

# Is democracy unravelling in Thailand; does it exist at all?

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WHAT seems to have come as a complete surprise to commentators and analysts in the midst of the American election has been the sudden emergence of a very confusing political uprising in Thailand. Most look listless as they try to explain away ambiguities like the blossoming of new and larger public gatherings or that "right wing" agitators are somehow mobilising the support of state unions.

The quick and superficial explanation that has gained easy traction internationally is that Thailand's democracy is unravelling. A cadre of reactionaries leading a motley group of royalists, businessmen and Bangkok elites is seeking to overthrow a democratically elected government. This extremist faction wants to roll back democracy and institute a largely appointed parliament because they resent ex-prime minister Thaksin's hugely successful policies to help the rural poor. The strong subliminal message however seems to be that powerful military and royalist elites in the country are promoting what looks, from the outside, disconcertingly like an anti-capitalist agenda.

Why should it be so obvious then that commentators, clearly briefed with this background, suddenly become limp and confused as they report on the recent events unfolding in Thailand?

Firstly the history here is not well understood. To many foreign observers, Thailand's evolution towards constitutional democracy since 1932 may seem to have taken far too long. However the change from an absolute monarchy to a lively, participatory democracy so far has taken only 76 years in Thailand.

Thailand was never colonised. In a country that was previously bereft of any strong traditions of common law, democracy or constitutionalism, progress towards democracy was always going to be difficult. In this context it seems a little astonishing that so much has been achieved in such a short time with so little bloodshed along the way.

Secondly, while there is a great deal said about the currently elected government enjoying a substantial majority, we do not hear enough about vote-buying and patronage in Thai elections. Vote-buying is such standard procedure here that it would confound many in the countryside if an outsider were to challenge it as "undemocratic".

Is this really a democracy when vote-buying is so ubiquitous? Is it still fair to say that the government was truly elected by a majority? How can vote-buying be stopped if the very people tasked with stopping it see it as critical to winning the advantage? These are all questions that commentators need to ask.

Thirdly, the poor, in fact all citizens in a democracy, want more from their government than just cash handouts. Most would expect to have some equality before the law in a democratic society.

Few understand that the "rule of law" as we know it in the West is not an innate part of Thai culture and tradition. Until now the rich and powerful have almost invariably been able to nudge, wink and bribe their way past any legal consequences. It is simply a game in which the enforcers are often as corrupt as the criminals. The current political upheaval has principally been the result of a recent and sustained effort by the courts to bring to book politicians who see acquiring a role in government as a business proposition in which they invest, by buying votes, and then reap rewards in the form of commissions once they are in office.

In the Thaksin administration, an electoral majority, bought largely out of his own huge personal wealth, gave the administration a mandate for corruption on an unprecedented scale. This was not simply taking commissions on infrastructure projects, it included policy corruption in which personal business interests were expanded and increased with government help. Classic conflicts of interest were exploited by the government in a way that had never been seen before in Thailand and were beyond the sophistication of the Thai justice system to either investigate or prosecute.

It is significant that instability should have arisen just now, when Thaksin, his friends and nominees in the current government are facing indictments and convictions in the courts for vote-buying, policy corruption, tax evasion and bribery. We have just begun to see the first of many court verdicts to come, and with them the government's anxiety about the future has risen to a fever pitch.

The present public backlash has been consistent in its condemnation of a government whose main focus since the election has been to change the constitution and hobble the courts in order to wriggle free from any impending verdicts against its partisans and members.

If one takes time to walk around and look at the main protest site at Government House, it's easy to see that the protesters there are not at all ideologues from middle class elites. They are, for the most part, normal Thais from all walks of life. Rising standards of living over the past 20 years, television, and better education have raised people's awareness of the law, as well as the rights and freedoms of those who live in other democracies.

True, there is still some regional disaffection, particularly in the northeast. However the most strident complaints are coming not from the poorest in those regions, but from powerful village chiefs, officials, police, army bosses and business interests who benefited directly from Thaksin-era cash handouts and rewards to cronies.

Finally, there are still a lot of shibboleths that need to be challenged about the practicality of the traditional Western democratic institutional forms in developing countries like Thailand. In the Western view, democracy is often conflated with republicanism, capitalism, legislative party politics and an inevitable debate between left and right. None of this however is absolutely vital to ensuring people's rights to freely participate in national government.

In short, while the strategies being advocated by the protest leaders may seem retrogressive to many, they arise from an understandable sense that

many of the forms copied from mature democratic systems that we take for granted in the West seem awkward and unhelpful. A more practical, Thai way must be found to bring economic self-reliance, justice and freedom for all in the country. Perhaps too, all of us need to try to evolve beyond the slogans and platitudes about democracy and begin to propose wider variations and more progressive ideas of governance in this 21st Century.