

Red and Yellow: Thailand's Future in Check and Balance 赤 シャツ黄シャツタイ王国の将来、突いたり躲したり

Philip J. Cunningham

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Clashing views about Thailand's future are being played out on the streets of Bangkok, taking the form of forceful demonstrations, contentious commemorations and populist grandstanding by red shirted and yellow shirted rivals. Behind the searing rhetoric and policy clashes are battles of personality, in which patron-client links coalesce, regroup and solidify, rewarding loyalty with a top-down sharing of power and spoils.



The paramount patron of the red shirts, Thaksin Shinawatra, has been especially resourceful at exerting full-spectrum influence, even in exile, from the red villages in the countryside to the corridors of the red building in Government House. He can exert influence through his sister, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, his political party, Pheu Thai, "his" red shirts and a vast network of proxies,

cronies and allies in places high and low.

Former business associate and current nemesis, Sondhi Limthongkul, has in his own way enjoyed something of a charmed existence, enjoying the discreet support of traditional power holders, wealthy supporters, media influence through ASTV and sheer good luck. Having survived an ambush that left his car riddled with over a hundred bullet holes, he has now, in the face of bankruptcy, and a host of legal problems, declared that the do or die "final struggle" is at hand.

The mutually antagonistic red shirt and yellow shirt movements were founded, funded and brought to life by feuding tycoons with down-to-earth idiosyncracies and contrasting personal styles whose bitter struggles played out in the media and tapped deep discontent.

But even if the yellow and red movements originate in the mists of a feud and a friendship gone bad, the extraordinary battle of wills has broken open a Pandora's box of potent ideas—ranging from good to bad, benevolent to malevolent—while engendering a concomitant sense of empowerment among ordinary citizens who have been encouraged to act out their dreams and desires, taking to the streets and voting with their bodies. Even if the elite personality clashes fade, cease or subtly shift with time, and even if the principles work out an elite reconciliation deal of sorts, at the grassroots level the struggle they have unleashed will continue. Taking it to the streets, putting ideals on the line, challenging taboos and toying with new notions of what constitutes good governance and Thai identity

are experiences so transformative as to engender long-lasting influence.

Despite being funded by a billionaire, the red shirts have generally come to stand for, or in any case like to portray themselves as standing for, a broad plank of pro-poor policies, for the most part a jumble of pseudo-socialist ideas, replete with political symbolism and techniques borrowed from the now defunct Communist Party of Thailand. The red shirt leadership, like the yellow shirt leadership is urban, with a strong Sino-Thai strain, but it also draws effectively on the provincial elite including notorious “Chao Pho” or “godfathers”, who run local political machines. The combination of populist rhetoric, good ideas on health care, some handouts and a network of regional political muscle has been unusually effective in arousing Thaksin support in northeast Thailand, a historically marginalized and under-represented area that has been largely ignored by the yellow shirts, despite being ripe for change and vulnerable to populist appeal.

The result is confusing, with red shirt capitalists manipulating tropes that were once the province of the communists, playing upon powerful fault-lines, pitting rural versus urban, Lao speakers versus central Thai speakers, and peasants versus aristocrats. Despite the inherent hypocrisy of red shirts and red villages being a top-down movement led by an urban elite with deep pockets and deep vested interests, it has been effective in awakening and unleashing the legitimate discontent of the semi-disenfranchised rural masses.

To sustain the support of the poor through populist campaigns, words do not suffice, so a parallel agenda of the Thaksin political machine is to extend and deliver a kind of crony capitalism to the countryside, camouflaged as “development” which permits the red’s well-heeled urban leadership to make money while appearing to be generous, whipping up a whiff of promise with a steady

trickle down of funds to reward poor supporters.

Meanwhile the yellow ideology, if such a thing can be said to exist, also appropriates tropes and fault lines from past eras, especially the identity politics of the Thai establishment at the height of the Cold War when being “red”, which in those days meant communism, was posited as being unThai and antithetical to tradition. Ironically the seemingly pro-elite yellow shirt movement enjoys the support of many ex-communists with significant links to northeast Thailand and self-made men and woman of ordinary circumstances.

The core leaders of the yellow shirts are not that different from the core leaders of the reds, cut from the same generation of upwardly mobile, university-educated urban Thais who came of age during the violent and disruptive decade of the 1970’s when the state battled with the CPT for the hearts and minds of the Thai people. The basic similarities between the two camps are masked and their differences accentuated because they wear opposing colors and manipulate opposing tropes.

Hidebound, if not reactionary, rhetoric about protecting the establishment and preserving a timeless traditional status quo has been paired with outrageous acts of rebellion, raising the question of which speaks louder, action or words?

Yellow shirts claim to uphold the sanctity of state, religion and monarchy, which implies that people need to know their place and know the rules of traditional society, yet they have been as defiant, or more defiant, than the reds in staging bold acts of civil disobedience—the outrageous but peaceful and smoothly executed November 2008 takeover of Thailand’s international airport to pressure Thaksin’s brother-in-law to step down as premier in being a case in point.

On the other hand, the yellow shirts, in part

due to their close association with the lay Buddhist order Santi Asoke, and in part due to their enthusiastic embrace of the “pho-phiang” or “Sufficiency” philosophy popularized by the king, offer a compelling vision of a calm, harmonious society at a time when Thailand is being rocked by the shifting tides of global capitalism and foreign influence. In this sense, the yellows, while ostensibly traditionalists, are picking up where the Thai communists left off in the fight for sovereignty and self-rule in the face of American imperialism and global capital.



Ratachaprasong intersection facing Central World on May 19, 2012

In May and June 2012, the politics of the street erupted abruptly after a long quiescence, and once again agit-prop acts of defiance are playing a dynamic, if not decisive role in charting Thailand’s political direction. Four major protests in the past two months have played as strong, or even a stronger role, than the concurrent heated political deliberations in Parliament and cool legal wrangling of the Constitution Court.

After attending several mass rallies and following Thai-language coverage in the press, online and on TV, I am left with the sense that activism and unrest is on the upswing, despite

the apparent equipoise of the moment, because of the broad perception that the country is on the cusp of profound change.

The alarming number of coups that punctuate Thai political history also lends credence to the political sniping and media commentary suggesting that another coup is not out of the question.

Raging debate, broken promises and militant posturing within the red shirt movement jeopardize the uneasy balance achieved by the Yingluck Shinawatra administration as it tries to appease a political base still traumatized and aroused by the anniversary of the events of May 19, 2010 while simultaneously trying to please the elite with

whom a possible accommodation is in the works.



The red shirts awaiting arrival of red celebrity Jatuporn Phrompong

The ruling Pheu Thai Party is under pressure to scrupulously avoid any action that could give the trigger-happy military the pretext for a coup, while the opposition Democrat Party is for the moment turning to nit-picking procedural technicalities, limited street protest, legal maneuvering and making coup noises to keep the majority party in check.

As the pressure builds and positions harden, it is not just the future that is in doubt. Increasingly Thailand's past, that is to say, the broadly shared understanding of what has long been understood as the unchanging past, is also up for grabs.

This was vividly demonstrated in four mass demonstrations that took place in recent weeks, starting with the May 19, 2012 gathering at Ratchaprasong that brought traffic at the busy downtown intersection to a halt for a semi-sober, semi-festive commemoration of the roughly 100 people killed during the street fighting and crackdown of April-May 2010, to a skillfully executed yellow shirt demonstration that took control of key symbolic spaces and closed down parliament on May 31, 2012, followed by a demonstration in Udon in the rural northeast, composed of former Thai Communists protesting the rising influence of the red shirts, and culminating with the June 24, 2012 red shirt public commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the toppling of absolute monarchy in 1932.

May 19, 2012 rally



The May 19 memorial rally was by far the biggest demonstration in recent months, filling the giant Ratchaprasong intersection in the heart of Bangkok's commercial district with a wall-to-wall crowd of tens of thousands of red-shirted protesters on May 19, 2012.

First, it is not an easy thing to assemble and keep control of a mob so large as to halt traffic at one of the city's busiest crossings. Especially notable is the fact that a sizeable portion of the red shirt ranks were swelled by the thousands of rural supporters who required food, water and rest after being bused in from far-flung northern provinces. The crowd was not a happy one, there were many sulking faces, understandably given the somber memorial date meant to recall fallen comrades, but overall the mood was calm and restrained, policed within and without. Minor flare-ups, almost inevitable given the accidental stepping on toes and sheer thickness of the crowd, were quickly extinguished. Fears of retribution and abandonment associated with the traumatic events of May 19, 2010 were muted, the red shirts now being aligned with the ruling party

and prime minister. There were the normal crowd sideshows of people-watching, tasty food and elaborate temporary encampments, but the music from the stage was uninspired and tempers were short.

Then there was the buzz of celebrity sightings, accompanied by an undulating push and pull of the crowd and many outstretched hands holding camera phones aloft when red shirt hero Jatuporn Promphan, the most ebullient and provocative of the red shirt speakers, is escorted at street level by a team of beefy handlers on his way to the elevated stage, like a popular prize fighter being led to the ring.

Finally, there was no mistaking this for anything but a red rally; it was characterized by an impressive degree of crowd coordination and color coordination across a mass of people some forty thousand strong. Not only were the hallmark red T-shirts everywhere in evidence, but an abundance of matching accessories such as face paint, red shoes, red bandannas, scarlet ribbons, polka dots, and tacky plastic clappers were also in evidence. There was even a puppy dressed in a cute red outfit.



The red stage at Ratchaprasong remembering “friends who did not die in vain”

Overall, Bangkok’s “red tide” was more pleasing to the camera than the mind. Above the crowd unfurled red flags and banners, which at first glance bore a superficial resemblance to the student crowds at Tiananmen Square in 1989, but without the naivety or innocence. On the one hand, this was a serious commemorative event; rank and file red shirt partisans took heavy casualties in April and May 2010; on the other hand, that same event also saw acts of violence and arson committed by red shirts, and to this day the facts remain murky about unidentified militant supporters known as the “men in black.” The gathering may have been therapeutic inasmuch as it offered some solace to some who lost loved ones, while serving militant notice to society at large that the red shirts were still a force to be reckoned with. But the mourning of the dead had to share a stage crowded with other agendas.

The opportunity to reflect and remember with dignity was hijacked by the purported highlight of the day’s mass commemoration, a phoned-in pep talk by an absentee billionaire. Thaksin was sufficiently removed, in body and mind, from the angry and confused vibes of the red shirted flock ostensibly gathered to remember the dead, to make tone-deaf self-serving comments about how things were looking better and better for him all the time. In a speech that has subsequently been ridiculed by many frustrated red shirts and even some of the red media outlets, Thaksin effectively said, thanks for your help, let bygones be bygones, don’t let death and destruction get you down, I don’t need your help anymore, the good news is that I’m coming back to Thailand soon!

The absent leader was not so absent-minded as to suggest that the proposed across-the-board amnesty currently being pushed for in parliament had anything to do with him getting back 46 billion baht in frozen assets, but for once the tycoon’s pathetic, plaintive cry “what’s good for me personally, is good for the country”

failed to convince. The phoned-in speech from a five-star hotel in Hong Kong or wherever, left many unhappy activists milling about uncomfortably on the steaming pavement of the sun-drenched, rain-swept hallowed ground wondering about the sincerity of their paramount leader.



Thaksin phones home to red shirts (Khaosod online)

The red shirts have reached a turn in the road. Voices as radical and as sympathetic to the red shirt cause as exiled social activist Jai Ungphakorn and retired historian Nidhi Eoseewong both chastised Thaksin after his May 19 speech for putting his interests above the struggle for social justice. In a break with the folk hero treatment Thaksin usually gets from the red press, “Lok Wanni” ran a cover story with an abject-looking Thaksin, headlined, “Thinking the old way, doing things the old way.”

The reds are ascendant as the predominant color in street politics today, but they appear to be heading for an irreconcilable rift. There is a groundswell of realization that Thaksin’s needs are being put above those of the frontline activists who have faced real dangers and lost friends and family in the street struggles that he continues to seek to influence by remote control. Thaksin’s vast network, a mix of true

believers, hardcore opportunists and the ranks of the genuinely confused would do well to heed the clarion call of fellow activists who warn them not to confuse one man’s fortune with the fate of the movement. If, after sacrificing so much the poor find themselves yoked to a billionaire’s wagon, then all the class-transcending, “brother, sister” talk, and inspired rhetoric about being “for the people” won’t be worth a dime.

May 31, 2012

The yellow shirts, who have not been seen on the streets of Bangkok in a long while, bounced back into action toward the end of May when it looked as if Yingluck’s Pheu Thai party might succeed in pushing through legislation which, among a raft of other things, would grant her brother Thaksin amnesty and pave the way for his return.

On this day in late May, the hot season has not entirely yielded to the rainy season, with resultant high temperatures and high humidity. The yellow shirts, officially known as the People’s Alliance for Democracy, are keeping cool, hiding under hats, sharing bits of shade and fanning themselves on a barricaded road between Dusit Zoo and Thailand’s Parliament building. The crowd of about ten thousand is dressed for comfort, and while yellow is a good color to fend off the heat of the sun, the dress code is informal and far from uniform. Protesters sit in clusters, friends with friends, chatting gaily and exchanging greetings with passers by and acquaintances.



Yellow shirt rally of May 31, 2012

Those closest to the stage listen attentively to speakers including senior statesman and lay Buddhist Chamlong Srimuang and the hard-talking publisher Sondhi Limthongkul, but there is constant cross-talk too, as well as periods of rest and recreation when film actors and singers take a star turn entertaining the audience. The tableau is like that of a giant picnic, or college reunion; without the rousing populist speeches, it would hardly seem political at all, even though the crowd blocks the entrance to parliament. At times the more energetic members of the yellow shirts get up on their feet and start dancing, in accord with the aural cues emanating from a bank of speakers, rigged up to the microphone on top of a huge truck that serves as a makeshift mobile stage.



Sondhi delivers thundering oration from truck-top stage at yellow shirt rally

The yellow shirts old girl club is in evidence. Indeed, if anything women outnumber men at this rally, and the average age of the protesters would seem to be nearly twice the age of college students, a traditionally activist sector that is as scant in evidence here as it was at the red shirt rally. The politically-minded yellows are joined in the effort to block parliament with provisional allies in the Santi Asoke religious organization of lay Buddhists who provide calm and uncomplaining logistical assistance including generous servings of vegetarian food. A band of sympathetic activists known as the multi-color shirts who were especially active the previous day in securing the very space where the lightly yellow-hued crowd now placidly gather, cluster on one end of the crowd.

Judging from warm social interactions, and snippets of conversation, there is more than a hint of déjà vu in the air. The yellow shirts have been down and out and so much out of the public eye of late as to have been dismissed by media commentators as a spent political force. While the day's gathering seems to suggest

otherwise, it might also be true that the big victories of yellow shirt activism are well behind them, which helps explain the nostalgia.

“Remember the airport? Wasn’t that fun? Remember it, day after day, what was it, 193 days of non-stop demonstrating? It was tough, but what spirit. What a riot.”

Revisiting the successful rallies of the past seemed to be a kind of rapport-building exercise and maybe it even served to shore up confidence, as if the yellow shirts were trying to convince themselves that they can still make a difference. They remain confident, even if this is not their moment. The conditions favor the reds at the moment but conditions change.

The red shirts are enjoying their day in the sun. The new face of Thailand, Yingluck Shinawatra, is “one of them.” Implicit support for the reds also comes from the majority Pheu Thai party, the national police, the Shinawatra business empire, and increasingly from the corridors of the staid state bureaucracy and even some military elements. But being aligned with power brings problems of its own. Things change.



With Sondhi

One could even say that the reds are paying their rivals a backhanded compliment. Look at how they have adopted and co-opted to perfection crowd-building techniques pioneered by the yellow shirts! They too have their core leaders, their think tanks, their war rooms, their celebrities. They too have learned the art of assembling an instant crowd overnight, and the power to make it disappear the next day, with the ease of turning a faucet on and off.

Wandering amidst the beach blanket clusters of Yellow Shirt protesters in front of the Parliament Building on May 31, I was more warmed by what I saw than what I heard. Some of the we-them language employed by speakers trying to get a rise out of the complacent crowd struck me as illiberal and alarming in the same way red rhetoric is illiberal and alarming. Motivational speakers like Jatuporn on the one side, and Sondhi on the other, are undeniably

larger than life personages and Machiavellian crowd pleasers. But wowing the crowd sometimes comes at the price of being completely truthful and fair. The highly popular speakers of the respective camps adopt a militant, finger-jabbing posture that borders on hectoring, but the audience seems to eat it up.

Sondhi stands solid, a bit aloof but sure of himself, like an amiable school bully used to getting his way, while Thaksin, in contrast, has the wobbly air of an outcast, a bit over-anxious to please and trade favors but quick to sulk. Not the most popular kid in the class, but wishing that he was. Sondhi seems obsessed with loss. When I first met him in his office a few years ago, he pointed to a painting of the battle of Red Cliff inspired by the mythical Three Kingdoms saga in which a general presses on despite losing everything. Talking to Thaksin around the same time, I found him obsessed with acquisition. When I asked him why he wanted power when he already had so much, he said he wanted more so he could “give back”.

The speeches were peppered with the same kind of crowd-pleasing juicy hot stuff one hears at red rallies, full of bombast and hyperbole, but the crowd itself struck me as being considerably more relaxed, united and sure of itself than the red shirts were the other day. Maybe it's the difference of commuting from the suburbs instead of the countryside. Maybe it's the difference of sitting near a verdant zoo where public bathrooms are available compared with sitting in a naked intersection with no street level amenities other than an overwhelmed McDonalds. In any case, the yellow shirt gathering was more subdued in tone, in all senses of the word, than the last edgy red massing at Ratchaprasong.



Symbolic wreath on Thai Parliament gate adjacent to yellow shirt gathering

The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) gathering more resembled a giant picnic than the radical closure of parliament, although the street was lined with barbed wire to the north, police peered through the barricades and security was tight towards the south. No one seems to know if this is just a one-off or the beginning of a long new yellow campaign.

Yingluck Shinawatra owes her electoral success to red shirt support in the same way that the previous prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva was indebted to yellow shirt support, for providing both personal security and pressure on the opposition, which is to say the yellows and reds have switched roles, from being allies of the ruling party to being in the opposition. Except the yellow shirts are deeper in the political wilderness now, because yellow shirt relations with Abhisit's Democrat Party-I heard them being called “unappreciative scoundrels”-are

so bad that just about the only thread that still links the two is a shared opposition to Thaksin.

The Democrat Party are not in evidence at this rally, though their rough antics in Parliament earlier in the week—stealing the speaker’s chair to disrupt the session was one such bad joke, tossing the papers of a controversial bill in the air was another—helped create the pretext for today’s gathering inasmuch as the TV images of a dysfunctional parliament out of control played into the hands of yellow shirts intent on closing parliament down.

Meanwhile, the parliamentary opposition are trying their own hand at street action, organizing their own color corps, introducing the opposition splinter group of sky-blue shirts, hoping to attract and entertain mass followers with their own “celebrity” speakers. The rallies have not attracted large numbers to date, though the appearance of 100 red shirts at a recent Democrat rally caused a brief wave of panic and the escorting of former Prime Minister Abhisit out a rear exit.

While Yingluck has been ridiculed for verbal gaffes and is largely understood to be a pretty proxy for ambitious brother Thaksin, her calm demeanor and apparent aloofness in the past few weeks have served her well. She took the high road during recent clashes, as I learned from visiting one of the war rooms in the prime minister’s office during the parliamentary debacle. I sat with Sean Boonpraong, one of her advisors who monitor events as they unfold, and it was clear from instructions that were being given over the phone that the Prime Minister’s office was keen to avoid conflict or injury at all cost. After some discussion they acceded to the closure of parliament and a prudent effort was made to keep red shirts away from the yellow shirt rally to reduce the possibility of a clash that could potentially rock the government.

What’s in a color?

The yellow shirts have gotten good mileage out of their quasi-sanctified color. Yellow is traditionally associated with Monday, day of birth of the reigning monarch, but it also subtly, if not entirely subconsciously, invokes an association with the power of religion in a land where saffron robes symbolize the Buddhist clergy. Yellow shirts, like red shirts, have been co-opted to mean something, and in the course of polarized conflict, begin to assume meanings antithetical to one another that extend beyond the original limited scope.

For example, if using blood red banners gives demonstrators an extra kick due to subliminal association with militant communism, so too do the yellows gain an unearned but useful association with the tradition-sanctioned color yellow. The yellow shirt association with the Santi Asoke Buddhist sect bolsters this association, as does having an ascetic leader, namely Chamlong Srimuang.

On the other hand, yellow shirt leader Sondhi Limthongkul, like Thaksin, is regarded by his followers as somewhat charismatic but considerably less than saintly; both men are brash and aggressive businessmen, known for big egos and political ambition, but they are seen as having a role to play and are accepted as such.

Wearing yellow took on a more strident tone after the audacious demonstrations that drove Thaksin from Thailand before and again after the coup of September 2006. Notably it was a sea of yellow shirts that filled the cavernous airport terminal during occupation of Bangkok’s international airport in November 2008, and it was the power of yellow that served to ratchet up the pressure on Thaksin’s brother-in-law, Somchai Wongsawan, who was easily removed from his office as prime minister by a decree of the Constitution Court a few weeks later.

The color yellow has become so closely identified with the PAD in the last few years

that it is jarring to view dated photos of today's red shirt leaders -Thaksin, Jatuporn, Natawut, and others - wearing the royal color yellow like everyone else back in the days when it was everyone's color.

Like red, yellow has taken on too many new connotations to be everyone's color. While it still grants the wearer a positive valence that comes from the rich association with royalty and religion, like red, it is now first and foremost a partisan color that serves to mark, if not induce a subtle undercurrent of fear, reinforcing the "we" and "them" divide that haunts Thai politics today.

While red shirts in recent gatherings have been literally true to their name- so uniformly dressed in red T-shirts as to make the wearer of any other color look out of place - and while red spokesmen frequently invoke their color, "daeng", in a talismanic way, as if it were a coherent identity, strategy and way of life, the yellow shirts, in contrast, seem to have lost their tint, if not their way. The use of yellow at the May 30 and May 31 rallies was clearly optional, and "lueng", while rich in associations, is not a shorthand for a way of life.

The thick crowd of thousands of PAD supporters blocking the entrance to Parliament on May 31 were dressed in a random assortment of mixed hues, everyday clothes of everyday colors, with the notable exception of red, which was conspicuously absent.

The presence of the allied "multi-color" activists at the "shut-down-the-parliament" rally partially explains the color coordination failure, but since the yellow shirt rally was meticulously managed, monitored and skillfully guided in almost every other respect, it seems less a question of oversight than a shift in tactics. Yellow was minimally part of the mix, but not at all overwhelming or in any way dominant. After having played it so well and so long, the yellow shirts seem to be saying that

playing the color card is a game of diminishing returns, a superficial game of which the trail-blazing yellow-shirts have at last grown weary.

Nation, Religion and King, a trinity traditionally lauded as pillars of Thai society, had been elevated to a quasi-spiritual level during the war against communism, as if the epitome of a singularly Thai essence. Yellow shirt manipulation of this trope becomes all the more clear when put side by side with red. Ever since the rise of the Soviet Union and People's China, along with satellite regimes in Vietnam and Cambodia, red has been all but synonymous with communism. Prince Sihanouk famously described the Pol Pot group as the "Red Khmer," or Khmer Rouge, and the name stuck. Elsewhere, red flags, red stars and red headbands endowed the wearer with powerful associations, even to the point of intimidation, with revolutionary communism.



Red shirts gather under the yellow arches

What does red mean nowadays anyway? The Cold War is over and times have changed. Communism has withered and capitalism has won. Red has not fully shed its associations with communism, but it is much less politically freighted than before. These days, it's the color

of advertising, more McDonald's than Mao Zedong.

And, as advertisers know, red is an eye-catching color with a strong emotional valence, whether it be a red Ferrari, lipstick or a drop of blood; it demands attention and is not at all neutral. When used in partisan politics, it evokes ostentatious pride in those who choose to wear it, at the same time provoking fear or disgust in those opposed to it. Thai historian Thongchai Winichkul has trenchantly expressed the way red is freighted with negative associations in mainstream Thai society in an online article in "New Mandala" called "The Reds' Infection of the Thai Political Body." During the height of the May 2010 crisis, he penned an incisive blog essay on how reds were being viewed by their political enemies as inherently tainted and dirty, like germs.

Negative clichés endure. The pro-Thaksin elite, as rich, connected and high-flying as anyone, struggles with the up side and down side of being cast as red. A recent discussion on Voice TV, a Shinawatra mouthpiece, centered on why being red did not necessarily mean being poor or poorly dressed but was instead an inspirational state of mind. The red camp has its share of high society dames and dashing young millionaires, who find it necessary, from time to time, to "identify with" the poorest of the poor.

Positive and negative associations wax and wane with the times. Shirts are just shirts, you put them on and take them off, but the extent to which they give rise to malingering metaphors about purity and vigor is a serious concern.

While it is absurd for any group to claim to represent the "real" Thailand or to make specious claims of "purity," the mere fact that such emotionally freighted and divisive notions are being voiced and circulated is troubling. Mutually exclusive claims to being "real" and being "pure" are the hallmarks of fascism and

totalitarian control. That such dangerous concepts have currency today lends credence to the pessimistic view that Thailand will descend into civil war, which it just might, if the mutual demonization and polarization continues apace, splitting the nation right down the middle.

As if alarmed by the sudden uptick in yellow shirt activism, the reds staged another rally on June 3, 2012 with thousands again bused in to the destination, this time to the indoor Thunderdome arena in Nonthaburi. Judging from dramatic photos of the event, the wearing of red was all but obligatory, which suggests that the red shirts continue to find strength in the superficial solidarity of color-coded threads and are not likely to follow the yellow lead in quietly abandoning the motif of uniform hue any time soon. If anything, the attachment to the emotive color red is taking on a life of its own, so rich with imputed identity and rife with imagined meanings that it may well outlast the red vs. yellow feud which launched it.

One of the tragic things about the nation's self-division into opposed camps of color is the way this artificial construct has broken the natural solidarity of families, schoolmates, workmates and even comrades of long-standing. The atmosphere is such that it is hard not to take sides, and even when one strenuously attempts not to, one can still find oneself being assigned a "color" by others.

Nor is it unusual to hear sweeping generalizations that impute the "slavish Thai media" to be yellow, while the "ignorant foreign media is red," and so on. On the other hand, for any observer, local or foreign, to take sides with one color or the other is as thankless as meddling in a messy divorce. Thai politics is familial and flexible, there are few permanent friends and few permanent enemies.

Though competing colors can evince fierce passions—one need look no further than sports rivalries within nations and around the

world—shirts of opposing colors can be removed instantly and with ease. Unlike ethnic division and racial strife, the color frenzy of sports, or even civil war, can be overcome with a bit of willpower and a change of wardrobe. Fashion is not without the power to influence, but ultimately it is a superficial marker.

It is mistaken to assume that Thai red shirts are red-leaning in the communist sense of the word, even though they have openly adopted some tactics and paraphernalia used by the student activists and communist guerillas of yesteryear. While the Pheu Thai party and the associated red shirt leadership does include several prominent former Communist Party of Thailand revolutionaries, such as Thida Thawornseth and Chaturon Chaisaeng, both of whom once fought in the jungle under the red flag of the CPT, they are not typical of the whole nor is donning a red shirt a natural choice for most of their erstwhile comrades from the old days.

Talking to red and yellow camps about how they each see the other, I was left with the impression that former reds, in the communist sense of the word, are not just not “red” but outright anti-red if not “yellow.”

Therdphum Jaidee is a prominent former leftist who chose to don a yellow shirt rather when politics suddenly polarized in the last few years. Speaking with the amiable, avuncular former firebrand, I notice he is quick to draw a straight line from his days as a labor activist, and his role as a leader of the Thai Communist United Front, to his current position as yellow shirt organizer. He was, and is, working for the people.



With yellow shirt leader Therdphum Jaidee at May 31 rally

Curiously I heard similar thoughts echoed by the red shirt leader Jaran Ditha-apichai, an idealist whose activism dates to the 1970’s when he was on “the same side” as Therdphum, but whose shared journey came to a big fork in the road in 2006.

Jaran is a progressive thinker and activist who still clings to ideas of living a simple life in service to the people, described to me by red shirt spokesman Sean Boonpracong as perhaps alone among the core leaders of the reds to actually live on the streets with red commoners from the countryside rather than retreating to air-conditioned hotels and safe houses during the extended street protests of April and May 2010.

I spoke at some length with Jaran at his unadorned office in the Government House compound where he runs an informal “war room,” composed of one TV and a few computers, serving as an informal advisor to Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

We got talking about friends in common and the curious divisions of fellow Octoberists, veterans of the epic student demonstrations and military crackdowns of October 14, 1973 and October 6, 1976, who risked their lives together under fire only to find themselves on opposite sides of the barricades in today's highly polarized and contentious politics.

Straightforward and to the point, Jaran's response highlights the seemingly indelible gradations of color that bedevil current political dialogue.

"Name any of your friends who were once student radicals, I can tell you what color they are," he said. I ticked off a list of Cornell University graduates, then some faculty at Chulalongkorn University, only a few of whom are well-known, and he had a ready answer for each of them.

"Yellow," "red," "very yellow" "somewhat yellow", and so on, with yellow emerging as the dominant descriptor.

So many of the people we knew in common were being characterized as yellow that I had to wonder if I had unwittingly been traveling in yellow circles all along, or if there was something irrevocably pro-establishment about Thais who studied abroad and then took up jobs at elite educational institutions. But that didn't seem right, since many of the names I brought up were at least as anti-establishment as pro-establishment, especially militant student radicals from the two red Octobers, many of whose disillusionment with the establishment had gone so far as to take up arms against the Thai state, in conjunction with the Communist Party of Thailand during the heyday of guerilla warfare in the late 1970's.

"Are you saying half of the former revolutionaries are now yellow?

"In fact I would say at least 70% of the former revolutionaries are yellow, not red."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Almost all the NGO people are yellow. I think that's because they don't like a strong state, they don't trust any government."

"What about the musicians who have dedicated their careers to social issues, such Surachai, from Caravan, Ad Carabao, the bards of revolution, you know, "songs for life, songs for the people?"

"They're all yellow shirts," Jaran said wistfully. "The "Songs for Life" crowd is totally yellow shirt, well, almost, except for Kammachon, who are with us."

In "Understanding the Political Crisis in Thailand," Jaran Ditha-apichai has written about the explosive growth of the red shirt movement, which, for him, is a natural continuation of the radicalism of his youth. But he is perceptive and diffident enough to admit that many, if not most, of his former comrades have chosen a different path, a yellow brick road that hews close to the status quo.

June 15, 2012

An unusual demonstration was held in Udon in the heart of the northeast on June 15, 2012 that underlies the utter silliness, and deadly seriousness of reducing a nation to colored-coded camps. Over one thousand former rank-and-file soldiers of the CPT gathered from 20 provinces across Isan - the semi-impoverished region bordering Cambodia and Laos where the CPT inaugurated its armed struggle in 1965 and which was for decades the heartland of communist resistance - to denounce as traitors to the cause two former CPT fighters who have since become leaders of the red shirts. This is surprising for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it took place in a northeastern province that is considered a stronghold for the red shirts.



Anti-red shirt rally held by former members of Communist Party of Thailand

Prominent Octoberists Thida Thawornseth and Chaturon Chaisaeng, both of whom had once been aligned with the Communist Party of Thailand in the maquis, were singled out by core spokesmen of the Joint Thai Development Group, Isan Branch, for their shameless support of Thaksin. Factional politics within active communist movements has been known in the past to take on life and death dimensions, but it is surprising to hear such militant mutual recrimination in Thailand, especially since it has been 30 years since a failed CPT laid down its arms and accepted Thai government amnesty. The specific event that triggered this outburst, was what the old cadres called “dishonorable attacks on the Constitution Court,” a new and powerful judicial body which serves to check parliamentary excesses and has done that and more, over-ruling elected legislators and party list candidates on key issues pertaining to everything from proposed amnesty programs to changes in the constitution itself.



Ex-CPT guerillas denouncing erstwhile comrades in the red shirt movement

While it might seem puzzling that battle-hardened guerilla fighters should suddenly emerge from a long and tranquil retirement to express public indignation over ex-comrades impugning the dignity of the state judiciary, it does illustrate a critical fault line. There are many individuals with serious revolutionary credentials who are not amused by a canny billionaire’s hijacking of the people’s color, especially as it becomes more apparent that a large part of red machination is focused on restoring the personal fortune, power and glory of one man.

Maybe one result of excessive youthful radicalism is a compensatory conservatism in later years, especially for the “lost” youth who were permitted to return to the fold without rancor or revenge. Just such an amnesty program was in place in Thailand in the early 1980’s during the administration of Prem Tinsulanond, which successfully brought the rebels in from the cold, back to the city from the jungle, on condition that they surrender and renounce the use of arms.

General Prem, now a Privy Councilor who is known to be especially loyal and close to the king, is also a critic of Thaksin. Perhaps it is hard for some ex-radicals to jump aboard the latter’s red bandwagon due to a residual sense of indebtedness to the former. It’s not that

important issues are not being raised in the street, but the red-yellow divide is not a matter of policy judgment alone. Personalities count, and personal loyalties make a difference.

If many of yesterday's rebels are today's upholders of the status quo, it might be pointed out that the opposite is true too. After all, back in the day when the Octoberists heard the generational call to take to the streets to fight for democracy and then, when the situation polarized, took the fight to the jungle to struggle for regime change, Thaksin was busy promoting himself, first as a police cadet, next as a US-based student of criminology, then, significantly, as a well-connected police official. While many of his age cohort suffered the privations of living in the wilderness; shooting and being shot at in a brutal guerilla war, the future tycoon's own short period of youthful privation never went beyond flipping burgers to support himself while studying in Texas and Kentucky.

The red-shirt reaction to the revolutionary "red" demonstration in Udon against the alleged betrayal of "red" values was immediate and dismissive; the red media framed it as a mere publicity stunt in which old, over-the-hill men in Mao caps "who must have been paid to do it by the elite", were not worth paying attention to as they were but a bunch of "discredited losers," "communist scum" or simply "stupid buffaloes."

That the national conversation should be full of such vituperation given today's polarized atmosphere is no surprise, but it would be a mistake to dismiss the old revolutionary soldiers as wastrels without influence. In Thailand today there are tens of thousands of men and women like them, former idealists who know a thing or two about loading an AK 47 and the cruel realities of guerilla war, mature men and women who once put their lives on the line to fight tyranny and who sacrificed the springtime of their youth on the

altar of revolution.

While a handful of the Octoberist generation have become visibly partisan advocates for red shirts or yellow shirts, the bulk of that lost generation is waiting, watching from the sidelines, worried about Thailand's troubled color politics, stirred by old feelings of idealism and perhaps tempted by nostalgia to don the headbands and join the fray, but their station in life has changed, with responsibilities as parents and teachers, community leaders and public servants. Now in their prime as bureaucrats, diplomats and professors, or as business men and women, some with bureaucratic influence or substantial soft power in the media, the Octoberist generation is wizened but perhaps a bit wiser than before.

In any case, the former reds, divided though they may be, aged and dissipated as some may have become, even conservative and reactionary as a fraction of them may be, still set a high standard for ascetic youthful idealism compared to the relatively materialistic new generation that invokes the red tradition and the rhetoric of radical change in the shopping centers of Bangkok.

For some of the former radicals I spoke to, Thaksin is at best a means to an end, a likeable capitalist perhaps, an unpalatable politician perhaps, someone who takes in order to give perhaps, but ultimately an expendable member of an awkward united front.

Thaksin did not become rich by sacrificing his youth for the sake of the nation or a less materialistic world. Nor did he climb to the heights of power through humility, diffidence and willingness to serve others; in contrast he has always insinuated that he is special, that he is different, that he is above the law, that he alone is indispensable. Reds can come and reds can go, but in the end he alone must be in charge, reunited with his old fortune, ready to reap a new one.

But after the heartbreak of the May 19, 2012 rally, when Thaksin thanked the red flock for getting him this far, and wished them well, a number of the red shirts got the uncomfortable feeling that they themselves were the expendable ones.

June 24, 2010

The red shirt rank and file continue to demonstrate, pushing the envelope, challenging the status quo, invoking history and identifying historic heroes. Red shirts rhetoricians have aided and abetted this process by finding ways to link today's uncertain movement with the almost hallowed democratic movements of the past. Voice TV did some substantial programming on the twentieth anniversary of the popular democratic uprising of May 1992, though invocation of the latter begged the awkward question as to why Chamlong Srimuang, one of the most heroic figures of the "Black May" challenge to military dictatorship in 1992, was now a leader of the yellow shirts. This, and the fact that Thaksin had business links to one of the coup makers was not convenient to talk about; instead the focus was shifted to the activist Jatuporn, who was not half as prominent as Chamlong in the events of Black May, but one the reds could claim as their very own.

Undeterred by the fact that many of those lauded as democratic heroes by the media do not follow the red line, red strategists dig deep in the past, creating links where none previously existed as if snatched from the thin air, positing a deep identification with bold, socialist-leaning thinkers such as Jit Phumisak and Pridi Panomyong, who have effectively served as patron saints of the student left since the 1970's.

Both men had an uncomfortable relationship with the monarchy. Pridi helped to overthrow the absolute monarchy as a member of the People's Party in the coup of 1932, was briefly

forced into exile, then came back to serve a short stint as Prime Minister before being pressured to leave Thailand for good, spending the rest of his days in exile in China and France.

Jit, born in 1930, is the ultimate red, sometimes invoked by red shirts to establish their political lineage. A brilliant linguist and historian, Jit is known for his translation of the Communist Manifesto into Thai and his original works on the nature of Thai feudalism. He joined the CPT after getting out of prison but his life was cut short by an ambush near his guerilla base in northeast Thailand.

Pridi is perhaps the foremost hero in the Thai democratic pantheon because he is seen as the brains behind the 1932 coup against absolute monarchy that marks the start of Thailand's quest for democracy.

To the boosters of Thaksin who say their man is a kindred spirit to Pridi (Thaksin, not known for ego control, has compared himself to Nelson Mandela, Aung San Su Kyi and nearly every contemporary saint short of Mother Theresa) the answer is simple. To paraphrase Prawet Wasi, an influential author and political commentator who has not been unfriendly with Thaksin in the past; "Sure, you're another Pridi, and he had the decency to stay away lest the kingdom be thrust into chaos, so follow his good example and stay away."

In any case, the 1932 "change in governance" coup co-led by Pridi is an obligatory reference point in textbooks— and until early in the current reign it effectively served as Thailand's national day, but this year marks the first time since the late 1950's that the People's Party coup of '32 has been celebrated with any enthusiasm.



Charnvit Kasetsiri speaks to the Bangkok Post

The best coverage I have seen on the topic, in a field of scant coverage, was a Bangkok Post interview with former Thammasat Rector Charnvit Kasetsiri and studio discussion of the June 24, 2012 commemoration broadcast by the often-engaging, sometimes enraging “Voice TV.”

The red shirt strategists have effectively lifted the date from dusty texts and resurrected it as an inspiration in the contemporary Thai struggle for democracy. It can also be seen as a coded attack on the monarchy, a way of keeping bubbling republican feelings in check for the time being, safely fenced in and restricted to the old historical matters, but open to allegory and interpretation.

Red shirts are regularly subjected to accusations of being anti-monarchy, a perception fueled by swings between effusive praise and the harsh rhetoric of a vocal republican fringe within the movement. Whether this bold minority speaks for many or most red shirts is hard to know — free discussion about how Thais really feel about the monarchy is in part constrained by a self-censorship born of familiarity and fondness, and in part due to the all-too-real fears of being accused, and possibly imprisoned, due to overzealous application of the lese majeste law — but in any case the republican wing of the red shirts is likely to find itself increasingly at odds with the administration of Yingluck Shinawatra, whose eagerness to strike a balance and make amends with the palace has come at the price of stifling the more radical tendencies of the people who elected her.



Some red shirts cast the Shinawatras as the saviors of Thai democracy

The June 24, 2012 commemoration attracted many thousands of demonstrators around the Democracy Monument, itself an architectural relic of the “Khana Rassadorn period” and the royal thoroughfares of the old city. The day’s celebration, which included re-enactments of the famous coup went off without a hitch, but the thought of it had provoked sufficient alarm for it to be heavily policed and, according to red shirt commentary online, ignored or played

down by the “cowardly” mainstream media.

The facts of the “mother of all Thai coups” are not so much disputed as widely open to interpretation. If there is a lingering whiff of controversy about the coup of '32, it is in part because it touches on the quasi-taboo topic of the monarchy, but also because it was the first of many coups, and the first cut is the deepest. Coups have been so frequent since then – at least 18 of them – as to be regarded as a standard instrument in the Thai political toolbox.

Coup groups typically hail from the military and justify their willing application of violence as a necessary means to the lofty ends of quelling corruption or civil strife, all in the name of bettering the nation. If they start out high-minded, they don't stay that way long, failing not only to deliver democracy, but quickly become corrupted and burdened with unintended consequences. This is as true of the coup of 1932, currently celebrated by red shirts, as the coup of 2006, the coup that deposed Thaksin and led to the creation of the red shirts.

In the prevailing narrative for people who don't pay much attention to history, the 1932 event has something to do with democracy, and something to do with the monarchy, but it has been tied up neatly in a box and put aside on a shelf, neglected but not discarded.

A more robust interpretation, offered by the red commemoration during the last week of June, was that 1932 was one bookend of the struggle for democracy, for which today's red shirts are still fighting, and ready to bookend on the other side after 80 years of struggle.

One significant achievement of the rally was to draw on the cooperation of students from Thammasat, an institution founded by Pridi. University students dominated the mass demonstrations of the 1970's but have never again been as active since and have been

notably absent from most recent gatherings of reds and yellows which tend to draw more middle-aged crowds.

The best coverage, in a field of scant coverage, of the June 24, 2012 commemoration came from the TV studio of the often-engaging, sometimes enraging “Voice TV.”

Embedded deep within a show ostensibly about fashion, called “Divas' Café.” was a smart, shorthand introduction to the history and scenes of how it was commemorated. The “divas” in question are three smartly dressed smart women with good academic backgrounds who take turns talking about fashion and politics in a novel and pleasurable way. They are full of laughter and humor but also dare tread where others daren't, offering quips and passing insights into some of the most controversial issues of the day, such as the mysterious deaths at Wat Pathum on May 19, 2010, or the political role of Pridi and the Khana Rassadorn in challenging absolute monarchy. In their discussion of architecture of the Khana Rassadorn period, they touched ever so gingerly on the republicanism that animated not just the coup of '32 but art and architecture for the decade that followed, shrewdly raising the delicate question of just how much power a monarch should have, what role the constitution should play, and what role the people should play; all controversial issues of roaring contemporary relevance. The divas look like fashion plates, changing outfits every day, but they sound like college professors, not clothes-horses. This seemingly incongruent mix of dressing in hot outfits to discuss hot topics seems more a question of strategy than vanity as their innocuous appearance gives them leeway to push the envelope politically.



Diva talking about Black May

Though the presentation by the three Divas was not without insight and charm, it was using history for political effect. It should come as no surprise that a staunchly pro-monarchy reading of the coup of '32 is also in circulation, in which the coup is construed as a canny anticipation of, and pre-emptive assertion of, the Western-educated King Prachidhipok's own will, that is to say it is the sort of thing he would have done by other means if he could have, and has ever since been used to bolster his reputation as a liberal and democracy-minded leader.

The coup of '32 continues to be wrapped with an ambiguous aura, part implicit critique of kingship and part a kick-start for Thai democracy, but also as modernizing event that demonstrates the resourcefulness and democratic inclination of the Chakri Dynasty, a symbol of the constitutional monarchy of the current day.

Both red shirts and yellow shirts claim fealty to the regnant king, and recently put that fealty on display when the king, accompanied by the queen and Crown Princess Sirindhorn, made his first major outing on May 25, 2012 after over two years hospitalization.

One of the highlights of the grand ceremonial visit came when Prime Minister Yingluck kneeled down and gracefully handed to King

Bhumiphol the deed for Thung Makham Yong, a precious piece of historic land in Ayutthaya, on behalf of the Shinawatra family.

The nationally televised ceremony included devout entertainment by three accomplished artists of the Octoberist generation that red strategist Jaran had characterized in his conversation with me as being "yellow", namely poets Chiranan Pitpreecha and Naowarat Pongpaibul and folk-rock singer Ad Carabao.

It is significant that the ceremony at Thung Makham Yong attracted Thais of different stripes and from all walks of life, rural and urban, north and south, red and yellow, civilian and military, capitalists and formerly communist-leaning activists. It harks back to the unifying role the monarchy has played at certain divisive junctures in the past, particularly in October 1973 and in May 1992.



Bangkok Post photo of citizens in Ayutthaya for May 4, 2012 royal visit

Such moments, while inspirational, are rare by nature. The unspoken poles of debate today continue to cling to the anachronistic poles of Thai politics during the height of the Cold War when red stood for communism, yellow religion and the nation was up in arms defending the monarchy against its seeming enemy, communism.

Only today it is the reds who want capital to penetrate the countryside and celebrate global capitalism and it is yellow which is paired with a quasi-socialist vision of rural empowerment, mass waterworks and sufficiency economics.

Neither red rhetoric nor yellow rhetoric is etched in stone. Rather, each offers an ever-shifting verbal show of tropes that stimulate participation and respond to issues of the day. For the reds, democracy, is a useful buzzword, and while it is mistakenly taken to mean “winner takes all” in the zero-sum game of Thai parliamentary politics, it is also a shorthand way of expressing contempt for the coup of 2006, while attracting positive international attention for the red cause. For the yellows, who seem less concerned with impressing foreigners and have spent only a fraction of the money used by Thaksin to influence world opinion through US-based public relations firms, national identity is the shapeshifter, revolving around arcane disputes with Cambodia, such as access to Preah Vihear Temple, which sits on the border, and strained sovereignty issues with a Cold War tone, such as denying NASA access to Utaphao air base because it might be used for spying or other secret activities.

It's complicated. As Sean Boonpracong wisely said, “Just when you think you are starting to understand Thailand, it changes on you,” and he's saying that as an insider at the Prime Minister's office. Any shorthand summary of red and yellow agendas not only masks the complexity and inter-connectedness of Thai politics, but is bound to become out of date at a moment's notice.

So it's important to remember that many of today's ideological foes come from the same cradle and classroom, and have shared significant political journeys, that is to say,

there's more than a little yellow in the reds and red in the yellows.

What's more, alliance-switching and faction-shifting intrigue abounds. Even leading political opponents of Thaksin, such as Democrat Party strongman Suthep Thaugsuban, report having been recruited by “highly-placed intermediaries” for a “meeting in Dubai” which is code for an audience with Thaksin. Indeed, Sonthi Boonyaratklin, the very general who executed the bloodless coup against Thaksin on September 19, 2006 is now a poster boy for cooperation with the Shinawatra clan as a newborn politician and key promoter in parliament of the blanket amnesty that would reunite Thaksin with both homeland and fortune.

Despite being thrust into opposite corners of the political ring, in part out of pique, in part for public spectacle, red shirts and yellow shirts are essentially cut from the same cloth. Today's activists on both sides of the color divide are animated by what they believe to be best for the country. Each side has its opportunists and scoundrels and troubling tendencies to be sure, but both sides are also brimming with idealists, selfless servants of the people and social reformers in search of a more just, equitable Thailand.

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