A Quick Historical View of Thailand’s Current Political Conflict

By Dr. Yuangrat Wedel and Paul Wedel

As the contesting parties in Thailand’s current political conflict reluctantly begin to recognize the need for some sort of compromise, it is important to understand that the current differences in political thinking are actually less dramatic than they have been at almost any time in the past century. Moreover, key social, demographic and economic trends seem likely to narrow those differences even further in the years ahead.

In our research for an upcoming book on Thai political thinking, we found that key issues in today’s conflict -- class-based privilege, democracy versus authoritarianism and economic fairness -- have long been contentious, often violently so.

Reading the political newspapers in the reign of King Rama VI we were surprised to find that opposition attacks on the government, the ruling class and even the King were sharp and bitter. On one side of the political divide some members of the royal family fought to maintain and even extend the power of the traditional monarchy, while on the other side, radical thinkers were denouncing official corruption, attacking capitalist oppression and calling for abolition of the monarchy.

That divide in political thinking led to the 1932 coup d’etat that ended the absolute power of the monarchy. The differences between the coup group and the traditional ruling class were great. The coup’s intellectual leader, Pridi Banomyong, called for a substantially socialist economy under an elected government while many royalists demanded a return to the powerful traditional monarchy. This divide led to bloody fighting with troops under Prince Boworadej battling to overthrow the People’s Party government.

Although the People’s Party defeated the royalist forces, the conservative and military factions in the party outmaneuvered Pridi’s socialist faction. Gen. P. Pibulsonggram gained power. With the assistance of Luang Wichivadakan, he emulated the rising fascists of Europe in creating a nationalistic and authoritarian government. The unexplained death of young King Ananda Mahidol in 1946 stirred great unease and conflict, with conservatives claiming that Pridi was somehow responsible. The army overthrew the elected government and returned power to Prime Minister Pibulsonggram. In subsequent years increasingly authoritarian governments won power in a series of military coups. For most of the next four decades, the differences in political ideals were stark: authoritarian capitalism versus democratic socialism.

The bloody political clashes of the 1970s widened the gap even further with the overthrow of military dictators in 1973 and the military imposition of a reactionary regime three years later. The political violence of 1975-76 drove even moderate liberals and democratic socialists into the arms of a fervently Maoist Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). The CPT was committed to violent revolution based on the peasantry and the government was committed to military suppression of the CPT and the violent crushing of leftist thinking. There was no middle ground and no room for compromise until the more realistic elements of the military seized power in 1977 to lead the country in a more moderate direction. The collapse of the CPT, largely due to internal communist conflicts, and a return to elected government moved Thailand away from authoritarian rule on one side and Maoist
revolution on the other. An attempt by the military to increase its domination of government in 1991-92 was rejected by the people with a great cost in lives. Political differences continued to narrow.

Rapid social and economic changes, particularly in the countryside, led to changes in political awareness that former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra alertly seized on to win votes. He showed that more electronically connected and politically aware rural voters would respond to policies that sought to deal with their key concerns: agricultural debt, commodity prices, access to capital and promotion of non-agricultural products from rural areas. The power of those policies to win votes led to the opposition parties, including the Democrat Party, to make similar policy promises.

Today, almost all of the contending parties agree, or at least say they agree, on these important national objectives:

- Effective representative democracy under a constitutional monarch
- A largely market-based economy relatively open to regional and global markets
- Government subsidies for key agricultural products, such as rice, and greater power for producers to get fair prices
- A social safety net that provides free health care, support for the elderly, and assistance to the disabled and under-privileged
- Access to higher levels of education, irrespective of class or economic status
- Communication and transportation networks that reach into the countryside and the region
- Devolution of more administrative, policing and taxation power to locally elected officials
- Good governance and reduction in corruption
- Expression of political dissent without violence

Yes, there are differences in the details of how these objectives are to be achieved and yes, the differences in these details are important. Equally important are differences over the priorities assigned to these objectives and the differing ways to achieve much-needed reform. Never in the past century, however, has there been such extensive agreement on all of these basic objectives. This convergence in political objectives should provide a basis for reasonable compromise.

If demographic and economic trends are any indicators, this convergence is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. The much touted differences between rural and urban populations are narrowing as more and more rural people move, at least part-time, into towns and cities. Already more than 47% of Thai people live in municipal areas. That shows a rapid increase from 29.4% in 1990 and it is estimated that urbanization is increasing by more than 1.5% a year. Conflicts over ways to support producers of basic commodities such as rice should diminish as fewer and fewer people depend on them. Since 1980 when more than 70% of Thais were farmers, the percentage of farmers has dropped to about 38%, and many of today’s farmers earn additional income from part-time, non-agricultural work. Thai agriculture, now in the hands of farmers averaging 55 years old, faces major changes in the next 20 years in terms of plot size, mechanization and crop diversification.

While the gap between the very rich and the rest of the population is increasing, the development of the Thai economy has reduced the numbers of the very poor. The percentage of people below the national poverty line decreased from 34% in 1990 to less than 8% today, according to the NESDB.
The biggest change in Thailand’s class structure has been the rapid rise of the previously poor into the lower middle class. Some academics suggest that if there is a “class conflict” in Thailand, it is not between the rich and the poor, but between the established middle class and the rising lower middle class. As income and education differences between those classes diminish, conflict should also diminish. Differences in education, although still important, are being reduced by policies promoting free and mandatory education that have given more people, even among the under-privileged, greater access to higher education.

Importantly, there seems to be growing agreement, at least among civilians, on the permissible ways to express the differences and conflicts that inevitably remain. For much of the past century, political conflicts led to violent repression and often to violent revolt. Although there has been violence in the current conflict, it has been relatively small scale and all sides say they oppose the use of violence. The People's Democratic Reform Committee has touted its ‘ahimsa’ policy and taken less aggressive actions than either the People’s Alliance for Democracy or the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) took only a few years ago. The government, for its part, has largely refrained from violent dispersal of demonstrators in an attempt to avoid the loss of life and legitimacy that accompanied the dispersal of the UDD protests in 2010. The military appears to understand that its 2006 coup did little to alter the balance of political power or end political conflict and therefore should avoid overthrowing another elected government. The temptations of power, however, should not be underestimated.

Unfortunately, it is not always the case that lesser differences mean lesser conflict. When fear of others gaining dominance rises, conflict tends to increase over even minor differences. Long-held and often out-dated perceptions, particularly of such hard-to-document problems as vote-buying and corruption, make it difficult for all to agree on the factual basis for reform. Emotional fervor, stoked by leaders on both sides has made it difficult for many to accept that the objectives of the contenders are not so different. Since violence ignites emotion and heightens conflict, it is essential that all sides avoid violence and begin to reduce the verbal violence that does nothing to solve problems. Demonizing each other and carrying one-sided attacks on biased social media and community radio only makes achieving reasonable compromises more difficult. It adds to the feeling of anger and chaos that can only tempt military leaders to ‘restore order.’ Actions by independent agencies can lead to conflict reduction only if they are unbiased, well-founded and carefully explained, so they can be accepted by even by those who disagree with them.

There will always be some differences and conflicts, as there are in every country in the world. In Thailand, however, it would be useful for the contenders to take an historical view of their differences. They will see that there has been considerable convergence of political thought that offers the opportunity to work out differences without violence. Quite simply, the political differences that remain, however emotional they may be, are actually far too small to be worth any more deaths and disruption.

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