

## Standing up for order in Thailand

---

04.13.10 - 05:54 pm

By Kevin Hewison

Guest columnist

The United States' longest diplomatic relationship in Asia, stretching over 177 years, is with Thailand. For decades, Thailand has been an important U.S. ally. Today, Thailand is in trouble.

Last Saturday, 21 people died and more than 850 were injured as Thailand's military attempted to clear anti-government protesters who had been rallying for a month. Apparently ordered in by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his security advisers, the military's action went badly wrong as protesters fought back.

This botched security operation has destroyed the government's credibility. Most of the casualties were the government's opponents, rallying as the National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship but known as red shirts because of their trademark color, seen in shirts, hats and flags. Formed in 2007, the red shirts brought together groups opposing the September 2006 military coup that overthrew the government led by twice-elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Usually derided in the mainstream media as "pro-Thaksin" or as a collaboration of paid agitators and ignorant farmers, in fact, the red-shirt movement mines deep resentment of the current social order that they see as unfair.

As a diverse political movement, the red shirts are not without divisions and problems. Some long for the exiled Thaksin's return, lauding the corrupt and flawed leader. Others have shown an aggressive streak, while some are politically naïve or promote money-based politics.

Despite this, the rise of the red shirts represents one of those brief periods of subaltern rebellion that challenges the established order. The red-shirt movement's emotive campaigns have challenged established hierarchies founded in the very inequality and injustice they oppose.

This makes for a movement that is detested by what is usually identified as "the elite."

The red shirts are mainly rural people and recent migrants to Bangkok's service sector and its factories. While the elite have done exceptionally well in recent decades, farmers and workers, while seeing their conditions improve, remain at the bottom of an unequal society. Even official figures show remarkably high rates of inequality of income, wealth, land ownership and opportunity.

Accustomed to running the country, its businesses and politics, the elite abhor red shirt talk of a struggle between aristocrats and commoners and "double standards" in the justice system. They worry that they are losing their control

over the lower classes.

Thaksin came to be hated by the elite he came from because his political support base came from the lower classes, especially in the poor north and northeastern regions of the country. Thaksin made promises of social welfare and support for the poor and then delivered on his promises. This made him spectacularly popular and saw him win a massive election victory in 2005. The elite worried that the poor were being politically mobilized.

In response, they launched a coup, promoted royalism, censored the media, and used the judiciary to ban pro-Thaksin political parties. Under an unelected, post-coup government, they changed the constitution to make it less representative.

Even this manipulation was insufficient, and when pro-Thaksin parties surprisingly won an election in late 2007, their government was immediately opposed. Using a combination of street-based politics and judicial intervention, the government was thrown out in late 2008. The current government was then cobbled together by the military and other elite forces. For the red shirts, the Abhisit government has never had any legitimacy, being seen as the handmaiden of those who rule behind the scenes.

In April 2009, the red shirts held their first major rallies against the government. These failed, degenerating into an uncontrolled venting of anger that was crushed by the military. Claims of deaths were never proven, but the red shirts learned important lessons.

They came back in March 2010 with a more united leadership, more discipline and supporters linked together by cell phones, political training and a network of pro-red shirt media. They also held a series of smaller rallies that prepared them for their “final stand” and produced a simple demand: dissolve parliament for new elections.

Their willingness to make a stand in the face of security personnel has frightened the elite. The worrying fact that police and soldiers were seen to be embracing the red shirts probably led to the fateful decision to clear the red shirts last Saturday.

Making matters worse for the embattled government, the country’s Election Commission has just decided that Abhisit’s Democrat Party should be dissolved for corruption. Without the Democrat Party, those who believe they should rule are more likely to fall back on the coup option to continue their rule.

Their government has been brought to its knees, but there are still calls from its supporters to do whatever is necessary to protect the established order. This is a dangerous conjuncture.

What can the U.S. do? The best option is to continue to promote democratic and non-violent solutions to the conflict. This involves support and good offices that enhance the opportunities for a negotiated solution.

*Kevin Hewison is a professor in the Department of Asian Studies at the*

*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.*

---

© heraldsun.com 2010