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# THE CONVERSATION

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## Thailand's street politics turns violent yet again

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In recent days, royalist demonstrators have hit the streets in Thailand, seeking to oust another elected government. Violence has again rocked the capital of Bangkok, where some 100 people have been injured.

Since exiled prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra won a landslide re-election in February 2005, Thailand has seen two rounds of royalist,



The ongoing anti-government street protests in Thailand are

yellow-shirted street demonstrations, a boycotted election, a military coup, a new constitution, two elections, the judicial dissolving of several pro-Thaksin political parties, two episodes of pro-Thaksin red shirt demonstrations and six prime ministers.

Theories abound as to what has caused so much political confrontation and violence. Some say royal succession – the king turns 86 this week – drives it. Others point to intra-elite or class conflict.

These factors cannot be discounted. Yet the basis of the conflict is a fundamental political and social shift that threatens the arrangement of power that was established in the 1950s and made strong by Cold War alliances. The military, monarchy and other hierarchical institutions, allied with a rapidly developing capitalist class, were at the centre of this arrangement of power and status. While the system sagged as the Cold War ended, it was reinvigorated by sometimes bloody military interventions and a resurgent monarchy.

Authoritarian and semi-democratic regimes ensured political stability and the economy boomed. Economic growth over four decades meant subaltern demands for reform were moderated. It was the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis and the subsequent rise of Thaksin that challenged the status quo.

Thaksin came to prominence just as electoral politics was being revamped under elite guidance. His approach to politics was novel: he developed an electoral platform that appealed to voters, especially in rural areas. His first election in 2001 was a landslide. His 2005 re-election victory was even bigger and showed how popular his policies were with the electorate.

Others, however, were less enthusiastic as they saw huge political popularity and power accruing to an elected politician. Voting for a leader and party that promised and delivered was seen as a challenge to the keystones of conservative political stability and the political and economic order: the monarchy and military. The support for electoral politics was a threat to elite domination.

The street politics of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the 2006 coup were the first bids to eradicate the threat posed by Thaksin and electoral politics. However, what became clear was that old tactics of coup, intimidation and establishing a weak parliament were no longer acceptable for many Thais. This rejection is seen in the fact that every election since 2000 has produced a pro-Thaksin government.

While the leaders of today's demonstrations are demanding an end to the so-called Thaksin regime, they are actually seeking a way to regain their capacity to direct change and maintain political control. These leaders are drawn from the Democrat Party. Formed as a royalist party, it remains the elites' preferred political party. The Democrat Party has led coalition governments in the past, but since 1975 has averaged just over 20% of the popular vote. As views have polarised in recent years, its vote has been higher, but it has never won a parliamentary majority.

The party's repeated electoral failures have seen it taken over by a leadership that supports extreme politics. Its leaders share a hatred of Thaksin and supported PAD's demonstrations in 2005 and 2008. Since losing the 2011 election, it has embraced disruptive actions in parliament and, increasingly, street demonstrations. Over the past few months, party boss Suthep Thaugsuban has used his organising skills to energise street protests.



More than 100 people have been injured in the latest round of protests in Thailand. EPA/Barbara Walton

Ironically, it was Suthep, as then-prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's minister responsible for security, who ordered the 2010 crackdown on red shirt protesters who were calling for an election. He allowed live fire zones and the use of military snipers in that violence.

As a result, Suthep's sudden embrace of non-violence in the current round of demonstrations smacks of opportunism. However, to date it is the government that has exercised restraint in the face of considerable provocation.

Suthep's core demand is that power be turned over to an unelected "people's council" that will cleanse Thai politics, eradicating the Thaksin regime. Like his PAD predecessors – many now with him – he rejects representative politics. His "new politics" is vague but abounds in the rhetoric of people's participation, anti-corruption and virtue.

Such oratory can be attractive. The elite sees a chance to re-establish its dominance. Many in the middle class, especially in Bangkok, identify the government's policies as corrupt and consider their taxes misused. Of course, the Democrat Party also has a core of supporters, especially from Suthep's region in the relatively well-off parts of the south.

Yet the fact remains that the majority of Thais have repeatedly rejected the Democrat Party at the polls. In its most recent period in power, the Democrat Party did a deal with the military that avoided another coup and saw the judiciary intervene to deliver government in late 2008. Over the following two-and-a-half years, the Democrat Party presided over substantial repression and censorship.

The current demonstrators can only succeed with another dose of military, judicial or palace support. If they receive it, and Suthep seizes power, the political reality will be considerably more authoritarian than his populist rhetoric suggests. A political "cleansing" and dismantling the Thaksin regime suggests a chilling despotism rather than a new politics.