

## A system that works is democratic enough

By: STANLEY A WEISS

**THAILAND** - What do you call a democracy in which women cannot vote, slavery is openly practised, elected office is reserved for wealthy white landowners, and national laws define an entire race of people as three-fifths of a human being?

A man waves the Thai flag as anti-government protesters fill up the Victory Monument intersection in Bangkok yesterday.

For nearly a century, we called it "the United States of America." It is fortunate that America's founding fathers never had to defend those contradictions on the pages of the *Economist* or to the cameras of CNN.

A nation like Thailand - which has lived through 17 military coups, 18 constitutions and 26 prime ministers since its unique system of constitutional monarchy was created in 1932 - deserves credit for its effort.

Despite setback after setback, it keeps trying to make democracy work, in a country largely surrounded by authoritarian regimes.

The tens of thousands of red-shirted protesters that converged on central Bangkok this week brought to mind another protest, also in Asia, which began 20 years ago this week. The protesters who gathered in China's Tiananmen Square in April of 1989 did so to mourn the loss of pro-democracy official Hu Yaobang. It ended tragically, of course, seven weeks later, as tanks rolled and lives were lost.

Contrast that with Thailand. During the political drama of the past three years, every freedom has been honoured and political power has been peacefully transferred. There is no question that a wide gap separates "red shirts" from "yellow shirts."

But for a Western media intent on interpreting every disagreement between yellow and red as a failure of democracy, one needs to remember that only eight years ago, there was widespread belief that a presidential election in the United States was stolen; or at the very least, ended by a Supreme Court which decided in favour of the candidate most ideologically similar.

"I was chagrined to read this split is undermining democracy," the US Ambassador to Thailand, Eric John, said to me. "Since when does a split in opinion undermine democracy? The fact that Thailand worked through its problems last year should be celebrated, not scorned."

Where the next chapter of Thai democracy leads in light of the current protests depends on the answers to four questions:

First, are the red shirts simply Thaksin Shinawatra's army, or have they now become something more?

As a leading Thai thinker told me, "People used to say that the yellow shirts paid their way to come to demonstrations while the red shirts were paid to come."

For most of this decade, the person seen as doing the paying was Thaksin, the twice-elected premier and telecom billionaire

ousted by a military coup in 2006, who allegedly bought "loyalty."

There was a perception that once those funds ran dry, so would that loyalty - as witnessed by the loss of 20 of 29 formerly Thaksin seats in December's parliamentary election.

Second, how big is the silent majority that sits between the red and yellow shirts in the Thai electorate today?

Bangkok Post columnist Veera Prateepchaikul wrote that "the majority of Thais who are neither red shirts nor yellow shirts have every reason to curtly tell these people, their leaders in particular, that we have had enough of their senseless protests".

And what channels exist for those who disagree with both sides to not allow their interests to be exploited? As Veera stated: "By the minority who talks the loudest."

Third, will His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej make his voice heard, as he has in the past?

By accusing Gen Prem Tinsulanonda of planning the 2006 coup, Thaksin has ratcheted his public rhetoric up to a point of no return.

During moments like this in the past - most notably, in 1973 and 1992 - the King has been a voice of reason, moving opposing sides to consider the larger good of Thailand.

Fourth, where is the middle ground between red and yellow shirts today?

Perhaps Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva should consider taking a page from the playbook of former US president Bill Clinton. After the opposition Republican Party swept the 1994 congressional election, Clinton had a masterstroke. He adopted a handful of leading Republican issues as his own, including welfare reform and a balanced budget. Two years later, he was re-elected to office, and those two issues became signature achievements of his presidency, benefiting the nation in the process.

What would happen if Prime Minister Abhisit adopted the rural poor as one of his causes? As former Dutch ambassador Anton Smitsendonk recently said to me, "Abhisit should clean up the situation in the North, in order to undercut political profiteering by populists like Thaksin. Give peasants some land and take price-setting out of the hands of northern speculating landlords by modernising markets." In short, do the very kinds of things Thaksin did when he was prime minister.

In the end, Thailand will work out its problems in its own way. Few people I speak with here are interested in Westminster-style debates about democracy right now. "Is this a good political model? Not by a long shot," a Thai entrepreneur told me. "But nobody here - not the elite, not the general public, not the politicians - really care too much about academic democracy. They just want a system that works, which is democratic enough."

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