

## THAILAND

### “Red Sunday” to the proof of Peace and Order

An event  
Its decoding  
An analysis  
Prospects

#### FACTS

➤ When the Burmese neighbour Rangoon donned red on 1<sup>st</sup> November to cheer its democratic local hero Aung San Suu Kyi (National League for Democracy, with red and gold blazon) one week before the much anticipated ballot (set for 8<sup>th</sup> Nov.), one could have also expected the Thai kingdom to adorn such crimson hint, cherished by the opposition civil society group the ‘Red Shirts’ being that their figure-head, the elegant former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra (Pheu Thai Party) was once again summoned to the Supreme Court a few days earlier for reasons that some might deem slightly more political than legal.

➤ Bearing the opposition’s symbolic colour and denouncing the soaring denial of democracy, Red Shirts partisans who gathered on Sunday hoped to showcase their support for the former head of government and, on this occasion, remind the Thai Junta of their freedoms of expression and demonstration, which had been besmirched for an umpteenth time after the seizure of power by the military a year and a half ago (May 2014).

➤ Disapproving of the Red Shirts’ gathering, the Junta managed to strip-down the event by making distinctively clear that ‘Peace and Order’ would be enforced no matter what, knowing that very few Thai would be willing to defy their authority.

#### ANALYSIS

■ In Myanmar, where the post-junta administration officially rules since 2011 over 55 millions Burmese, tens of thousands of pro-democracy militants in red apparel gathered in Rangoon on Sunday, one week before a ballot that could make history.

The red (democratic) fever was comparatively missing in this other Asian Buddhist nation, equally familiar with the habit that men in uniform tend to have and that consists in repeatedly intervening in political affairs (twenty coups d’état since the establishment of the constitutional monarchy in 1932...). The National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—the Junta to the account of the not-so-cheerful General and Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha—ensured that such habit be maintained by advising individuals in the most crystalline manner against taking on their authority. Ever since the NCPO took over, the Thai kingdom not only became the land where expressing one’s opinion leads to imprisonment and where a gathering of more than four individuals is considered a challenge to social order, but also the land where fear and reason prevail over any vague desire to express the general ire.

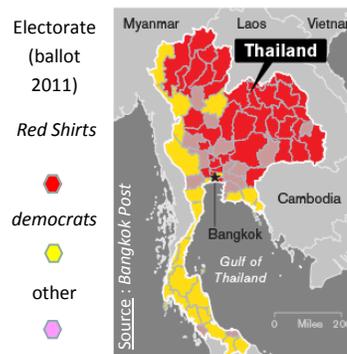
■ In exile since 2008, the mentor of the anti-Establishment populist movement and former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra appeared draped in red... on social media only.



#### THAILAND: references

Territory: 513 000 km<sup>2</sup>  
Capital: Bangkok (10mi inhabitants)  
Neighbouring countries: Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia  
Population: 68 millions  
Ethnic groups: Thai (96%) Burmese (2%)  
Religion: Buddhism  
Regime: constitutional monarchy  
Head of State: King Rama IX  
Prime Minister : General Prayuth  
Economy (GDP 2014): - 1,5%  
Average annual income 5000 €

#### Partisan groups by regions



#### MAIN ACTORS

National Council for Peace and Order, military Junta  
Opposition: “Red Shirts”, Pheu Thai Party ; ‘Shinawatra clan’  
Establishment (urban elites, business circles, army, police)  
Royal Palace ; King Bhumibol

#### QUOTE

“Politicians do not have to be suspicious of me. [The media] writes every day that I intend to cling on to power. I must make it clear. If there is no peace and order, I must stay on. If there are attempts to bring people out [onto the streets], the movement leaders will be dealt with first” General-Prime Minister **Prayuth Chan-ocha** said. *Bangkok Post*, 29th October 2015

RECENT EVENTS

- 01/11 *Red Sunday*: “Red Shirts” rally
- 29/10 former PM Y. Shinawatra summoned once again to the Supreme Court
- 16/10 National Council for Peace and Order instigate the *Rural Education Plan*
- 05/09 junta disapproves of the new constitution’s draft; elections postponed *sine die*
- 17/08 attack in central Bangkok; at least twenty casualties
- 19/05 former PM Y. Shinawatra before the court for *negligence*
- 19/05/14 Army Chief’s coup d’état, PM Y. Shinawatra overthrown; martial law

DECLARATIONS & REACTIONS

**“The NCPO will send soldiers to every village to create understanding so that villagers are not listening to information that is different from the truth”,** Junta spokesperson said. *New York Times*, 16<sup>th</sup> October 2015

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**“They’re (military) worried that if an election is organised, it will lead to chaos. They agree that the martial law is best to govern the country”,** a member of National Reform Council said. *New York Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2015



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CHALLENGES AND CONSEQUENCES

Timidly announced by its instigators, vaguely supported by its figureheads (i.e. Pheu Thai’s backbone Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra) endlessly at odds with the authorities and the justice system, this *Red Sunday* did not really showcase the opposition’s insurgence skills or its willingness to go into action against an omnipotent Establishment.

Rather, it demonstrated the latter’s obvious resolution to conserve the NCPO in power and to postpone the hypothetical organisation of legislative elections that would, without a doubt, act in favour of the suppressed majority, which the Red Shirts have made their primary concern. Since General Prayuth’s NCPO oversees the decision-making process in the national affairs, Peace and Order—crucial elements of former Army Chief’s roadmap (as well as Thai and foreign economic actors’)—have, without a doubt, officialised their comeback. Except in the South (former Pattani sultanate), still in the grip of a Muslim separatist insurrection and its daily death toll (see ‘*Rebels reject peace talks in deep South*’, Bangkok Post, 12<sup>th</sup> Oct.), Peace and Order became the new orthodoxy in a domestic environment expunged of any demonstration and any anti-government protest, which numerous foreigners have encountered during Autumn 2015 when visiting Prayuth’s revised Thailand.

Two and a half months after an attack in central Bangkok caused bloodshed (at least 20 victims), authorities refuse to hear any criticism, neither from the upholders of

a return to democratic rule, nor from the international community who disapproved anyway of the coup d’état in May 2014, albeit a satisfying economic order following the worrisome recession of the past year. Although Burmese voters will most probably rush to the polls this weekend to try and satisfy their democratic craving, the Thai electorate—advocate of elections and good governance—will have to be (very) patient, for the ruling party requires no less than a year and a half to draft a new constitutional setting (now 18<sup>th</sup> of the type...), prerequisite to the organisation of an election.

PROSPECTIVE

*“Military law has sent Thailand’s human rights situation into free fall, without any indication that a democratic transition is to take place in the short-term. The Junta resorts to its martial law’s draconian prerogatives to detain hundreds, repress rights of expression and suppress all media”* (Human Rights Watch, World report 2015).

*Assessed in early 2015, the situation remains the same ten months later, for the stranglehold of the National Council for Peace and Order does not intend to loosen its mark neither on the kingdom’s political affairs nor on every citizen’s routine, be it at the price of endless recriminations by the international community and of risking rising tensions—further rallying by the democratic Thailand embodied by the Red Shirts, despised by the government in power and the Establishment.*

Paris, November 2, 2015

*Translated from the french version by Leopolda Contaux-Bellina, graduate from King’s College, London.*