BC stands for NEO's Banned Classic. This article was originally published by our journal on 27.01.14. For some reason, this article is missing from Google search results. Since this article remains pretty relevant to those geopolitical events that are taking place on the geopolitical stage today, we deem it possible to present it to our readers once again. Should it go missing again, you may be confident that you will see it republished by NEO once more, should it still remain relevant by that time.

It appears that the fight for democracy has been dragging on for years in Thailand. The country has now been in an uproar for two months. The situation is critical and tensions are on the verge of boiling over as the country's government became paralysed due to the anti-government protests on an unprecedented scale. The mass protests are not caused so much by the current government's blunders in domestic and foreign policy nor are they caused by the government's corruption. Those who are fighting against the government have been unified on a platform of fear, a fear of the possible growing influence of the country's previous Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who was ousted from power in 2006 by the military, accused of fraud and corruption and has currently had to flee abroad. The current government of Yingluck Shinawatra, his younger sister, was formed following the parliamentary elections of 2011 where her Pheu Thai Party, which consisted of Thaksin supporters, won the majority and is now being seen as merely a puppet controlled by Thaksin.

The country's massive upheaval was caused by a law that was passed by the Parliament in November of 2013, but rejected by the Senate, which would have given amnesty to Thaksin and allowed him to return to the country.

The fight against the "Thaksin Regime" is organized and led by Suthep Thaugsuban, a member of the Democrat Party, who is one of the oldest political powers in the country. He created the People's Democratic Reform Committee and united numerous supporters around himself from the highest and the middle classes of Bangkok and the Southern parts of the Country, those who were the political pillar of support for the Democrat Party.

In looking at similar events throughout history, the current situation is reminiscent of the one that exploded in Thailand in 2008 because of another victory by Thaksin supporters. This was negatively received by his opponents. However, it was possible to cool down the political tensions of that period. The constitutional court invalidated the 2007 election results and prohibited the activities of the pro-Thaksin party of People's Power, opening the floor for the oppositional Democrat Party to take power, which had by then formed a coalition government led by Abhisit Vejjajiva. However, as early as 2010, riots by the so-called "red shirts" who supported Thaksin led to violence and bloodshed in the country and signalled the necessity to hold parliamentary elections in 2011, which led to another victory of the pro-Thaksin forces.

Why does his figure still cause such negative reactions from a section of the Thai population? For the middle class Bangkok residents, siding with the anti-government movement became a way to express their dissatisfaction with the violation of human rights and the strengthening of the authoritarian methods of government during the Thaksin period. Others, in particular entrepreneurs, were motivated to protest by his neoliberal policies.

It is true that the period when Thaksin Shinawatra was in power after winning the elections of 2001 and 2005 became a time of increasingly authoritative tendencies in the political development of Thai society, despite the formally existing democratic institutions of power. His regime is often called the "populist authoritative version of democracy". However, there is also another reason as to why a section of the Thai society responds with "fear" to the Thaksin regime. This is because his influence in the country went beyond the traditional political establishment.
Unlike his predecessors, the social foundation of his power rests with those layers of society who have traditionally not participated in politics and their interests were only indirectly expressed by whichever political group came to power. Thaksin Shinawatra was the first Thai Prime Minister who proposed and implemented the idea of increasing the material well-being of those living in the country’s poorer regions. His neoliberal policies in the economic sphere also coincided with this goal while leaning on the support of groups from large corporate businesses, which gave birth to fears in some circles of Thai society regarding the preservation of the country’s economic sovereignty and independence. The Thai political establishment was also unhappy with Thaksin because he challenged the traditional institutions of power in Thailand - the military, court system and the monarchy.

As a result of the measures undertaken by Thaksin to monopolize power in his own hands, the balance of political power ended up being skewed in the favour of his supporters, which dramatically narrowed the scope of political participation by the Democrat Party who has traditionally represented the interests of the liberally-minded parts of Thai society. The marginalization of their position within Thailand’s political system predetermined their involvement in the opposition to Thaksin rule, which has once again made itself known in full force today.

But can it be said that this anti-government movement facilitates the strengthening of democracy in the country?

Firstly, the movement is calling for the dismissal of the elected government. Secondly, it has paralysed the parliament due to the departure of members from the Democrat Party, which forced the Prime Minister to dissolve parliament on December 9, 2013. Thirdly, the unrest is currently prohibiting the next parliamentary election from taking place on February 2 of this year. The reason for this is that the Democratic Party is uncertain that it would triumph at the elections because it has not won an election since 2001. Fourthly, the movement calls for political reforms which are by their definition anti-democratic as they are aimed at dismantling the institution of representative democracy and creating a People's Assembly that would be under the auspices of the institution of monarchy and would guarantee a “flawless democracy”. This would be accomplished by appointing 100 members and electing an additional 300 from representatives of various professional groups to rule the country for 18 months with the goal of conducting further, still unknown, reforms and passing various laws, including constitutional amendments.

Essentially, the opposition questioned the viability of parliamentary democracy in Thailand, which would result in curbing the electoral rights and the influence of the poor layers of the rural population, who were the main backbone for Thaksin Shinawatra and his supporters. Power in the country would then, once again, belong to the traditional political elite, which was never too keen to resolve issues of social and economic inequality that were set by Thaksin Shinawatra.

Of course, these statements and actions by the anti-government forces are able to further ignite the situation in the country by causing growing discontent on the part of Thaksin supporters. The country could be plunged into chaos, where the only way out could be a military coup. Postponing the elections until a later date, and this possibility is currently being discussed, is unlikely to ease the political tensions, which could also be said of holding another election as the opponents are not ready to compromise.

Thailand, who has the second-largest economy in South-East Asia, is currently plagued by unhealthy competition of political forces that hold onto various ideologies regarding the nature of the country’s political structure. The dilemma currently facing Thai society lies in whether the political order is handled by the government who is backed by its voters or by the traditional institutions of power - the monarchy and the military.

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