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In Thailand Opposition Assaults Democracy As Voters Reelect Government: "Yellow Shirt" Protestors Act Like Mussolini's Black Shirts

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Thailand has voted for the third time since the military staged a coup in 2006. The crony populists won again. The establishment thugs didn't even compete. The country is headed toward more and more dangerous political turmoil.

The opposition no longer believes in democracy. Protestors in Egypt and Ukraine advocated new elections. In contrast, Thailand's misnamed Democrat Party and its ally, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), or so-called "Yellow Shirt" movement led by former DP deputy prime minister Suthep Thaugsuban, attempted to block Sunday's vote.

Thailand's latest poll was triggered by PDRC mobs in Bangkok which sought to drive Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra from office. Although the protestors wear yellow, associated with the Thai monarchy, they are the modern equivalent of Benito Mussolini's Black Shirts, who seized power through the infamous 1922 march on Rome.

The Thai political system is nominally democratic, but the military has staged multiple coups and dominated multiple governments. Even during civilian rule the state typically was controlled by an elitist establishment, essentially a military-royalist-civil service-business-urban/upper class axis. The monarch plays only a limited constitutional role, but anti-democracy activists use the revered king for political advantage.

The country faces extraordinary political turbulence. Wrote Nirmal Ghosh for the *Straits Times*: "Thailand's conflict is complex and multilayered. It merges personality conflicts and revenge politics, class conflict, economic disparity and struggle over resources, and the fear of the urban middle class of a near future of rule by powerful corrupt politicians without the stabilizing presence of a morally strong and benevolent monarch."

The ongoing political battle grows out of the 2001 victory of telecommunications executive Thaksin Shinawatra. He followed the traditional political strategy of tax, tax, spend, spend, elect, elect, offering financial benefits to the neglected rural poor.

Thaksin won another big victory in 2005, but the following year the so-called People's Alliance for Democracy launched demonstrations to bring down his government. The military then ousted him in a coup. After rewriting the constitution to strengthen rule by establishment elites, the military held a new election in 2007, which was won by Thaksin's successor party (though he remained in exile abroad).

The following year, in what has been described as the 1 percent rebelling against the 99 percent, PAD launched a series of protests to shut down the government—taking over Bangkok's international airport and besieging parliament, for instance—and the security agencies refused to intervene. The courts stretched the law to oust Thaksin ally Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej as prime minister because he was paid to host a television *cooking show*. Then establishment pressure on the government's coalition partners caused them to shift to make the DP's Abhisit Vejjajiva prime minister even though his party had not won even a plurality of the vote since 1992.

In response angry Thaksin supporters, called "Red Shirts"—dominated by the rural poor and middle-class—flooded into Bangkok, filling the financial district and disrupting an international summit. The police and army rediscovered their commitment to public order and in 2009 cleared the streets, killing scores of protestors and injuring thousands of others. Opposition leaders were prosecuted and imprisoned.

However, Abhisit was overwhelmingly defeated in 2011 by Yingluck, Thaksin's sister, and her Pheu Thai party. Last fall PAD relaunched itself as the PDRC and mounted large demonstrations after her government proposed an amnesty which would have allowed Thaksin, convicted in absentia of corruption charges, to return to Thailand.

As before, the opposition used storm trooper tactics. Suthep's mobs seized public buildings, took over government ministries, blocked Bangkok streets, discussed occupying the stock exchange and shutting down the air traffic control system, and even threatened to kidnap the prime minister. The Thai Black Shirts met every failure by adopting more extreme tactics.

Yingluck responded by calling an election and announcing that she would "let the people decide the direction of the country." But that was the last thing the protestors wanted, since they knew they would lose. After two decades of electoral defeats the opposition views the ballot box as a problem, not a solution.

PDRC leader Anchalee Paireerak told the *New York Times*: an election "is not our objective." The DP's Theptai Seanapong, who resigned from parliament and refused to contest the new poll, admitted "We cannot beat them." Sathit Wongongtoey, another protestor, complained: "they will return to power. We cannot allow that to happen."

So the Black Shirts proceeded to block candidate registrations and early voting. Despite the deployment of 130,000 police to protect voters, protestors halted polling in several provinces and individual Bangkok polling places. The opposition now hopes to overturn the results.

Thaksin embodies the worst of irresponsible populism, the use of public office and funds to essentially buy votes. He has been convicted of corruption, though that ruling is tainted by the willingness of Thai courts to sacrifice justice in order to strengthen establishment rule.

As for Yingluck, complained journalist Wasant Techawongtham: “This is no democratic regime, and it is clear from all its past actions that it is using its power not for the nation’s interests but for the interests of its de facto leader Thaksin Shinawatra and his cronies in government.” Perhaps true, but that sounds a lot like most democracies. As H.L. Mencken observed, “every election is a sort of advance auction sale of stolen goods.” The operation and outcomes of democracy can be ugly, inefficient, unfair, even immoral. There is no better system, however.

Certainly not the one proposed by Suthep. His agenda is power. He called for a “people’s revolution” with an unelected “people’s council,” which he would get to fill, to “reform” election rules, which would guarantee his victory, before the next poll is held. Some of his supporters openly call for an absolute monarchy or other form of authoritarian state.

Like Thaksin, Suthep and his cronies are dedicated to their own interests. They just prefer the more discreet power-mongering and profiteering made possible when close-knit elites quietly dominate irrespective of election results.

Yet Suthep and his establishment friends insist on their right, and their right alone, to rule. His crowds evoke memories of fascist bullies in other nations cowing the majority and forcing their way into power. He claims to represent the nation but has only contempt for those who do not recognize his pretensions. On election day the Black Shirts even attacked Thais seeking to vote, throwing punches as well as water bottles and other objects. Four years ago Thaksin opponents demonstrated that they will rely on bullets if necessary.

Despite the Black Shirts’ efforts, Prime Minister Yingluck was reelected. Under normal circumstances she would form a new government. But it will take a miracle for Thai politics to soon begin working normally again.

Creation of a stable administration accepted by the opposition is the least likely result. The Democrat Party has abandoned electoral politics, the establishment loathes the popular majority, Suthep is determined to take power irrespective of his lack of popular support, and the Black Shirts want to make the country ungovernable. The latest electoral loss is only likely to enrage what have become perennial sore losers.

Yingluck’s opponents may file charges of alleged electoral violations and urge the Election Commission to nullify the vote. That could trigger large and violent demonstrations from the Red Shirts; attorney Verapat Pariyawong predicted the result would be “more blood on the streets.” By blocking candidate registrations the Black Shirts prevented the poll from filling the

required 95 percent of parliament's seats. By-elections will be necessary before the body can open, leaving Yingluck a weak caretaker in the meantime. Moreover, Suthep's mobs will attempt to prevent those votes from proceeding.

The opposition also may turn to the courts, long a reliable ally. The National Anti-Corruption Commission is investigating Yingluck's role in a much-criticized rice subsidy program. Both the Supreme and Constitutional Court are hearing a number of highly political charges which could result in a ban of Yingluck, top Yingluck officials, and her entire party. However, Red Shirt activists, who so far have avoided violently challenging the Black Shirts, are unlikely to peacefully accept a judicial coup. There already have been isolated gun shots and bombings, though no one has taken responsibility.

If all else fails, the Black Shirts are likely to take more radical steps to overthrow the new government. Chaos in Bangkok, and especially violent clashes with Yingluck supporters, might cause the military to stage another coup, though the armed forces leadership so far has remained neutral. The 2006 coup leader, Sonthi Boonyaratglin, opposes such a takeover: "If you love the country and the king, you better stop thinking about it." He warned that the military likely would face violent resistance from not just the Red Shirts but the "mass" of people.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej's frail health adds another complication. A source of national unity, the ailing 86-year-old no longer is able to moderate political passions. The crown prince is disliked, leading to proposals to pass the crown to one of his siblings. At the same time, the Thai economy is heading south as investors drop or postpone plans. Increased instability and violence will worsen the country's economic prospects.

In short, Thailand's political future looks at best uncertain and at worst disastrous. Absent self-restraint, which has been entirely lacking, the only hope may be constitutional reform reducing central government power. In fact, this might offer a rare opportunity for consensus: both sides seem inclined toward devolution, including electing provincial governors. If Bangkok was less dominant and regions could chart their own course, the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts would have less incentive to battle to the political death and might agree to a political armistice.

Thaksin may be a blight upon Thai politics, but Suthep and his allies are a cancer. Unfortunately, in Thailand democracy does not guarantee good government. However, authoritarian, undemocratic rule would be far worse.

There is no easy answer to Thailand's problems. But Suthep's Black Shirts will bear the primary blame if their nation descends further into violence and disorder.