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Constructing the 'Red' Otherness:
The Role and Implications of Thainess on Polarised Politics

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Introduction

> *I think the Red Shirts are not Thai people because they destroyed things, they destroyed Bangkok, they destroyed Thailand. ("Bangkok Races to Erase Traces of Protest," 2010)*

The above statement was made by a dress-shop owner whose shop was located near the site of the destruction caused by the riot in May 2010. His statement is interesting in that he identified the Red Shirts, members of a political alliance opposing the current government, as not being Thai. While the *Red Shirts* and their supporters were accused of not being Thai due to violent behaviour, what about the *Yellow Shirts*, a group likewise formed in opposition to the former governments, who seized the international airport in 2008? Are they Thai? The question is: What constitutes being Thai or a Thai nationhood? Has Thainess really existed for a long time? If not, who constructed it for what purpose, and for whom was it constructed?

In this article, I will give some background information on current politics in Thailand and review theoretical concepts of nation and nationhood as well as conceptualising Thai nationhood or Thainess. In addition, the role of Thainess that has been used by Prime Minister Abhisit and his patrons – the current power holders – will be explained, and I will demonstrate the implications of the application of

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Thainess for Thai politics. This article argues that social scientists, when examining socio-political phenomena in Thailand, cannot neglect Thainess as both a norm of exclusion and a political weapon used by the power holders.

Brief Background of Polarised Politics

Democracies come in many forms, but their minimal basis is holding free and fair elections. Without such an electoral process, it cannot be claimed that there is democracy. In Thai political discourse, democracy is often negatively equated with the political dominance of the majority, i.e. people deemed unqualified to make the right decisions. Moreover, as the parliament is not recognised as the main mechanism for achieving political resolutions, power holders rather resort to the application of undemocratic means such as military interventions. For this reason, the political regime in Thailand is bureaucratic-authoritarian since it has experienced *coups d'état* both by military force and political means in recent years.

Bureaucratic authoritarianism is an approach used to explain political phenomena and regimes in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in the late 1960s (Wiarda, 2000, pp. 87-89). In my opinion, in the case of Thailand, it would be easier to understand bureaucratic authoritarianism if we call it 'the military in politics' to indicate that the military carries out a *coup d'état* and has a significant leadership role in politics. However, the military cannot mount a successful *coup d'état* without support from civilians. The military and its allies, the civilian elite, always base the legitimacy of their intervention in politics on the corruption of politicians. However, co-operation of the civilian elite alone was not enough to overthrow a democratic government in the context of contemporary Thailand. A signal from the palace was also a necessary element. The Thai bureaucratic-authoritarian regime requires the control of the lower classes in order to maintain its power.

The political order of Thailand has returned to a bureaucratic-authoritarian regime since the coup of 19 September 2006, which was led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin. The coup was also strongly supported by the Bangkok-based middle class, royalists,

and the network monarchy[2], with General Prem Tinsulanonda, the head of the Privy Council, being its principle symbol. Despite the fact that two democratic governments had been established through elections, neither could bring the military under control. On the contrary, the military had more influence than the governments. The 19 September 2006 coup was a de jure *coup d'état*; however, a de facto *coup d'état* came about after that time.

The main reason that Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was ousted from office in 2006 was neither corruption nor capital cronyism, but the need to break the de facto rule of Thainess of which Royal Nationalism, the mainstream political ideology in Thailand, is the core element. His behaviour and policies challenged the traditional manner of Thai politicians; for example, Thaksin's populist policies were suspect because it was thought that that they might replace projects in rural areas that had been under royal patronage.

Subsequently, two democratically elected governments, i.e. those led by Samak Sundaravej and by Somchai Wongsawat, could again not govern the country, since they were also perceived as Thaksin's nominees. As their governments were also treated as threats to Thainess, both had to leave office.

The de facto *coup d'état* occurred late in 2008 after the dissolution of the People's Power Party. This coup was led by General Anupong Paochinda, the Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army. General Anupong invited politicians to have a meeting with him about the political situation, leading to a change in political factions in the House of Representatives, and opened the stage for Abhisit Vejjajiva to become the prime minister of Thailand. There is no doubt that the government led by Abhisit is backed by the military, royalists, and network monarchy. However, it has stirred up animosity and sparked a massive protest by the partly pro-Thaksin camp, which consists of rural residents and anti-coup protesters. This camp has been called the Red Shirts; however, the official name is 'National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship' (UDD).

Apart from the Red Shirts, there are the Yellow Shirts or the 'People's Alliance for Democracy' (PAD). This group consists of the Bangkok-based middle class, royalists, and network monarchists who supported the coup by the military in order to protect

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2 For further details on the term 'network monarchy', see (among others) McCargo (2005).

the mainstream ideology and the palace. The Yellow Shirts held massive protests from 2005 through 2008. In addition, besides the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts, there is a group called the Multi-Coloured Shirts, who are in general not different from the Yellow Shirts since its campaign can ultimately be seen as an effort to institutionalise the sacred concepts of 'Nation, Religion [Buddhism], and Monarchy'.

The massive protests have been out of control since 2009. The Red Shirts started them in Bangkok and have resorted to escalating violence. Because of casualties from this political violence, especially caused by the military forces, some academics have stated that they consider the situation, especially in April and May 2010, not just a riot but a civil war.

After heavy subjugation by the government, the Red Shirts officially ceased their protests. However, the leaders could not control the protesters, and the aftermath was not only the destruction of many buildings and department stores in Bangkok but also the burning of city halls in many provinces, especially in the country's North-East. Moreover, there were several unusual cases of arson there and in the North.

Although the government has attempted to call for unity, especially in television broadcasts, its efforts do not appear to be working because its repression of the protesters was enforced through terror. Therefore, it was pointless to cry out for unity without investigating what was really causing the deaths.

The government presented the 'third hand theory', claiming that there were terrorists camouflaged as protesters. However, many photos and clips of video footage by both news agencies and the protesters themselves make it difficult to accept such claims. Many protesters and other people are still questioning the government's responsibility for the deaths, although the government has made many efforts to show its sincerity. For instance, the government has appointed commissions to investigate the incidents and find the truth, but these were accused of prejudice.

It is clear that the government cannot regain its legitimacy as long as it is trying to eradicate its opposition. While the government has been calling for unity, it has used a powerful tool to polarise Thai society into those who conform and those who do not. That powerful tool is 'Thai nationhood', also known as Thainess or *Kwampenthai*.

What is Thainess?

Most people take the concept of a nation for granted and suppose that it has existed for a long time. However, according to Anderson (2006), a nation is an imagined political community. The concept of nationhood is similar to that of a nation in that it is not a natural entity, but a social construct. Thus it is problematic because it is not static or monolithic. As soon as a nation is constructed, some will be excluded despite living within the state's boundaries. Nationhood divides people into 'us' and 'them' or 'ourselves' and 'others'. The 'Other' is in danger because nationhood has been made to be sacred, and therefore the 'Other' is seen as an iconoclast. In this sense, nationhood is very similar to a religion that aims to make people believers or conformists without doubt and question.

Thai nationhood or Thainess is highly problematic. Thongchai Winichakul, a prominent Thai historian, noted that Thainess has never clearly been defined. However, what is not Thai or un-Thai is often identified. From this point of view, Thainess is obviously apparent when otherness or un-Thainess can be identified. Therefore, the latter is essential to the former. Thongchai called this process "negative identification" (Thongchai, 2004, pp. 5-6).

Apart from negative identification, there is 'positive identification', which refers to the selection of some elements or norms, such as political ideology, by power holders in order to define Thainess. For example, King Vajiravudh declared that the monarchy was the most important element of Thai nationhood (Thongchai, 2004, p. 4); thus, Vajiravudh's version of Thainess gave precedence to *Kwamjongrakpakdi* or loyalty to the royalty. Even though the power holders prescribed what Thainess was, negative identification is still important to enhance the obvious appearance of Thainess.

Thainess is an efficient political tool of the power holders for maintaining and expanding their power and interests, which is the real function of Thainess (Pavin, 2005, pp. 4-6). For instance, King Chulalongkorn attempted to popularise his version of Thai nationhood in order to enhance the legitimacy of his throne and his fixed status among rulers and subordinates (Pavin, 2005, p. 5). Thus, the function of Thainess is not only preserving and increasing the power and interests of the power holders. Instead, it is also used as a powerful weapon for eradicating political opposition without any doubts or arguments. Like any former power holders, Abhisit and his

patrons, the elites and network monarchy, have used their own version of Thainess to legitimise their regime and power as well as to eliminate the Red Shirts, their political opposition.

Thainess and its Role in the Abhisit Regime

Right now, [a lack of] unity in the Northeast is a major problem that obstructs the efforts to develop the region and the country as a whole. If we restore national reconciliation, this will bring immense benefits to the Isan people [population of Thailand's North-Eastern region]. (General Prem Tinsulanonda quoted in "Gen Prem Urges People of Northeast to Restore Unity," 2009)

Unity or *kwamsamakki* is very important to Thai power holders because in their view it leads to stability by demanding conformity of thought, belief in Royal Nationalism, and interest in top-down control. By trying to remove all differences in thinking, it maintains the current structure of political relations. It is important to note that unity differs from harmony or *kwamprongdong* in that harmony respects differences and accommodates interests while unity does not. However, there is a close similarity in the use of these two words in the Thai language.

The concept of 'unity' has often been used by Thai power holders, especially when they were confronted with a political crisis. Abhisit is no exception to his predecessors, although he has been eulogised exaggeratedly by many Thai elites, for example, General Prem and the Thai middle class. Abhisit and his patrons have constantly called on the Thai people for unity since the Red Shirts started their movement. Pavin Chachavalpongpun, a Singapore-based Thai political scientist, has also demonstrated that there is an attempt to merge the unity discourse with the concept of Thainess (Pavin, 2010, p. 333). From this perspective, therefore, the Abhisit version of Thainess has created disunity as being un-Thai or the 'Other'. Abhisit's Thainess functions as a 'weapon' against the threat of the Red Shirts, who have been polarised from ordinary Thais and labelled as 'disunity makers' and 'supporters of the plot to overthrow the monarchy'. In other words, they are being used to exemplify Otherness.

As the 'Other', they are in danger or are in a 'state of exception' in the terminology of Agamben (2005). The state of exception is "the legal form of what cannot have legal form. On the other hand, if the law employs the exception that is the suspension of law itself" (Agamben, 2005, p. 1). The Emergency Decree on Public Administration

in Emergency Situations (Emergency Act), which was declared by Abhisit on 7 April 2010, is the declaration of the state of exception that binds and abandons the Red Shirts and their supporters as being against the law. Their lives are no longer under the protection of normal law. Agamben (2005) calls this kind of living a "bared life".

In addition to being excluded from normal protection, their deaths are ungrievable. According to Butler (2004), a post-structuralist philosopher, lives are made ungrievable through the function of norms. Because those lives do not conform to the norms, they are negated from the outset. For this reason, their deaths cannot be mourned because their lives were negated to begin with. Thus, in the Thai context, the Red Shirts' lives are ungrievable because they fall outside the norms of Thainess, and many victims who opposed the Abhisit regime or Thainess have not received mercy or mourning.

Furthermore, the Red Shirts live under social sanctions. For example, Kantoop, a female teenager who joined the Red Shirt protests and disagreed with adherence to the monarchy, was deprived of her right to study in Silpakorn University. Silpakorn's representative claimed that she was not paying respect to the monarchy, therefore her belief and behaviour disqualified her according to the university's rules. Apart from this moral crime legally determined by university regulations, she is vastly stigmatised in cyberspace through forwarded e-mails and Facebook posts. Thus, her life has become a 'bared life'.

Thai nationhood or Thainess has become a weapon to legally and morally eradicate the political enemies of Abhisit and his patrons. As elaborated above, it is a very simple method: simply construct one's opponents as being the 'Other'. After that, they can be easily killed in a lawful and ethical manner in defence of the sacred Thainess.

Conclusion

This article elaborated on the role of Thainess as a political tool for Thai power holders and particularly for the Abhisit regime. Although the focus was on the use of Thainess by Abhisit and his patrons to eradicate their political enemies, it should not be concluded that others, including the exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin, have not acted in the same way. However, Abhisit has obviously used Thainess to maintain

power by destroying the opposition. I believe that Thainess will continue to be used as a weapon by Thailand's power holders in the future. Thai nationhood or Thainess is a construct of the elite to serve their own power and interests as well as to sustain the power structure.

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