inequality. Thailand's rapid growth as an economic power since the 1970s has not simply occurred through industrialization, but also through a long-term and planned centralization of political power. In part, this political concentration was a deliberate ploy during the Cold War and Vietnam War to maintain Thailand as a capitalist and pro-West state among socialist neighbors (Glassman, 2004). Thailand has experienced military rule for most of its history since its establishment as a modern kingdom in 1932. For large parts of the 1970s, many rural areas were strictly controlled for national security. Democratic elections (beyond short-term experiments) were held initially only in 1988, and even then disturbed by military coups in 1991 and 2006.

This concentration of power has also reflected, and indeed perhaps caused by, the growth of Bangkok. Bangkok is some 40 times larger than Thailand's next city of Chiang Mai, and Bangkok's elites have usually ruled Thailand. Most prime ministers since military rule have been retired generals, who have often created political parties based on their own personalities and supporters rather than pre-defined political positions of left and right. Moreover, Thailand's aristocratic classes also carry power – although analysts disagree about the individual role of the king himself (Handley, 2006). King Bhumiphol Adulyadej has ruled since 1946, and has occupied a position of usually unparalleled support from Thai society. He clearly intervened to reduce military power in 1973 and, less strongly, in 1992. But his visible role since then has been much less.

Responses to the military elite, however, have been slight. The Communist Party of Thailand swelled following military crackdowns during the 1970s, but quickly weakened in the 1980s. Since the 1980s, many villagers protested that they were not included in the immense growth experienced in Bangkok – or against infrastructure projects such as dams or power plants if they threatened livelihoods (Forsyth, 2007). But these protests rarely slowed down Thailand’s modernization. They also did not lead to an identifiable and long-term left-wing, or pro-poor, source of political power. During the 1990s, a coalition of rural associations and trade unions emerged under the name the Assembly of the Poor, which supported rural protests, and sometimes took to Bangkok’s streets (Missingham, 2004). But the Assembly diminished in the late 1990s, perhaps coincidentally with the Asian financial crises, and perhaps because of the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra.

### *The rise of Thaksin*

The immediate origins of the 2010 conflicts can be linked to the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister of Thailand.

Thaksin broke the mold for various reasons. First, Thaksin did not come from Thailand’s older elites, but instead was born in Chiang Mai from a relatively lower class background as a police officer. He then made a fortune on the back of a state-allocated monopoly for providing mobile phones and communications in the 1980s-1990s. Thaksin was one of the growing number of Thailand’s new business elite, whose success did not depend on historic ties to the army or royal family (Baker and Pasuk, 2009).

Second, Thaksin overtly targeted the poorer rural voters of Thailand in order to get electoral support. When he turned to politics in the late 1990s, he adopted a populist program, and deliberately asked rural voters what they wanted out of government. In addition, Thaksin appealed because he was recognizable as a winner in business, and a long-wanted solution to the problems of the financial crisis. He created the popularly-named *Thai Rak Thai* party (‘Thais Love Thais’), which won support from the rural heartlands of northern and northeastern Thailand (McCargo and Ukrist, 2005).

*Thai Rak Thai* was elected in 2001, and Thaksin became Thailand’s first prime minister to remain in power for his elected period. He was then re-elected with a larger vote in 2005. *Thai Rak Thai* passed some of Thailand’s most progressive reforms for poorer citizens, including a universal cheap health care program (the ‘30 baht scheme’), cheap loans for villagers (the ‘One million baht village loan scheme’), and marketing of products made by each locality (‘One tambol one product’).

But Thaksin also attracted criticism for alleged corruption and misuse of power. He was blamed for mishandling and inciting the violence in Thailand’s Muslim far south. Thaksin often acted like someone who did not know the difference between his own responsibility and that of the country. (Famously, he once claimed to be buying

Liverpool Football Club, and then implied that this would be paid for out of Thai public money: observers believe this was a public relations trick).

Most controversially, Thaksin fell from grace rapidly when he sold his family business, the Shin Corporation to the rival Singapore sovereign wealth fund and avoided paying tax in 2006. A new political organization, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), arose to challenge Thaksin directly. This organization, led by a previous business associate of Thaksin plus a rival politician, organized street protests in Bangkok with supporters dressed in yellow shirts – the color used to celebrate the King's birthday – and consequently became known as the 'Yellow Shirts.' Declaring that they 'fight for the King,' and declaring Thaksin to be a secret republican, they urged Thaksin to step down. One Yellow Shirt leader also controversially claimed rural voters could not be trusted to vote because they lacked sufficient knowledge and judgment. Thaksin, while denying any opposition to the royalty, finally agreed to step down in 2006. But, apparently worried that he might not do so, the army intervened in September 2006 and deposed Thaksin in a coup.

#### *The 2006 coup and aftermath*

The army justified the 2006 coup was on the grounds of restoring national security and protecting the monarchy. Rumors suggested the coup was particularly backed by the Queen and the head of Thailand's Privy Council (and ex-prime minister), General Prem Tinsulanonda. Many Thai people either saw the coup as a necessary evil, or despaired that military tactics should overthrow democracy yet again (Funston, 2009).

The military government ruled for just over one year. It passed a new constitution that increased the regulation of prime ministers. It also disbanded the *Thai Rak Thai* party, and undertook legal action against alleged corruption by Thaksin and his wife. But in the general elections of December 2007, the winners were the *Palang Prachachon* ('People Power') party – a new force, funded by Thaksin and modeled on *Thai Rak Thai*. Ironically, however, the initial leader of this party, Samak Sundaravej, had a reputation for opposing pro-democracy demonstrations during the 1970s.

This new party, however, did not last long. In October 2008, the Yellow Shirts seized Bangkok's two airports to demand that the government step down because it represented the interests of a deposed and discredited prime minister. This protest coincided with an official investigation into alleged electoral malpractice by *Palang Prachachon*. When the party was found guilty of buying votes during the 2007 election, it stood down, and was disbanded with two other parties. In resulting inter-party negotiations, a new coalition led by the *Prachathipat* (Democrat) party arose took office. This new government was constitutionally legitimate – but it was not based on the majority of the electoral vote, and indeed was supported by the Yellow Shirt faction. The government tried to restore stability to Thailand, but continued to press charges against Thaksin, eventually finding him guilty of misusing his power; sentencing him to two years in jail if he returned to Thailand; and, in early 2010, seizing 1.4 billion dollars of Thaksin's assets.

But this new government also attracted a new form of political opposition. A parallel group to the PAD emerged, calling itself the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), which represented the interests of the deposed political parties and of Thaksin. These protestors became known as the Red Shirts, to distinguish them from the yellow, and to hint at their relatively poorer support. In March 2009, they invaded a meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and sites in Bangkok, causing embarrassment to the government and a strong police response. Then, in 2010, they arrived in their thousands in central Bangkok.

#### *2010: Mobilization or symbolism?*

According to left-wing analysts such as Giles Ungpakorn, the 2010 Red Shirt protests are an unsurprising, and indeed inevitable response of Thailand's poor to decades of being ignored, and by the increasingly unjustified attempts of Thailand's military and royal elite to control Thailand (Ungpakorn, 2007, 2010). These analysts point to the 'unelected' status of the current government, the existence of a coup to overthrow Thaksin, and the refusal to settle problems through new general elections. They also point out how no-one involved in occupying Bangkok's airports in 2008 has been prosecuted, despite the negative impact on Thailand's reputation and thousands of businesses.

Moreover, these analysts claim that the Red Shirts protests were funded by villages and community organizations in rural Thailand, and then supported in Bangkok by the urban working classes who provided food and money. The historic organizational structure of the Assembly of the Poor provided a means to bring rural protestors together, and take them to Bangkok. These analyses portray the Red Shirts as a locally governed, poor-people's movement interested in social justice.

Other evidence, however, suggests that Thaksin or his supporters seized opportunistically on this longer-term disaffection in order to distil a crisis in 2010. Unsubstantiated claims say that representatives of the *Pheua Thai* ('For Thais') party – the pro-Thaksin party that has succeeded the now defunct *Palang Prachachon* – offered money to villagers in the northeast to attend rallies in Bangkok.<sup>1</sup> They also offered large payments in the event of death and the cancellation of village debts if the new party were elected. Political activism in Thailand of course is full of such precedents, and indeed Thaksin was claimed to fund the Assembly of the Poor during the 1990s because it helped destabilize the then government (Baker and Pasuk, 2009). It would be unfair to suggest that Thaksin paid all protestors; or that protestors were Thaksin's 'stooges.' But the role of Thaksin seems integral to form and purpose of these protests in 2010, with the explicit intention of calling new elections after the deposal of Thaksin and the legal and financial actions against him.

There are also other uncertainties. Newspaper reports claim that the Red Shirts contained some men (sometimes dressed in black) who carried automatic weapons and who shot at the police and the army – although Red Shirt leaders deny these men existed. Were these men fictional inventions of the government in order to justify the later crackdown? Or were they agent provocateurs among the Red Shirts who sought to escalate the violence? Certainly, some eight government soldiers were killed by gunshots during the protests. Similarly, some acts of

violence inside Bangkok – such as grenade explosions outside army buildings – were also described as evidence for both terrorism and government manipulation by both sides.

Also, were there different components among the Red Shirts that eventually became splits in the movement? Two weeks before the eventual crackdown, newspapers reported that the protestors and the government had reached an apparent truce by calling for general elections later in 2010. This apparent agreement was then reportedly rejected by the Red Shirt leaders. Did the Red Shirts refuse to trust the government? Or was it because the Red Shirt commanders hoped that the fastest response would come from forcing a confrontation in front of the world's cameras?

The protests of 2010, moreover, were full of imagery and symbolism: the vivid colors of the red-shirted protestors; the prominence of many women among them, often holding young children aloft in front of barricades and cameras. Many Red Shirts protestors were happy to be filmed using slingshots against the armed soldiers (despite the claims many protestors had guns). Was this a form of street theatre to command attention? Indeed, the protests began by Red Shirt protestors donating their own blood, and then pouring it, symbolically, under the gates of parliament house. All of these acts show that the Red Shirts were happy to be portrayed as powerless peasants.

But despite the violence facing the Red Shirt protestors, one final question is who would benefit most from this conflict? The likely winners of a general election would be the *Pheu Thai* party – the latest manifestation of Thaksin's political representatives. This party adopts an overtly pro-Thaksin stance, yet is also led by previous prime-minister, General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. As with the leader of the previous People Power Party, this man has often been characterized as disinterested in pro-poor political reform, and indeed has a reputation for enhancing his own business interests while in office despite costs to communities and environment (Fahn, 2003).

### *Making sense of 2010*

It seems hard to escape the conclusion that the Red Shirt protests of 2010 were a calculated coalition between two broad sets of interests. On one hand were the lower and middle-income peasantries of Thailand's north and northeast who believe – with some justification – that development in Thailand is avoiding them. On the other hand were Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters who wish to oppose the current regime, unfreeze his assets, and even possibly allow Thaksin to return to power.

In this sense, it seems both sides are using each other – the peasants to gain funding and political visibility – and Thaksin to mobilize people to destabilize the government. After all, this is a similar situation when *Thai Rak Thai* was elected in the early 2000s. Thaksin mobilized poorer voters to allow him to gain power. We should not be surprised if voters support him if he also provides them with benefits (Walker, 2008).

Moreover, the conflicts in Thailand also demonstrate different strategies of political mobilization and symbolism. Thaksin's electoral success was based on him offering direct benefits to Thailand's majority voters from the rural lower classes. The Yellow Shirts cannot outnumber the Red Shirts, but they adopt the symbolism of the King to claim authority. Ironically, this strategy might have backfired because it might have encouraged the King not to risk intervening against the Red Shirt protests because his name was already adopted by the Yellows. If the Red Shirts had refused to respond to the King then his authority would be severely damaged.

Meanwhile, the Red Shirts relied on the symbols of sacrifice, spilled blood, mothers and children, and powerlessness that have been used in various ways by similar protests since the 1990s. These different symbolisms add power to the Yellow Shirts (who cannot rely on the sheer number of votes) and to the Red Shirts (who might be numerically strong, but face opposition from the entrenched interests of the army and upper classes).

But which groups benefited most from the protests? At the moment, it seems the current government has lost prestige internationally, but it is still in power, and has not announced plans for a general election. Indeed, the suppression of the Red Shirts seems to have won support from many people in Bangkok and Thailand who have sought an end to the violence, and who despised the lawbreaking of the Red Shirts.

Thaksin and his supporters seem to have lost for the time being. The attempt to destabilize the government has failed. But Thaksin's funds can still – at present – support further general elections.

The poorer protestors, however, are in a different position. There is still no political party with an obvious agenda for addressing the interests of poorer rural areas. The violence and burning of Thailand's largest shopping mall, Central World, have also weakened their legitimacy. Thailand has seen many protests by militant activists from rural areas since the 1990s, but apart from *Thai Rak Thai's* policies of the early 2000s, few governments have adopted an overt and comprehensive 'pro-poor' policy position. Indeed, is it possible that the Red Shirt protestors – the ones facing the bullets in central Bangkok – were sent there by elites in order to swap one self-interested regime for another?

The answer – so far – seems to be that enough Red Shirt protestors were willing to risk that possibility in order to maximize their own interests. It seems entirely rational for citizens who feel marginalized from Bangkok's politics to support a political figure such as Thaksin who has provided them leadership and benefits in the past. The protests also gave international attention to inequality in Thailand, and the perceived lack of justice in the political system. In time, such publicity and public show of strength might pay greater dividends.

But despite these genuine concerns about inequality in Thailand, the immediate causes of the Red Shirt protests – as they occurred in 2010 – seem to lie elsewhere. Much as many would like to see the Red Shirt protests of 2010 as a mass mobilization based of poorer classes seeking to overthrow an entrenched elite, evidence suggests the



purpose and formation of events reflected a series of planned and opportunistic actions by a combination of different actors. These different actors were, firstly, the deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who brought his financial power and personal desire for retribution to the conflict; and, secondly, many poorer activists, who – with varying levels of militancy – wanted to exploit the opportunity posed by Thaksin’s dilemma and probable funding to use his case to force Thailand’s elites to take the lower classes more seriously. In turn, these actions triggered additional symbolic tactics of calling on most Thai people’s loyalty to the King; portraying the Red Shirts as lawless; and of the Red Shirts themselves presenting their members as unarmed victims. Despite the appearance of the Red Shirts as a mass labor movement, the main victor of this protest would always have been Thaksin Shinawatra, one of Thailand’s greatest capitalists.

The events of 2010, however, will of course not be the end of the story. When general elections come again, we can expect to see political parties seeking to court rural votes. Some parties will represent old military elites, and others will be funded by new business leaders. It is unclear whether Thaksin will still be allowed to fund electoral parties. The ability to call on the symbolism of royalty is also fading.

Yet, perhaps the clearest lessons of the Thai conflicts of 2010 are that the entrenched Bangkok elites are opposed by an alliance of a new business elite and lower classes – but that these allies are not always working for each other. Moreover, in the short term at least, the blunt force of numbers of votes and protestors can be withheld by a more symbolic force of how different actors portray themselves and appeal to what is considered legitimate in Thai society. This tactic has been used most prominently by the weaker voices – the electorally smaller Yellow shirts, who call upon tradition and the monarchy – and the still-unsuccessful Red Shirts, who have evoked images of victimhood and poverty. These symbolic acts are effective tools for social activists when fighting from a weaker position.

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<sup>1</sup> The author himself received emails from contacts in Udon Thani province, northeastern Thailand describing how villagers had been funded by *Pheua Thai* officials, although these claims are not verified.