

CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN THAILAND AND THE NETWORK OF MONARCHY

Aryanta Nugraha

International Relations Department UPN “Veteran” Yogyakarta

Jl. Babarsari 2, Tambakbayan Yogyakarta

Email: Aryanta.n@gmail.com

Abstract

Artikel ini bermaksud untuk menjawab dua pertanyaan; mengapa terjadi krisis demokrasi di Thailand dan siapa sebenarnya pemenang dari krisis demokrasi tersebut. Dengan mempertimbangkan semakin pentingnya kehadiran kelompok yang sering disebut sebagai *Network of Monarchy*, artikel ini berargumen bahwa krisis demokrasi di Thailand sangat terkait dengan persaingan politik antara kubu pro-Thaksin dengan kubu anti-Thaksin yang disponsori oleh kalangan *Network of Monarchy*. Kompetisi politik tersebut tidak hanya terjadi pada tingkat elit, tetapi berubah menjadi keresahan politik dan kerusuhan sosial yang melibatkan pertentangan antar kelompok masyarakat yang dicirikan oleh penggunaan warna kaos yang berbeda (*clash of colored shirts*). Meski akhirnya Thaksin berhasil diturunkan, artikel ini berpendapat bahwa kemenangan sementara kubu *Network of Monarchy* ini tidak akan berpengaruh banyak bagi stabilitas dan kepastian demokrasi di Thailand, apabila kerangka pengaturan demokrasi pasca Thaksin gagal melibatkan partisipasi masyarakat di tingkat akar rumput. Terlebih lagi, pemerintah demokratik juga harus mampu mengatasi persoalan ketimpangan ekonomi, terutama di wilayah utara.

Keywords: *Thailand, democracy, network of monarchy*

Introduction

In post 19 September 2006 military coup that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra until now, Thailand entered into a political turmoil featured by the widespread of civil unrest in various ‘colored shirts’ that represent divided camps, between anti- and pro Thaksin. The multi coloured mass movement consists of several color shirts group. The Red Shirts movement, a pro Thaksin Group organised in United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) that supported by rural mass especially in the north. The Yellow Shirts, an anti-Thaksin of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) group led by Shondi Limthongkul that also supported by the palace and urban middle class. The Blue Shirts, a group that counter against the red usually in violence organised by Newin Chidchob, a former pro-Thaksin political leader that well-known in mobilising thugs. There was also the White Shirts around the journalist and the moderate groups who seek a non-violence campaign (Prasirtuk, 2009; 203-210). Interestingly, the choice of colours represents a unique symbol. Yellow is the

color of Buddhism and also related to Monday, the day of the King’s birth, while the blue color represents the queen. The white colour associated with Thai’s Flag of nation-based Unity. Red colour has no clear connection with Thai culture and Monarchy symbols (Dressel, 2010; 445).

This political crisis marked a setback of Thailand democracy that started at 1992 and the prospect of political reform is loom. The ongoing political crisis showed by the occupation of Government House and the closed down of Bangkok’s airport in the late of 2008 by the Yellow Shirts supporters, the disruption of ASEAN Summit in Pattaya in April 2009 by the Red Shirts supporter and the clashes between security forces and the Red Shirts between March and May 2010 that involved at least 90 deaths (McCargo, 2010; 8). This essay will explain the recent democratic crisis in Thailand and shows that the royal associated political groups or network monarchy (McCargo, 2005) is the winner of recent political conflict and pro-Thaksin movement is the loser. However, this stage is just a beginning of a protracted conflict to build a sort of democratic regime in Thailand.

Democratisation and the Network of Monarchy

Historically, the path of political change (democratisation) in Thailand is widely understood as a linear-progressive change from absolute monarchy period (ended in 1932), military rule (from 1932-1973) and democratic reform (from 1992 until now). The ultimate challenges of democratisation, in this view, are corrupt politicians and money politics, not the monarchy or the military. In this kind of understanding, the coup in 19 September to expel Thaksin Shinawatra from his office and the today Thailand's political turmoil tacitly represent the 'democratic reform' against corrupt politicians and money politics. However, as shown by Connors, the recent political crisis mirroring a struggle between political elites relating to political order and the rules of the game (Connors, 2008; 478-496). In this battle of the rules of the game it is interesting to reconsider the active role of the monarch in shaping democracy and to gain political prominence in Thailand.

The role of the king in Thailand's democratisation has become a subject of academic research since the King Bhumibol Adulyadej as an important source of political legitimacy directly involved in mitigating several political crises mainly in 1973 and 1992 mass uprising (Winichakul, 2008; 11-37). More than just occasionally direct involvement such as through public speeches, the central role of monarchy in political development in Thailand has been established and reproduced through a sub-system and a mode of para-political institution governance the so-called network monarchy.

The main characteristics of network monarchy are: (1). The monarchy is the render of the last political resort in the time of crisis; (2). The monarchy is the ultimate source of national legitimacy; (3). The King actively involved in setting political agenda, especially through his annual birthday speeches; (4). The monarchy intervention especially has been done through privy councillors lead by ex prominent military figure and Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanond (McCargo, 2005; 501-502). McCargo (2005) argues that since 1973 up to now, the network monarchy actively involved in political process by the king and his proxies, particularly ex-prime minister Prem Tinsulanond. However, the

network monarchy never achieved domination in political sphere and has to work together with other formal political institutions, mainly the elected parliamentary. This is proven by the failure of the democrat government of Chuan Leekpai which was supported by network monarchy from 1992 to 1995 and led figures that unsympathetic to the monarchy such as Banhran Silpa-archa (1995-1996) and Chavalith Yongchaiyudh (1996-1997) in the top of government.

After the 1992 political crisis, the liberal faction of network monarchy around Anand Panyarachun and Prawes Wasi sought to reinvent a new system of monarchical governance based on liberal construction and no more rely on military and bureaucratic network. According to Anand and Prawes, a new institutionalised of network monarchy is part of a long project to reduce direct involvement of the King in politics as well as a preparation to avoid violence conflict at the time of royal succession. As a result of the new constitution was promulgated in 1997. The new constitution also accompanied by new institutions such as the Electoral Commission and National Human Rights Commission.

Competition between Thaksin and Network of Monarchy

Ironically the 1997 constitution and the impact economic crisis paved the way to the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra's *Thai Rak Rhai* (Thai Loves Thai) Party in January 2001. Thaksin victory was based on his personal magnate of a pragmatic and successful CEO of multibillionaire telecommunication company, his populist appeal to rural mass, particularly in the north, north-east and central region and off course money politics.

Historically the relationship between the palace, the government and the business group was not harmonious. But when the economic crisis sprang, King Bhumibol promoted the idea of "sufficient economy". This appeal drew many supports from Thai middle class and translated into the active involvement of domestic business elite in controlling the state. Thaksin was benefited from this kind of political atmosphere (Hewison, 2008; 200-201). In order to strengthen his political base in rural area, Thaksin became more populist by pouring money to rural areas such as giving soft loans for every community, debt moratorium

for farmers, universal health care program and a people bank. Thaksin, actually, was not a populist by nature, since his first priority when he initially established the TRT was to rescue Thai businessman from the economic crisis and modernisation in political and economic life. It is shown from his slogan "Think new, act new for every Thai" (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2008; 62-83). Moreover, Thaksin also controlled the media and arrogantly attack the critics. His growing arrogance demonstrated in the war on drug campaign in southern region that approximately caused more than 2000 extra judicial killing (Hewison, 2006; 202).

The hatred against Thaksin mounted after the sale of Shin Corporation to Temasek holding in a deal worth US\$1.9 billion, while Thaksin paid no tax (Hewison, 2006; 203). The most significant Thaksin's opponent is Sondhi Limtongkhul, a former Thaksin allies. Sondhi is a media business millionaire that received government support during the economic crisis. The relation of Thaksin and Shondi fell out when the government expelled a banker that supervises Sondhi's bankruptcy. Sondhi built the People Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and sought to gain support from the palace. PAD also gathered support from Thai middle class to join in demonstrations and rallies during 2005 and 2006. In response to continuing rallies, Thaksin called a sudden election in April 2006.

The growing protest activities of PAD met with the contention of network of monarchy toward Thaksin. Basically, network of monarchy and the King do not like Thaksin for several reasons. Firstly, from the beginning Thaksin managed to dismantle political networks connected to monarchy, particularly in military and bureaucracy and replace it with a new network based on political-economy, if not cronyism (McCargo, 2005; 513). That is why there was a competition among Thaksin and network monarchy to control military.

Secondly, in the case of Shin Corporation selling, Thaksin neglected the involvement of Crown Property Bureau (CPB) - a palace owned corporation, in which CPB was among Shin Corp's shareholder. CPB wanted to keep Shin Corporation under domestic ownership to maintain the honour and royal patronage, while

Thaksin's business instinct favoured quick profits. No wonder that Thaksin business was not only competitor to CPB but also challenged the honour status of CPB (Hewison, 2006; 206).

Thirdly, Thaksin was considered as palace competitor in political arena, mainly in reducing the symbolic connection between the King and the poor. The palace is positioning itself as a champion to the poor through many projects to the poor and recently to the idea sufficient economy. When Thaksin came with different approach to the poor by establishing a welfare system, it was truly a potential challenge to the king legitimacy in the rural areas.

Finally, the ousted of Thaksin by military forces arranged by Prem in September 2006 represents the climax of network monarchy effort to become the dominant element in Thai democracy. Now the King and his privy councillors become the centre stage of political struggle and the anti-monarchy elements will likely be excluded from political stage.

Conclusion

It is clear from the explanation above that democratic crisis in Thailand rested on the competition between Thaksin camp and the network of monarchy around the Royal supporters. Thaksin's popularity, from the network of monarchy's perspective had been considered as arrogance. Moreover, when Thaksin sold the Shin Corp without involving the Crown Property Bureau-a company that often associated with the Royal family, Thaksin was accused as jeopardizing national economy.

To answer the question of who are the winners and losers of Thai democracy, this paper shows that the ousted of Thaksin paved the way for the network of monarchy to the centre of political power. Nevertheless, the influence of Thaksin in Thai's politics has already taken root. The stability of Thai's democracy more or less will be affected by the grievances of the north and the northeast of Thailand that until now become the supporter of Thaksin. The new democratic institution should address the social discontent of the unlucky people in the north and strengthened the grass root participation in all level-decision making process. If these issues are failed to be addressed, new populist and new Thaksin will

take advantage of social discontent, and the political crisis will continue to prevail.

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