

“Thailand’s Crisis and the Fight for Democracy”

Giles Ji Ungpakorn

Associate Professor Giles Ji Ungpakorn is a political commentator and dissident from Thailand. In February 2009 he had to leave Thailand for exile in Britain because he was charged with lèse majesté for writing a book criticising the 2006 military coup. His latest book will be of interest to academics, journalists and activists who have an interest in Thai politics, democratisation and NGOs.

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Chapter 1: Red Shirts vs Yellow Shirts

Chapter 2: The PAD, NGOs and the Peoples’ Movement

Chapter 3: The Crisis for the Monarchy

Chapter 4: Historical changes in Thailand

Chapter 5: The Civil War in the South

Chapter 6: A Personal Note

“Thailand’s Crisis and the Fight for Democracy” is Giles Ji Ungpakorn’s latest work concerning the on-going political crisis that has engulfed Thailand since the coup of 2006. The book analyses the nature of the deep political divisions between the “Red Shirts” and the royalist “Yellow Shirts”, starting from the creation of the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), through the 2006 coup and up to the end of 2009. It argues against the idea that former Prime Minister Taksin is somehow anti-Monarchy and that this was the root cause of the 2006 coup. In trying to understand the political crisis, it must be seen in its entirety, including elite divisions and disputes, but also the roles of Civil Society activists and the constantly developing social movements which are made up of ordinary people.

The first chapter argues that Taksin’s pro-poor policies and repeated election victories threatened the entrenched interests of the conservative ruling elites, including the military, the civilian bureaucracy and the political establishment. Although Taksin was no socialist and had no plan to build his political party into an activist movement, his overthrow by the military in 2006 sparked the building of a self-organised Red Shirt mass movement. To some extent this movement has moved beyond Taksin’s control, some sections becoming radical and republican.

The second chapter deals with the politics of the Peoples’ Movement and analyses how major sections of this movement, which include the NGOs, came to side with the royalist authoritarians against the majority of the poor and the democratic system as a whole. It questions mainstream democratisation theory and critiques previous views about NGOs in the light of Thai events. This chapter discusses the extreme right-wing PAD movement which closed the international airports in late 2008. There is also a discussion of the labour movement.

The third chapter discusses the difficult issue of the Thai Monarchy. Unlike most academic commentators, Giles Ji Ungpakorn argues that the King is weak and lacking in character. His key role is the ideological justification for elite rule. He symbolises the “legitimacy” of coups and anti-democratic actions, especially those carried out by the military. The 2006 coup and the King’s old age and ill health have resulted in a crisis for the royalists. There is a growing republican movement in Thailand today. The chapter also discusses the *lèse majesté* law which the elites use against their political opponents.

The fourth chapter gives an historical background to Thai politics from the pre-capitalist era, through the turmoil of the 1930s and 1970s, up to the present day. This historical understanding is important in locating the dynamics of the ruling class and the changing politics of revolt from the time of the Communist Party through to the creation of the NGOs.

The civil war in the Muslim Malay south is discussed in chapter 5. Giles Ji Ungpakorn shows that the fundamental issue is Thai state repression and until this is dealt with politically, there can be no long term peace. Yet mainstream policy in Thailand is still aimed at a military solution.

The final chapter deals with personal political experiences and memories of his father, Dr Puey Ungpakorn. This chapter has the English version of the Red Siam Manifesto, which was issued immediately after leaving Thailand in February 2009. It also contains an appendix with the 8 paragraphs from Giles Ji Ungpakorn’s previous book, *A Coup for the Rich*, which the Thai police deemed to be *lèse majesté*.

The analysis in this book is unique and is not covered by mainstream books on Thai politics.

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