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Buchanan, James

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Translating Thailand's Protests: An Analysis of Red Shirt Rhetoric

JAMES BUCHANAN¹

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From 14 March 2010 onwards, a mass of suea daeng, literally 'red shirts', began a prolonged, mass protest in Bangkok, which eventually degenerated into the worst political violence Thailand has seen in its modern history, leaving 91 people dead, around 2,000 injured, and a city smoldering from rioting and arson. This article provides a narrative of the protests and the Red Shirt movement which is informed by my own eye-witness account of the events and built around the translation of Thai language sources I encountered. By translating and analyzing original Thai language sources from the protests, e.g. banners, signs, t-shirts, speeches, and graffiti, I argue that the Red Shirts have a more sophisticated, far-reaching political philosophy than many give them credit for. Also, as events unfolded, the movement developed and grew beyond its original scope by demanding justice for victims of the military crackdowns and challenging the political role of the monarchy. Both as a political movement and as a sizeable section of the electorate, the Red Shirts have the potential to drastically reconfigure Thailand's social and political landscape.

Keywords: Protest; Red Shirts; Social Movement; Thailand; Thai Political Crisis

Ab 14. März 2010 begann eine Masse an suea daeng, wörtlich „Rothemden“, einen anhaltenden Massenprotest in Bangkok, der letztendlich in einem der schlimmsten politischen Gewaltakte in Thailands moderner Geschichte mit 91 Toten, etwa 2.000 Verletzten und einer in Unruhe und Brandstiftung schwelenden Stadt ausartete. Dieser Artikel bietet eine Erzählung der Proteste und der Bewegung der Rothemden, informiert durch meinen Augenzeugenbericht der Ereignisse und einer Übersetzung von Thai Quellen, auf die ich gestoßen bin. Aufbauend auf der Übersetzung und Analyse von originalen Thai Quellen der Proteste, z.B. Transparente, Schilder, T-Shirts, Reden und Graffiti, argumentiere ich, dass die Rothemden eine durchdachtere und weitreichendere politische Philosophie haben, als ihnen von vielen zugestanden wird. Zudem entwickelte sich die Bewegung im Laufe der Ereignisse über ihr ursprüngliches Handlungsfeld hinaus, indem sie Gerechtigkeit für die Opfer des militärischen Durchgreifens forderte und die politische Rolle der Monarchie in Frage stellte. Sowohl als politische Bewegung als auch als ein erheblicher Teil der Wählerschaft, haben die Rothemden das Potenzial, die soziale und politische Landschaft in Thailand erheblich umzugestalten.

Schlagworte: Protest; Rothemden; Soziale Bewegung; Thailand; Thai politische Krise

1 James Buchanan lived and worked in Thailand from 2005 to 2010, witnessing much of the turbulence of that time at first hand. He received a master degree with distinction in Southeast Asian Studies from SOAS, University of London, and is due to begin PhD research on Thailand's Red Shirts in September this year. The author would like to thank two anonymous peer reviewers for their valuable input as well as Dr. Federico Ferrara, Assistant Professor at the Department of Asian and International Studies, City University of Hong Kong. Contact: jimmy_buchanan@soas.ac.uk

Bangkok 2010: A Year of Living Dangerously

From 14 March 2010 onwards, a mass of *suea daeng*, literally 'red shirts', began a prolonged mass protest in Bangkok. The Red Shirts is the unofficial name given to the protest movement known in Thai as *naew ruam pra-cha-thi-pa-tai to tan pa-det kan haeng chat*, translated as *The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship* (UDD). They demanded the dissolution of parliament and fresh elections, which seemed certain to empower a party aligned with ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who had been ousted by a military coup four years earlier. A former police lieutenant-colonel turned telecommunications tycoon, Thaksin revolutionized Thailand's political landscape when his *Thai Rak Thai* Party won a landslide victory in the 2001 general elections. His American-style campaign trail took him out to areas of the country usually given scant attention by Bangkok politicians and his populist policies – universal health care, debt moratorium for farmers, and development funds to stimulate local economies – won him massive support in these rural areas. He completed a full term in office – the first elected Thai prime minister ever to do so – and was re-elected with another landslide in 2005. However, despite his economic success and popularity, Thaksin's first term in office was also dogged by controversy. Civil society groups were appalled by his human rights record, particularly his 'war on drugs', and his attempts to control the media through defamation suits. He was also accused of corruption and, most seriously from his point of view, he had made powerful enemies within some sections of Thailand's elites. In particular, he was accused of being disloyal to the King – an extremely serious charge in Thailand. A protest movement, the *People's Alliance for Democracy* (PAD), began holding increasingly large rallies in the capital in an attempt to bring him down. The PAD, dubbed the 'yellow shirts' due to the color they wore to show their allegiance to the King, made Thaksin's second term in office extremely difficult and effectively paved the way for a military coup in 2006. The junta cited many reasons for the coup, including disrespect for the monarchy, corruption, and an "unprecedented rift in society" ("Statement From the Administrative", 2006). If Thaksin had indeed caused a rift in Thai society, then the coup only deepened and widened it, as a new movement, the Red Shirts, emerged to oppose it. Thailand had entered into what Montesano (2012) has called a "slow-burn civil war" (p. 3).

I was living in Thailand and found myself caught in the middle of events at the time, which became my own 'year of living dangerously'. As a *fa-rang*² visiting the protests, it was often a bewildering experience. I had been studying Thai language for some time but was by no means fluent and it was sometimes difficult to follow the many dramatic events of those months. At the rallies, I found myself surrounded by Thai, both written and spoken. Slogans adorned banners, placards, flags, and the actual red shirts from which the protesters took their name. My ears were assaulted by a cacophony of language from all directions; speeches from the main stage blared out of loud speakers, songs blasted from sound systems set up in the back of pick-up trucks, protestors chanted slogans; and I was often approached by friendly and curious protestors who would ask me, in Thai, what I thought of the political situation. All of this was a challenge to my limited Thai language skills but one which I accepted with vigor, such was my desire to understand what was going on. This article utilizes the linguistic landscape of the protests by translating and commenting on some of the original Thai language sources I came across. In doing so, I provide some insight into the political meanings of the protests and the motivations, desires, and frustrations of the protestors. I argue that the Red Shirts demonstrate a much more sophisticated political outlook than their detractors give them credit for and that the movement went far beyond mere support for Thaksin. The Red Shirts, often in very creative ways, subverted hegemonic cultural norms and challenged the existing order as they reasserted their stake in Thailand's political system. Also, as events unfolded, the movement adapted accordingly, expanding its scope to include issues such as justice for the victims of the military crackdown, *lèse-majesté*, and the role of the monarchy. By using translation of Thai language sources as the focus for my analysis I hope, in a sense, to let the protestors speak for themselves. Examination of the Red Shirts' own words may sound like an obvious method but it is one that has so far been underused as commentators rush to express their own thoughts of the protests. Also, the Red Shirts were very ineffective in their English language public relations and failed to communicate who they were, what they were doing, and why to an international audience. By contrast, their Thai language rhetoric and framing was extremely sophisticated, with Nattawut Saikua and Jatuporn Prompan

2 An often used term meaning 'Westerner'.

in particular emerging from the protests as two of the greatest Thai orators of recent times. Original Thai language sources are therefore fertile ground for those wishing to analyze the movement.

To avoid a top-down approach, I have used a variety of sources, ranging from graffiti scribbled on walls by the rank and file protestors to extracts of speeches made by core leaders. All translations are my own and are from Thai language I saw or heard at the protests, from photographs I took or from online sources.³

Heard and Read in the Land: Decoding Red Shirt Rhetoric

Many, including myself, were struck by the carnival atmosphere when the Red Shirts first descended on Bangkok. They paraded around the city in cars, pick-up trucks, motorbikes, and on foot. Stalls were set up selling food, merchandise, and even services like massage. There was much singing and dancing and several songs became popular anthems. One was “Red in the Land” (“Daeng Tang Phaen Din”, 2009), a rousing marching song, which urged protestors to leave their homes and mobilize to join the Red Shirts (*ok chak ban ruam pa-lang suea daeng*). The numbers of protestors the Red Shirts were able to mobilize became a daily topic of conversation during the March-May period, with various estimates coming from police, media, and other sources. The size of the crowd was an obvious way to judge the size of the movement and its chances of success. With so much at stake, the estimates given were often extremely conservative or exaggerated, depending on the sympathies of those reporting. The protracted nature of the protests meant that the movement found it a challenge to sustain numbers, which waned in the morning and afternoon and then swelled again each evening as people finished work. Initial claims that the protests would be a “million man march” (“Day of Reckoning”, 2010) were obvious hyperbole but, at its peak, there were definitely well over a hundred thousand Red Shirts on the streets. Whilst a few stalwarts sustained the protests by camping out in the city for the duration, many more shuttled back and forth between the capital and the provinces; as some left, others replaced them, ensuring that numbers were maintained. Between this and the many based in Bangkok who joined to make up the

³ With regards to transliteration style, no system of Romanization of Thai is perfect, but for the sake of consistency I have followed the commonly used Royal Thai General System of Transcription.

evening crowds, it is clear that Red Shirts are a movement of significant numbers. Another song was the irresistibly catchy “Love Red Shirt People” (“Rak Khon Suea Daeng”, 2009), which proclaimed a love for democracy and for Thailand (*rao rak pra-cha-thi-pa-tai rao ko rak pra-thet thai*). Although nowhere near the ultra-nationalism exhibited by their political enemies, the PAD, the Red Shirts were also nationalistic. It is worth bearing in mind that Thaksin managed to successfully turn nationalist sentiment into political currency in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997, when Thai pride was injured after being forced to accept International Monetary Fund (IMF) assistance (Pasuk & Baker, 2009, p.76). His Thai Rak Thai Party (Thais Loving Thais Party) had, as the name suggests, used a nationalist platform to help it win a landslide election victory in 2001. The latest incarnation of that party, which was dissolved by the military junta after the coup, is the Phuea Thai Party (For Thais Party) who, again, chose a name which would harness nationalist sentiment. Whichever side of Thailand’s divided politics you are on; it seems it pays to be nationalistic. By comparison with the ultra-nationalist PAD, however, whose rhetoric and protests at the Cambodian border has enflamed a long running dispute over an ancient temple, leading to a series of clashes, the Red Shirts are decidedly mild. In their protests, the Red Shirts have also been much more outwards looking than their nemeses. Unlike the PAD, the Red Shirts have a wide network of chapters in various countries in Europe, Australia, and America who have campaigned on their behalf and held protests at their respective embassies. One reason for this could be that, rather than the backwards ‘country bumpkins’ their urban compatriots consider them to be, many rural Thais are now “cosmopolitan villagers” (Keyes, 2012), who have first hand experience of the international world through decades of migration for employment and marriage to foreigners. By contrast, the more right-wing PAD rhetoric is inward-looking and xenophobic, dismissing outside analysis of issues such as the monarchy as something that ‘only Thais can understand’. At one point, founder and core leader of the PAD Sondhi Limthongkul went as far as to make the bizarre claim that American capitalists were behind a plot to overthrow the monarchy (“Sondhi: American Capitalists”, 2010). Another song often heard at the protests, not from the main stage but from protestors’ cars and tents, was “Khon Ban Diao Kan” (Phai Pongsatorn, 2009).

The song, which translates as something like “people from the same home”⁴, is an extremely popular *phleng luk thung*⁵, which talks about the empathy and closeness between poor people who go to Bangkok from the provinces in search of work. Although not overtly political in content, the song’s popularity and meaning ensured its place as a favorite amongst the protestors. The *luk thung* style, which originates from the north-east, is a denigrated form amongst the middle class in Bangkok, who see it as provincial and unsophisticated. The lyrics of the song echo the socio-economic factors which mobilized the Red Shirts and forged their sense of communal identity – a feeling that, in the words of the song, they only need to “look into each other’s eyes to understand one another” (*khae mong tha kan ko khao chai yu*). This also demonstrates the strong regional dimension of the political crisis and formation of the Red Shirts, many of whom come from the north and north-east, or Lanna and Isaan, which, since the formation of the modern Thai state, have not been successfully integrated and maintain distinct regional identities. However, the power balance between the center and the periphery has now begun to change with the consolidation of electoral democracy. More populous rural areas are now able to assert themselves, leading to a backlash from Bangkok, which attempts to “derail the political challenges emanating from outside the capital” (Glassman, 2010, p. 1319).

This ‘all singing, all dancing’ Red Shirt movement was in sharp contrast to the rioting Red Shirts who had caused havoc in the city in 2009, pointing to a better organized, more savvy movement. This change in tactics was well-advised because the riots of 2009 had failed to garner public sympathy and provided cause for their opponents to label them as violent and thuggish. In 2010, as mobile Red Shirt rallies snaked their way through Bangkok streets to cheering crowds, there was a tangible sense that the new, ‘fun-loving’ Red Shirts were winning the hearts and minds of many in the undecided camp. This change was, of course, calculated but may also have been a natural process; an example of what Collins (2001) describes as the “initiating emotion”, which gradually subsides within the collective gatherings of social movements. This initiating emotion, which for the Red Shirts was anger and a sense of injustice, is necessary for a movement to achieve ‘take-off’ but then “gives rise to

4 In this case “home” means village or province.

5 The term refers to a genre of music in Thailand that is often translated as “country music” but a more literal translation is “songs of children of the fields” (Lockard, 1998, p. 184).

distinctly collective emotions, the feelings of solidarity, enthusiasm, and morality” (Collins, 2001, p. 29).

Of course, there was more to the protests than just singing and dancing, and the language displayed on shirts, jackets, hats, bandanas, banners, placards, and stickers gave some insight into what had brought tens of thousands of people onto the street in the first place. The main aim of the protests was to pressure the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva to dissolve parliament (*yup sa-pha*); one of the most repeated slogans in the protests. As analysts look for the bigger social and economic trends which are certainly at the root of Thailand’s political crisis and the emergence of the Red Shirts, it is easy to overlook the one simple demand in 2010: fresh elections. The movement’s faith in elections as a tool of political decision-making gives a fair degree of validation to their self-proclaimed commitment to democracy. It is worth bearing in mind that both the Red and Yellow Shirts have the word democracy (*pra-cha-thi-pa-tai*) in their official titles. However, by contrast, the PAD had petitioned for a palace-appointed government (“King the Only Hope”, 2006) and poured scorn on the electoral process.

It is true that many of the protestors did show their loyalty to ousted Prime Minister Thaksin, with images of his face on t-shirts and banners and slogans such as “I love Thaksin” (*ku rak Thaksin*). The more colloquial pronoun *ku* was used during the protests instead of the more formal and hierarchal *phom/chan*. More personal and with rural, folk undertones, the form is rarely used in public discourse. Moreover, due to Thai culture’s strict demarcation of the private and public spheres, the intimacy of the pronoun can sometimes cause offense as it is seen as ‘too familiar’. By using this word, the Red Shirts were deliberately subverting bourgeois social norms and flaunting their alleged rural ‘coarseness’ in the faces of their detractors in the capital.

During the earlier PAD rallies, protestors used plastic, yellow ‘clappers’ shaped like hands, which when shaken produced a clapping sound to applaud speeches made from the protest stage. With cheeky reference to this, the Red Shirts produced their own ‘feet-clappers’, this time red-colored and shaped like feet. This juxtaposed nicely with the yellow hand-clappers used by the PAD and also had an element of shock-value, given that feet are considered dirty and offensive in Thai culture. Once again, the Red Shirts were defiantly playing up to their unrefined image and showing their

middle finger or, in the Thai context, showing their foot, to bourgeois hegemony.⁶ Glassman (2011, p. 36) suggests that the Red Shirts' discontent was created by the very hegemonic projects designed to subvert them. It is fitting then, that resistance is communicated to elites by creatively recasting their own hegemonic cultural norms and moving away from bourgeois language and social practices to more local, rural ones.

Possibly the most potent weapon in the Red Shirts' rhetoric arsenal was the re-appropriation of an archaic Thai word *prai* – a derogatory word meaning an uncouth and uneducated peasant or serf. Bunthawat Weemoktanondha, an anthropologist from the northeastern city of Khon Kaen, comments that the Red Shirts were “breaking a cultural taboo by using this word so openly to describe themselves without feeling ashamed of being *prai*” (Macan-Markar, 2010). The word was juxtaposed to another archaic word, *am-mat*, which is often translated as ‘elite’ and in this case refers to high-level government officials. The *am-mat* criticized by the Red Shirts were influential bureaucrats such as the judiciary, who were blamed for the ‘judicial coup’ which ousted Prime Minister Somchai (Weaver, 2008), and the Privy Council, particularly Prem Tinsulanonda, who was accused of being the mastermind behind the military coup of 2006. The use of this word demonstrated the new understanding the Red Shirts had regarding the locus of power in Thailand. The word has its roots in the Sanskrit word *amatya*, which was the second highest level of officialdom in the Bhramanical theory of political organization, or *rajya* (Tambiah, 1976, p. 31). The *amatya* were second only to the king, or *svami*, himself. Given the proximity of the *amatya* to kings historically, and of the modern day *am-mat* (i.e. the Privy Council) to the current king, this choice of word seemed to have very subversive undertones. The *prai/am-mat* dichotomy also played on the feudal system, or *ra-bop sak-ka-di na*, of Thailand's past and thus highlighted inequality in modern Thailand. This phrase has strong connections to Thai Marxist ideology, specifically to the iconic leftist figure, Chit Phumisak, and the theme of his most famous work, *The Face of Thai Feudalism (Chom Na Sak-ka-di Na Thai)*, published in 1957. In the same vein, the choice of the color red poses an obvious reference to radical Thai Marxist discourse. According to Tongchai (2010), the choice of the words *prai* and

6 In the aftermath of the crackdown on the Red Shirts at Ratchaprasong intersection, NGO worker and activist Sombat Boon-ngam-anong emerged from the grassroots of the movement with his own Red Sunday events to maintain the Red Shirts profile and remonstrate the killing of protestors. Aside from creative protests such as ‘red aerobics’ and ‘red bicycle rides’, his group became known for photo opportunities ‘giving the finger’ to the camera. This kind of public defiance may be passé in Western culture, but seemed quite shocking in more conservative Thailand.

am-mat “targets the oppression and injustice due to social class and hierarchy” and turns the Red Shirt struggle into a “revolt of the downtrodden rural folks against the privileged social and political class”.

The Red Shirts realized that dissolving parliament alone, despite it being their central aim, would achieve little if the *am-mat* they claimed were pulling strings behind the scenes remained in place; therefore a complete overhaul of the Thai political system was necessary. Thus, t-shirts and banners called for the *am-mat* to be overthrown (*khon am-mat rat-ta-ban*) and “Power returned to the people” (*khuen amnat pra-cha chon*). Through such sloganeering, the Red Shirts were effective in tapping into a heritage of popular protest and struggle for democracy in Thailand. On 24 June 2012, the Red Shirts held a rally to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the 1932 revolution, which again historicized the movement – this time all the way back to the revolution which overthrew the absolute monarchy and started the country on its rocky road to democratization. Nattawut (2010b) describes this dramatic period in Thai history, saying that on 24 June 1932, a group of military and civilians were able to transform the government (*24 mi-thu-na-yon 2475 tha-han le phon-la-ruean . . . dai a-phi plian plaeng kan pok khrong*). However, he points out that, despite this, the foundation of the political structure in Thailand has actually changed very little since that time (*khrong sang lak thang kan mueang khong prathet mai dai plian pai loei*) and the core of the old system remains, dragging its feet (*nai sa-ra sam-kan pen yu yang nan yang khong yam kap yu che-na-nan*). He then presents the Red Shirts as playing a pivotal role in completing this historical process, telling the crowd that in 2012 a big struggle is on the verge of happening (*kam-lang cha kuet kan to su khrang*).

By contrast, the PAD failed to create a meaningful narrative, and instead misspent much of their rhetoric on vitriol directed at Thaksin. As the Red Shirt movement first emerged in defense of the ousted prime minister, the PAD and its sympathizers also directed its acrimony towards them, calling them uneducated ‘red buffaloes’ (*khwai daeng*). The term *khwai* is an extremely offensive term which implies someone is stupid and lazy and is often used towards people from the provinces who work in agriculture. This attempt to degrade the Red Shirts has been common since their inception and has taken many forms. In this case, the effect is to dehumanize them; not only are the Red Shirts not human, they are the lowliest form of beast. In other cases the Red Shirts have been perceived as being ‘red germs’ (Tongchai, 2010), in-

vading and thus infecting the cleanest and most sterile of places – a hospital. After sightings of snipers on the roof of the Chulalongkorn Hospital, which overlooked the Red Shirt barricade at Silom junction, a group of Red Shirts entered the hospital to demand that the soldiers vacate. Panic ensued as doctors and nurses wheeled out patients to escape the Red Shirts. Tongchai (2010) builds on his ‘infection’ metaphor by explaining that the Red Shirts and Thaksin have come to be viewed as a “disease to the Thai moral body”. Others, such as Pavin (2010) and, in this journal, Poowin (2010) have demonstrated how nationalist discourses of ‘Thainess’ (*khwam pen thai*) have been used to portray the Red Shirts as somehow ‘un-Thai’ and therefore as alien or ‘Other’, and not deserving the same rights as other Thais. Not only were Thaksin supporters deemed ‘too stupid to vote’, it was also assumed that they lacked the agency to protest about something of their own volition and they were accused of being paid to attend the protests. To rebuke this claim, the slogan *mai tong chang ku ma eng* (there is no need to hire me, I came of my own accord) was adopted by the Red Shirts and printed on t-shirts and other merchandise – humorously but decisively reclaiming the agency which their opponents were attempting to take away. Commentators often suggest that the Red Shirt protests began as a pro-Thaksin reaction to the coup and then developed into something more. This narrative fails on two counts. Firstly, it fails to recognize that from the beginning, the Red Shirt movement was composed of various different groups, not all of whom were supportive of Thaksin. Take, for example, the academic and activist Giles Ungpakorn who was an affiliate of the Red Shirts and had been one of the first to oppose the coup but also distance himself from the controversial Thaksin by using the slogan “No to Thaksin. No to the coup” (*song mai ao*) (Ungpakorn in Walker, 2006). Secondly, this chapter has suggested that even those Red Shirts who did support the ex-prime minister also demonstrated sophisticated critiques of the Thai political system, defended electoral politics, cleverly subverted hegemonic cultural norms, and acted to reclaim their dignity and agency. However, it certainly holds true that the movement developed over the course of the protests and adapted accordingly, as new situations presented themselves. The following chapters will chart these changes.

Cruel April, Savage May: The Army Crackdown Inflames the Red Shirts

Despite the peaceful start of the protests, events soon took a turn for the worse. The two months of April and May became known as Cruel April (*me-sa-yon hot*) and Savage May (*phruet-sa-pha-khom ma-hit*) as Thailand witnessed the worst political violence in its modern history. Both of these terms resonate the expression “Black May” (*phreut-sa-pha tha-min*), the name given to the violent crackdown of demonstrations and massacre of protestors by the Suchinda government in May, 1992.⁷ Again, these expressions created a historical link between the Red Shirts and popular resistance in modern Thailand.

The first violence occurred on 10 April at Kok Wua intersection, when an attempt by the military to clear one of the protest sites left 25 dead: 19 protestors, 5 soldiers, and a Japanese TV cameraman. Much of what happened that evening is still blurry but what does seem clear, despite official obfuscations, is that the majority of the protestors died after being fired upon by the army (“Military Admits Firing at Reds”, 2010). Many of those killed suffered horrendous head injuries, seemingly shot by snipers positioned on nearby rooftops. In the aftermath, those killed on 10 April were eulogized in Red Shirt rhetoric. T-shirts with the date of the massacre and slogans such as “Praise the commoners, heroes of democracy” became popular (*sa-du-di prai wi-ra-chon pra-cha-thi-pa-tai*). Displays were hung up around the rally site, showing graphic photographs of Red Shirts who had been killed, accompanied by written commentary criticizing the military and decrying Prime Minister Abhisit as a tyrant (*thor-ra-rat*) and a murderer (*khat-kon*). As the Red Shirts mourned their dead, a rumor circulated that shortly before the attempted dispersal, Queen Sirikit’s lady-in-waiting, Jarungjit Thikara, had visited the eleventh regiment army base, where the military and Abhisit government were conducting meetings. It was alleged that she had met with the government and top brass of the military to order, on behalf of the Queen, the crackdown on the Red Shirts. A leaked photograph of the alleged meeting was copied and pasted around the protest site. Jarungjit denied the rumours, leading Red Shirt leader Nattawut Saikua (2010a) to tell the crowd at Ratchaprasong that “Lady JJ (Jarungjit) has come out and said that she is not involved (*than phu ying JJ ok ma pa-di-set wa mai kiao khong*), that she didn’t interfere in politics, (*mai dai yung kiao*

⁷ For an excellent account of this period in Thai history, cf. Murray (2000).

kap kan mueang), that she doesn't have the power to give orders to the commander in chief" (*mai mi am-nat nai kan sang phu ban-cha kan tha-han bok dai*). He refuted her claim, saying "if I wasn't sure, I wouldn't come and announce it on this stage" (*tha mai man chai khong cha mai ao ma thalaeng bon we-thi ni*). To a cheering crowd, he asserted that she had "interfered in politics" (*saek saeng sa-than kan mueang*). Jarungjit is said to be the Queen's closest aide so, for the Red Shirts, giving the order for the crackdown was the same as the Queen giving the order. Prior to this, there had been vaguely detectable discontent with the role of the monarchy, particularly when the Queen attended the funeral of a PAD protestor who was killed in a clash with the police, saying that she was a "good girl" and a "protector of the monarchy and the country" ("Fuelling the Pyre", 2008). However, with passions running high after the clash on 10 April, a more open dissatisfaction was beginning to emerge; something that had previously been almost unimaginable in Thailand.

The killings hardened the resolve of the protestors, who barricaded themselves in the commercial heart of the city, protected by fearsome-looking fortifications of car tires and sharpened bamboo sticks. Along with their calls for the dissolution of parliament, they now also demanded justice for the victims of the crackdown as a prerequisite for ending the protests. Having learned a lesson from their blundered attempt to disperse the protestors in April, the army this time created a perimeter around the main protest site and attempted to stop food and supplies from entering. The outlying areas were then brought under complete military control using a tactic called containment by fire. In reality this meant shooting anything that moved, often with sniper fire from tall buildings and overhead bridges. The death toll started to mount and the crowd inside the 'red zone' slowly dwindled as protestors chose to avoid the main rally site and instead form pockets of resistance in other parts of the city. The protestors had by this time abandoned their trademark red shirts to avoid becoming targets for snipers. The dangerous conditions on the street precluded carrying signs and banners; instead, fireworks and childish looking catapults were used to stage a futile resistance to the soldiers who were armed with high-powered assault rifles. On 19 May, after a week of pressurizing the Red Shirts, the military decided the time was right to make a decisive push to clear the main protest site. The Red Shirt barricades proved no obstacle for the tanks and the protest leaders surrendered, fearing for their own safety and that of the crowd. The majority of

the protestors fled before the troops arrived, scattering out through backstreets to safer areas and trusted friends and family. Hundreds fled to a nearby temple which had previously been declared a “safe zone” by the government. However, the temple came under heavy fire, with several protestors shot either inside or just outside the temple; at least nine died (“9 Bodies Found”, 2010). In the face of defeat, the protestors let out their final cry, rioting and setting fire to buildings around the city, the most famous being the huge Central World mall, a section of which was completely destroyed.⁸ The rage spread to other provinces, with protestors setting fire to government buildings in Chiang Mai, Udon Thani, Khon Kaen, and Mukdahan – all Red Shirt strongholds. When the rioting subsided, Thailand stood back and assessed the damage. The charred shells of buildings could be seen dotted around the city, at least 91 people had died and a further 2,000 had been injured. Worse still, the crackdown and the killings had only intensified the anger which had brought the Red Shirts out to the streets in the first place, the country’s social and political fissures had only been deepened, and the possibility of future confrontation seemed very likely indeed. Over the course of these two months the atmosphere of the protests had changed from one of fun and optimism to outrage and determined stoicism. Alongside the rhetoric discussed in the previous chapter emerged criticism of the military, a desire for justice for the victims of the crackdowns, and rumblings of discontent with the role of the monarchy.

The Writing on the Wall: Graffiti and Seditious at Ratchaprasong

After the clearance of the main rally site at Ratchaprasong, the Red Shirts were muted for a while, with most of its leadership in jail, but smaller groups, particularly the Red Sunday group led by NGO worker and activist Sombat Boon-ngam-anong soon began rallying again. The emergence of these new groups and leaders such as Sombat is evidence of the fluid and organic nature of the movement and seems to refute claims that it is a top-down, elite-mobilized “manipulated mass” (Crispin, 2010,

⁸ That the Red Shirts committed acts of arson is undeniably true. However, much remains unclear about the most devastating fire, which completely destroyed a large section of the Central World mall, with evidence suggesting that the area was already under military control before the fire broke out. Regardless, the destruction was seized upon by the state, which used it as justification for the crackdown and a reason to label the Red Shirts “terrorists”. As Taylor (2011) points out, this is an “intentionally de-legitimizing epithet which carries considerable emotional force in the post 9/11 world” (p. 3).

p.109). The focus of these protests was expressing outrage over the killing of the Red Shirts. Slogans such as “People died here” (*thi ni mi kon tai*) appeared on placards as protestors took part in ‘die-ins’ on the street whilst young Thais awkwardly shopped in Siam Square, trying to ignore the chalk bodies that had been drawn on the ground. Public space around Ratchaprasong was used for state propaganda purposes, with billboards reassuring people that “Everything will be ok” and “Together we can” (*ruam kan rao dai*), the latter slogan being creatively subverted with stickers proclaiming “Together we can kill” (*ruam kan rao kha dai*) pasted up around Ratchaprasong and nearby Siam Square. Bangkok’s middle classes, so traumatized by the protests, gladly swallowed the Prozac propaganda offered by the government. A ‘memorial’ wall was erected at the site of the destroyed Central World Mall, to which people added messages of their own, declaring their love for the King and mourning the loss of the place they shopped, ate, and socialized. One message lamented that the beer garden outside the mall wouldn’t be open for watching the up-coming football World Cup (*yak du bon lok thi ni lae ao lan bia khong rao khuen ma*), whilst a girl complained that she wouldn’t be able to attend her dance classes (*klap ma sak thi yak som ten*). Many in the city were understandably upset that the normal rhythms of their lives had been disrupted by the protests, but it was surprising that the destruction of the mall had provoked such strong emotions, illustrating the deep attachment people felt to the site of consumption which had served as a backdrop to their lives. Some even used the memorial wall as a chance to air their hatred of the Red Shirts, with some rather choice language used. However, others found the wall insensitive and were appalled by those quick to ‘mourn’ the loss of a mall whilst apparently lacking any emotional response to the deaths of 91 people (Taylor, 2011, p. 4). Some were moved to write their own messages, condemning the military and the government. Thus, the wall became a site of contention between those who backed the crackdown and ‘mourned’ the mall and those sympathetic to the protestors. Messages were written, responded to and angrily scrubbed out – a microcosm of the debate raging throughout the country.

On 19 September 2010, the Red Shirts held the first mass rally at Ratchaprasong since the crackdown and decisively claimed back the space, if only for the day, by completely covering the area with their own graffiti. I was working near the area that day and finished work around the time the protest ended. As I walked past Cen-

tral World on my way home I saw two policemen guarding the wall with the graffiti on it. The Red Shirts had long gone home and the only people on the street were a few passers-by, who were standing reading the graffiti, mouths agape. The majority of the messages targeted the monarchy and blamed them for the killing of the Red Shirts. In Thailand, the King is protected by the *lèse-majesté* law, Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, which states that “whoever defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years” (Streckfuss, 2010, p. 108). Much of the graffiti targeted the law itself, with anti-*lèse-majesté* slogans such as “*Mai ao 112*” (we don’t want 112) featuring prominently. Derogatory remarks were written about the *wan si nam ngoen* (blue whale) and *pak daeng* (red mouth); both thinly disguised references to Queen Sirikit.⁹ There were also several comments implicating Sirikit in the theft of a blue diamond belonging to the royal family of Saudi Arabia (US Embassy Bangkok, 2008). King Bhumipol also came under fire, with many comments teasing his blind eye and calling him a murderer.¹⁰ With safety in numbers, some Red Shirts had challenged the monarchy in a public Bangkok space – an act of huge political significance in Thailand. Realizing the importance of the graffiti, I rushed home to grab a camera and return to take some photos. When I returned, just thirty minutes later, the entire wall had been removed by the police, demonstrating the seriousness with which authorities in Thailand treat any dissent against the monarchy.

The Red Shirts that day chanted *ai hia sang kha*, loosely translated as “that bastard ordered the killings” (“*Ai Hia Sang Ka*”, 2010). The term *ai* is a male title, with a meaning similar to “guy”. It is an extremely familiar term, which can be considered rude if used to address a person one is not close to. The word *hia* refers to a *tua hia*, or monitor lizard, which is thought to be a loathsome reptile in Thailand. That the Red Shirts were referring to the King can only be speculated, given that the phrase is so vague, but it is exactly this vagueness which is so intriguing. Other possibilities, such as then Prime Minister Abhisit, Deputy Prime Minister Suthep, Privy Councilor Prem, and Army Chief Anuphong had all come under fire from the Red Shirts before, and had

9 The ‘blue whale’ refers to her birth color, blue, and her rather corpulent figure. The ‘red lips’ nickname refers to the bright red lipstick she often wears. Often, the blue whale or a pair of red lips were drawn instead of actually writing the words, symbolic of the silence the *lèse-majesté* law imposes and, at the same time, testament to the protestors’ ingenuity and determination to get around it.

10 Details are unclear but King Bhumipol either lost an eye or was partially or wholly blinded in a car accident as a youth.

been explicitly named; but not the King, protected as he is by *lèse-majesté* laws and by sections of society still fiercely loyal to the monarchy. Giles Ungpakorn (2010) speculated that they were referring to the King and that it suggests “a growing republican movement among millions of Red Shirts”. A survey I conducted among Thais living in the UK who identify themselves as Red Shirts showed that most believed the phrase refers to the king. Taylor (forthcoming) points out that, in the wake of the killing of protestors at Ratchaprasong, the Red Shirts renamed the area using a subversive play on words. The name Ratchaprasong, composed of the words *ra-cha* (king) and *pra-song* (desire), literally means “the King’s desire”. During a protest shortly after the crackdown, this was changed to “people’s desire”, by replacing *ra-cha* with *rat*, from the word *pra-cha rat*, meaning “people” or “citizen”. This symbolic re-naming challenges the power of the monarchy and the entire Thai social order.

Royal Bullets: “Killing the Children for the Father”

After the crackdown, with many grassroots Red Shirts seething at the monarchy, the topic could no longer be ignored by the Red Shirt leadership. On 10 April 2011, at a rally to mark the anniversary of the killing of protestors at Kok Wua intersection, Red Shirt core leader and Phuea Thai Member of Parliament Jatuporn Prompan (2011) delivered a controversial speech which subtly criticized the palace. Directing his speech rhetorically to then Prime Minister Abhisit, Jatuporn criticizes him for using the Royal Thai army (*ta-han rak-sa pra-ong*) to crack down on the protestors.¹¹ Whatever units are used to kill them, he said, the Red Shirts will not be hurt (upset) (*nuai nai ma kha pom phuak pom yang mai chep puak*) unless it is the royal units or the Queen’s Guard (*ya-ga-wen nuai tha-han rak-sa phra ong tha-han suea ra-chi-ni*).¹² This is referring to the use of the regiments most closely associated with the palace, especially the Queen’s Guard, who were most active in the crackdown on the protestors. He suggests that Abhisit wanted the Red Shirts to think that the bullets (which killed them) were royal bullets (*khun cha hai rao khao chai wa pen krasun phra rat than chai mai*). Jatuporn chose his words carefully; chastising Abhisit for using those specific regiments to dis-

¹¹ Here, the emphasis seems to be on the *royal*.

¹² The Queen’s Guard refers to the 21st Infantry Regiment, whose nickname is the *tha-han suea ra-chi-ni*, or ‘Queen’s Tigers’.

perse the Red Shirts and, in doing so, tarnishing the reputation of the palace. Rather than attacking the palace, which would be extremely risky, he attacks Abhisit. However, few believed that Abhisit was holding any real power during the crisis, and so Jatuporn's words about "royal bullets" seem to have deeper significance. If Jatuporn knew that Abhisit held no real power, then the question is: Who was he directing his tirade against? Jatuporn then goes off on what seems like a tangent by mentioning that he would like to be interviewed by Khun Woody, a famous Thai talk show host. However, this reference was loaded with meaning that the crowd would immediately pick up on. Not long before Jatuporn's speech, Woody had conducted a controversial interview with Princess Chulabhorn. Whilst Woody sat prostrated on the floor, sharing food with her dog, the princess lamented that "what happened last year, when the country was burnt, brought great sorrow to Their Majesties the King and Queen" ("Princess: Country Burning", 2011). The Red Shirts had been extremely upset by her comments and would enjoy Jatuporn's pun that he could never be interviewed by Woody because he was not born to talk; he was one of those who were born to die (*pro rao mai dai goet ma khuy tae goet ma tai*).¹³ Princess Chulabhorn's remarks had already been criticized by some as insensitive because she mentioned the 'tragedy' of the burning buildings but not the protestors who had been killed. Like any criticism of the monarchy, this was mostly in hushed tones, but the academic Somsak Jiamteerasakul (2011) aired his views more publicly in an open letter to the princess, slamming the *lèse-majesté* law and calling for more open public debate about the role of the royal family. Later, Jatuporn criticized the words of Princess Chulabhorn – and many other, anti-red segments in the country – by saying that "people in this country only see the smoke, but don't see the 91 dead and two thousand injured" (*khon nai prathet ni hen tae khwan fai tae mai hen 91 sop bat chep loei*). Jatuporn then returns to Abhisit, asking him why he had to kill us (the Red Shirts), even though they had done nothing wrong and are "good peasants" (*pen prai thi di*).¹⁴ Jatuporn then denies that the Red Shirts wanted to topple the monarchy, insisting that their only goal was to dissolve parliament (*yup sa-pha dai yin mai, mai chai lom chao*). He then asks the crowd "*mi prathet nai bang nai lok ni kha luk phuea pho kha luk phuea mae, mi prathet ni*

13 Woody's talk show is called "born to talk", or *gèrt maa kui*. The pun of being "born to die" is reference to the massacre of Red Shirt protesters.

14 As well as protesting the Red Shirt's innocence, this is also a dig at Thailand's ruling elites, given the meaning of the word *prai*.

prathet diao” or “which countries in this world kill the children for the father, kill the children for the mother; only this country!”¹⁵. In Thailand, where public discussion on the monarchy is effectively impossible thanks to fierce social sanctioning and the country’s *lèse-majesté* law, Jatuporn’s speech was incendiary and openly articulated sentiments which had been percolating through the Red Shirt rank and file.

Conclusion

The Red Shirt movement and the protests of 2010 are of major significance in Thailand. The social forces unleashed when Thaksin courted the rural constituencies for votes have proven to be a genie that just will not be pushed back into the bottle, no matter how hard the country’s elites may try. The political crisis has brought to the surface underlying tensions that have existed in Thailand for decades or longer. An examination of Red Shirts’ rhetoric suggests they have a sophisticated understanding of politics in Thailand and have massive revolutionary potential, both as a social movement and as a large section of the electorate. This article has pointed to ways in which the movement has challenged the existing Thai social order by incorporating less hierarchal language and behavior into its protests. The existing cultural hegemony set by Bangkok elites has been shunned in favor of more rural traditions, particularly as the entire relationship between the center and periphery is shifting. Events from the coup until 2010 have led to a political awakening (*ta sa-wang*), in which the Red Shirts say they now see the true nature of the Thai state and the location of power more clearly. As I have detailed here, this has led to a re-evaluation of the role of the monarchy – an extremely inflammatory issue in Thailand which could prove to be a source of further conflict in the near future.

Without the pressure from the Red Shirts, it is doubtful whether the elections which brought the Phuea Thai Party, fronted by Thaksin’s younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, to power would ever have happened. It is also possible that the threat of mass Red Shirt mobilization could have deterred the military from staging another coup against her. With their goal of 2010 now achieved, the Red Shirts remain active in fighting for the rights of those imprisoned either for their part in the Red

¹⁵ Here, “father” and “mother” refer to the king and queen who, according to official discourse, are imagined as the father and mother of the nation.

Shirt protests or for *lèse-majesté* crimes (the boundaries between which are often blurred). They have also been active in pushing for justice for the victims of the 2010 crackdown and ending the tradition of impunity for the state violence which has too often marred Thailand's history. With slow progress in both, and rumors of a possible rapprochement between Thaksin and the royalist elite (Crispin, 2011), many of the rank and file of the movement are expressing concern that its leaders, some of whom are now members of parliament, may be selling out in favor of reconciliation with the elites. As mentioned earlier, new groups of Red Shirts and new leaders continue to emerge. Chulalongkorn academic Suda Rangkupan has led several rallies, whilst another recent rally, organized by a group calling themselves the *Radio Broadcasters for Democracy*, seemed to ruffle the feathers of Phuea Thai Party and the more mainstream of the Red Shirt leadership, with reports that they might have intervened to convince the protestors to call off the rally ("Thaksin Key to Rally's End", 2013). So it seems, the movement might not exactly be one which "encourages the masses to seek their own action in relation to the situation at hand" (Taylor, 2010, p. 298), but rather one which the mainstream leadership would like to control but may ultimately find themselves unable to.

By using the original language of the protests as a framework for analysis, I have hopefully created a better understanding of the goals, desires, and frustrations of the protestors. Language sources such as slogans and speeches can offer much insight into the nature of protest movements and are too often overlooked in analysis. This is especially true of languages such as Thai, which may not be accessible to all observers and therefore require some commentary. Language is a tool for communication and is thus a vital and natural part of social movements who, by very definition, have something to communicate. Language is first used to negotiate shared values and goals within movements and then to express these values and goals to the broader community. Anyone who feels passionately enough about something to take an active role in a movement wants to have their voice heard. I hope that by translating some of the voices from the Red Shirt movement I have helped, in a small way, to make this happen. Many of them died trying to make their voices heard, and so deserve that much.

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