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## Red Monday – The Roots of Thailand's Unrest

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The Red Shirts started this protest by pouring their own blood under the gates of parliament as a symbolic move. This weekend, their blood spilt for real as 17 protestors and four policemen were killed. On Monday the Red Shirts carried empty, red-coloured coffins through Bangkok.

The protestors who have filled Bangkok's streets in recent weeks are the popular face of the supporters of the exiled previous prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. They are the rural farmers from Thailand's north and northeast who feel that the current government of Thailand has treated Thaksin unfairly, and that the majority of Thailand's farmers and rural poor are not being listened to in Bangkok.

They certainly have a point. In Thailand's last general election, the party supported by Thaksin and the Red Shirts swept to power with a majority. But this party was found guilty of vote-buying and electoral offences, and was then disbanded. In the resulting horse-trading between different parties in Thailand's parliament, the new ruling coalition was not the one supported by the electoral majority.

Yet this problem cannot be resolved easily through a new general election. The problem is that Thailand's electoral politics are dominated by the immense wealth of Thaksin Shinawatra, who has the financial musclepower to influence elections and fund campaigns even though he is now exiled from Thailand because of corruption and abusing his power when in office. Thailand is in the unprecedented position of having its politics influenced by someone who would be imprisoned if he returned to Thailand, but whom the current government has been unable to muzzle.

It is certainly ironic that the Red Shirts are composed of Thailand's poorest people, yet are supported by, one of their most notorious tycoons. Thaksin swept to power in 2001 on the back of a slick political campaign and a new style of politics that presented an alternative to the decades of Thai rule from the army and allies of Bangkok's upper classes.

Thaksin was unusually rich. He had made his fortune on the back of a state-allocated monopoly on mobile phones and telecommunications during the 1980s and 1990s. He also had a popular touch. He was from northern Thailand. He launched Thailand's first satellite. He went on to own Manchester City football club. When prime minister, he befriended the rural voters by allocating cheap credit to villages, as well as Thailand's first universal and cheap healthcare.

But Thaksin also misused his power in office, and this allowed his enemies to dispose of him. Thaksin clumsily handled an anti-drugs campaign during the early 2000s that led to some 4,000 people – many of them innocent – being shot by police. His leadership stoked up tension between Muslims and Buddhists in Thailand's far south. He also used his influence to increase his family's wealth many times when he was prime minister. Most notoriously, he sold his own Shin Corporation to the rival Singaporeans in 2006, avoiding paying tax, and inciting resentment from the public. He was replaced in a military coup in late 2006 amidst rumours of him trying to influence the Royal Family, and was later convicted of being involved in a fraudulent property deal on behalf of his then wife, and sentenced to two years in jail.

Thaksin, however, did not go away, and he continued to wield influence from abroad. The 2007 general elections were won by a party that was funded by, and openly supportive of, Thaksin. When this party was disbanded for electoral malpractice in 2008, his Red Shirts then stormed political meetings in early 2009, and again in recent weeks. The Thai government's decision to freeze 1.4bn dollars of his assets earlier this year might have been a further incentive.

But what are the alternatives? If Thailand holds another general election, it is likely that the Thaksin-supported parties will win again. Will they then pardon Thaksin and let him return?

Thaksin's enemies are determined to prevent this outcome. The Army, in particular, were behind the coup that displaced Thaksin in 2006, and it is unlikely that they will act in a way to destabilize the current government. But there is a need to build

trust in general elections to achieve two currently unachievable things: representing Thailand's rural farmers, and excluding the influence of the exiled Thaksin.

But returning to elections will also increase the chance of unrest from Thaksin's other opponents – the so-called Yellow Shirts – who adopt a more traditionalist, middle-class, and royalist position than the Reds. The Yellow Shirts held the country to ransom in 2008 by occupying Bangkok's airports and surrounding parliament.

Violent events like these show how little trust the Thai people place in established forms of democracy such as elections and parliament. But on a wider level it also shows an important transition in Thailand from the age when military governments ruled with a King who was respected by all the population. The King is now 81 and Thailand is a much more complex and varied society. Stable and strong government requires elections to be representative and clean. The longer-term solution is building trust in general elections. In the short term, however, more violence seems likely.

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