The Journal of Asian Studies Vol. 68, No. 1 (February) 2009: 7–19.
© 2009 The Association for Asian Studies, Inc. doi:10.1017/S0021911809000072

Thai Politics as Reality TV

DUNCAN McCARGO

EARLY IN THE MORNING of August 26, 2008, a large group of stick-wielding, black-shirted masked men forced their way into the studios of Bangkok's NBT television station, briefly detaining a number of staff. Once inside, they flung open the main doors, allowing several hundred more yellow-shirted protestors from the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) inside. Other PAD supporters occupied the grounds of the station. NBT, the channel of the government's Public Relations Department (PRD) formerly known as Channel 11, was held by the PAD for around twelve hours. During this time, rogue engineers tried unsuccessfully to channel their illegal—but wildly popular—ASTV television signal through the NBT network. Defeated by the technical challenges, the protestors gave up their occupation of NBT, returning to Government House, the office of the Thai prime minister. That same afternoon, PAD supporters had climbed the fence of Government House and occupied the compound surrounding the Italianate Khu Fa building.

The symbolism of August 26 was striking.[1] Just as most of Thailand's military coups have begun with the seizure of broadcasting facilities, the PAD started with a strike at the government's public relations machinery. The PRD has long been a controversial entity—its main office building was burned down during antimilitary protests in May 1992—but the attempt literally to replace government with opposition broadcasting was unprecedented. Prior to mounting the physical challenge of commandeering Government House, the PAD was attempting to change the channels on every television set in Thailand. The medium had really become the message.

Who are the PAD?[2] What do they stand for? And whom do they represent? These are not easy questions to answer. The movement first emerged early in 2006, to campaign for the ousting of the then–prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Duncan McCargo (d.j.mccargo@leeds.ac.uk) is Professor of Southeast Asian Politics at the University of Leeds. Photographs by the author.

[1]For an analysis of developments up to late September, see the International Crisis Group briefing "Thailand: Calming the Political Turmoil," September 22, 2008, at http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=5689 (accessed October 24, 2008).

[2]A useful starting point is the Web site PAD USA, which includes both Thai and English materials: http://www.padusa.org/2008/index.html (accessed October 24, 2008). Another with a similar mixture is http://antithaksin.wordpress.com/ (accessed October 24, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

An early leader of the anti-Thaksin movement was Sondhi Limthongkul, the controversial owner of the *Phujatkan* (Manager) media organization. Though he imagined himself as an Asian Rupert Murdoch figure, Sondhi had never become seriously rich. A professional self-promoter, Sondhi spent the 1990s presenting himself as the spokesman of the Sino-Thai business elite who favored an end to bureaucratic dominance, mixing talk of globalization with the language of "Asia for Asians." His media empire was always a house of cards, one that tumbled during the 1997 financial crisis. During this period he vanished, leaving staff and debts unpaid: His journalists were encouraged to take their desks and computers home in lieu of their salaries. With support from Thaksin, Sondhi was able to rebuild his business in the years that followed. But Thaksin denied Sondhi the major prizes he sought—such as control of a television station—and their conflict came to a head when the government ousted Sondhi from *Muangthai raisapda* (Thailand Weekly), a popular political talk show that he hosted on Channel 9. In other words, Sondhi's grievances against Thaksin began with matters of media and centered on the question of television access.

Thaksin had become prime minister with unprecedented popular support in 2001, and won a landslide reelection victory in February 2005. A former police officer, he had become fabulously rich by securing a series of government-awarded mobile phone and communications-related concessions. His wealth increased greatly following the 1997 Asian economic crisis. Because Thaksin had adroitly transferred most of his assets into U.S. dollars immediately before the devaluation of the Thai baht—in a move that smacked of a tip-off—his Shin Corporation became Thailand's leading telecommunications giant almost overnight. Thaksin had already served for short spells as foreign minister (1994–95) and deputy prime minister (1995–96), taking over the middle-sized Palang Dharma Party previously led by former Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang. In 1998 he established the Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thai) Party, capitalizing on a mood of economic nationalism in the wake of the financial crisis. Yet the very same sentiments he had earlier fostered contributed to his subsequent downfall, when Thaksin's family sold Shin Corporation to the Singaporean government investment arm Temasek at the beginning of 2006. The Temasek sale triggered allegations of tax evasion and other criminal activity; but Thaksin's primary offence in the eyes of the public was his sale of one of Thailand's most important companies to a foreign power. The political tide turned against Thaksin, who was forced to call a snap general election—later annulled by the courts—faced months of street protests, and was finally ousted in the military coup of September 19, 2006.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press



https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

To see Thaksin simply as a controversial politician would be to miss the point. He represented a bold challenge to the dominance of the Thai monarchy, which had long sought to marginalize and discredit elected politicians. Although the absolute monarchy ended in 1932, King Bhumibol—the world's longest-reigning monarch, on the throne since 1946—has accumulated immense *barami* (charisma) that eclipses other actors in Thai society, allowing him to exercise considerable extraconstitutional power. In practice, the King rarely intervenes in politics himself; most interventions are carried out, ostensibly on his behalf, by an extended network of subordinates and informal allies. This "network monarchy" includes elements of the military, the bureaucracy, and even nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics, and civil society activists.[3] Most members of the network have no direct contact with the King himself, but act out of loyalty to what they see as his intentions.

As Michael Connors has brilliantly argued, the dominant political idiom in Thailand since the 1970s has been one of "royal liberalism," a royally promoted, tightly delimited pluralism in which the monarchy retains considerable prestige and privileges.[4] Initially, royal liberalism evolved alongside a central role for the military, amounting to a form of soft authoritarian rule. Monarchical benevolence and wisdom provided the "liberal" elements required to curb the excesses of authoritarianism; but suppressing communism and ensuring the continued survival of the monarchy were core priorities. During the 1980s, emerging elements of royal liberalism coexisted with a vigorous representative order, as Parliament became more prominent. But following the debacle of the 1991 military coup and the violent suppression of prodemocracy protestors in May 1992, reordering was urgently needed. Bhumibol was growing older, and a political system that had come to rely on his strategic interventions was no longer sustainable. Power shifted away from the military and toward the liberal wing of network monarchy, led informally by ex–prime minister Anand Panyarachun, and prominent social critic Dr. Prawase Wasi. These two men were among the prime movers behind the 1997 "people's constitution," which sought to institutionalize representative politics, introducing a set of legal provisions designed to curb money politics and ensure the good behavior of politicians. In large part, these measures were designed to avert a postsuccession political crisis, getting the Thai system into better shape in advance of the next reign.

In the eyes of the liberal monarchists who crafted it, the 1997 constitution was to prove a failure. The unwritten principles of the new constitution were simple: Good people would be able to enter politics, these good politicians

[3]For an elaboration, see Duncan McCargo, "Network Monarchy and Legitimacy Crises in Thailand," *Pacific Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 499–519. On the king, see Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006).

[4]See Michael K. Connors, "Article of Faith: The Failure of Royal Liberalism in Thailand," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 38, no. 1 (2008): 143–65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

would follow agreed rules of the game, they would not challenge the power or prestige of the monarchy, and in return the monarchy would not interfere with their activities. Thaksin, with his hundreds of members of Parliament (MPs) and millions of rural votes, never signed up to these principles. He was ousted in 2006, not because of the Temasek deal, or because of corruption or abuses of power, but because of his symbolic challenges to the monarchy.

As such, the renewed PAD demonstrations in Bangkok that began on May 25, 2008, were deeply invested with this kind of symbolism. The demonstrators were objecting to the postcoup People Power Party (PPP) government led by Samak Sundaravej, which they saw as a revived form of Thaksin proxy rule. Thaksin himself had returned to Thailand in February after a period of self-imposed exile. Most protesters wore yellow shirts, alluding to Monday, the day the King was born (days of the week are color-coded in Thailand). Sondhi had first created these shirts during the pre-PAD phase of his anti-Thaksin movement; the theme was duly appropriated by the palace, which had authorized the mass production of royal-logo yellow shirts to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the King's reign in 2006. Before long, they were statutory wear for most government officials. Implicitly, yellow shirts (and the yellow wristbands that usually accompanied them) were a reassertion of bureaucratic and royalist sentiment, to counter the pro-Thaksin sentiments of his many supporters. Pink and blue were also royal colors; pink had been worn by the King on the day he left hospital in November 2007, while blue represented the Queen's birthday. PAD "guards"—in practice a well-organized militia, some of them armed—typically wore black t-shirts, while supporters of the rival pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) sported red.

Sondhi's speeches conveyed the core messages of the PAD in an inventive, polemical style. As he declared on ASTV on May 24, the night before the resumption of street protests, "Am I tired? I am not just tired. I am disheartened. Why am I disheartened? Because all aspects of Thai society have already been bought. Some parts of the army have been bought. Virtually the whole of the justice system has been bought. The civil service has been bought."[5] The PAD saw themselves as redeeming Thailand from corruption fostered and fueled by Thaksin and his allies.

The five "core leaders" of the PAD were a diverse bunch: media magnate Sondhi, former Thaksin mentor Chamlong, state enterprise union leader Somsak Kosaisuk, NGO activist Pipop Thongchai, and opposition MP Somkiat Phongpaiboon. Fashions and accessories were integral to the PAD: Sondhi himself donned new outfits regularly, changing his t-shirt, headband, and scarf. Anyone visiting the PAD rallies at fortnightly intervals would be hard-pressed to find any of the same t-shirts on sale. Themes included the controversy over Khao Phra Viharn (Preah Vihar), a Khmer temple close to Cambodia's border

[5]Translated from Manager Online, http://www.manager.co.th/Home/ViewNews.aspx?NewsID=9510000060266 (accessed October 24, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with Thailand; attempts to mobilize support from Bangkok's Sino-Thai population (*Luk chin rak chat*, people of Chinese descent love the nation);[6] the depiction of the city's main street as a political university (*Rao rak mahawithiyalai rajadamnoen*, we love Rajadamnoen University); and a major cult of Che Guevara. How this iconic Argentine Marxist could be transformed into a Thai royalist-nationalist was one of the most intriguing questions raised by the PAD's eclectic and vividly incoherent t-shirtology. Other t-shirts commemorated August 26, 2008, as the beginning of the "last war," or promoted the "new politics" espoused by the PAD leadership. Constantly changing t-shirt themes reflected attempts by the movement to keep followers engaged during an extended struggle. Sales were boosted because a supply of fresh t-shirts was also useful for supporters spending many nights away from home. Complimentary food was provided at the demonstrations, which had a festive, noisy, temple fair atmosphere. Free panties were distributed to female protestors.

Activism was closely bound up with private enterprise: The PAD was accompanied by a veritable caravan of camp followers and fellow travelers, ranging from t-shirt vendors to militant vegetarians, and even the Thai Hippy Party, peddling their wares and promoting some curious social and political messages. Trademark plastic hand-clappers became a must-have accessory for PAD demonstrators; anti-PAD groups sported foot-clappers in response. The biggest beneficiary of the movement was Sondhi himself, whose ASTV network saw an enormous boost in subscriptions throughout the protest. The PAD protests became one long 24-hour reality TV show; all speeches by the main leaders were broadcast live, along with antigovernment commentaries and entertainment from live singers and bands who were embedded with the demonstrators. One of the busiest stands at the PAD was the ASTV subscription booth; PAD leaders repeatedly urged supporters to subscribe, while in many towns across the country, PAD rallies were shown live on big screens. Another popular booth sold "authorized" PAD clothing and accessories as worn by Sondhi himself, as well as books on the movement and DVDs of speeches by PAD leaders. Given Sondhi's uneven financial history, the rallies were a wonderful commercial opportunity. Sondhi also personally solicited the lion's share of donations to the PAD.

State responses to the PAD soon illustrated a basic (though not watertight) split: The military and the palace implicitly or overtly supported the protestors against the Samak (later Somchai) government, which was, in turn, backed by the police. This was not a classic antigovernment protest, but a civil war between competing elements of the Thai state. The war was essentially a series of media events and episodes of political theater, including the seizure of NBT, the occupation of

[6]The relevance of the Sino-Thai issue is explored in Kasian Tejapira, "The Misbehaving Jeks: The Evolving Regime of Thainess and Sino-Thai Challenges," paper presented at the "Chineseness Unbound: Boundaries, Burdens and Belongings of Chineseness Outside China" Conference, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, September 11, 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Government House, the encircling of Parliament on October 7, the bungled police riot control maneuvers of August 29 and October 7, and the bloody clash of September 21. Each major act of theater was followed by recriminations, denunciations, investigations, and sometimes apologies. Between acts, PAD leaders, prime and other ministers, and senior army commanders made media interventions supporting their own readings of largely illegible developments.

In April 2006, the King had given a major speech in which he tasked the country's judges with resolving the country's ongoing political crisis. The results were seen in decisions ranging from the dissolution of Thai Rak Thai in 2007, to Samak Sundaravej's ouster from the position of prime minister for constitutional violations (Samak was swiftly replaced by Thaksin's brother-in-law, retired judge Somchai Wongsawat). In principle, the PAD supported this process of "judicialization" of Thai public life, and called upon politicians to respect the rule of law and face due legal process. This did not apply, however, when arrest warrants for insurrection were issued for nine leading PAD figures; for several weeks, PAD leaders refused to give themselves up, and the police were unable to apprehend them without entering the crowded Government House compound.

The question of monarchical support for the PAD was a vexed one. Back in September 2005, then–privy councilor Surayud Chulanont had briefly agreed to join a Thammasat University panel on the topical issue of "royal powers," before withdrawing his acceptance. One factor behind his decision was apparently that Sondhi Limthongkul would be among the other speakers. Sondhi was not viewed as a bona fide royalist, but as an opportunist who had donned royalist clothing. Indeed, his ouster from Channel 9 that same month arose not just because he had criticized Thaksin, but because he had allegedly made antimonarchist remarks. The palace was historically distrustful of mass mobilizations, which have the potential to undermine the prestige of the throne and support elected politicians, rabble-rousers, or (worse still) rivals for the affection of the public. Nevertheless, faced with Thaksin's enormous popularity and electoral support, the palace came to see the PAD as a necessary counterweight to Thai Rak Thai's formidable power networks. The monarchy itself did not do anti-Thaksin cheerleading; rather, in early 2006, the network tacitly subcontracted the task to Sondhi and the PAD. Aristocrats and palace camp followers gave various forms of moral, financial, and practical support to the PAD, even while holding their noses, swallowing their misgivings, and looking distinctly askance at the vulgarity of the demonstrations. Special sections were sometimes reserved for them at the protests. Sondhi later claimed while speaking in the United States that a member of the royal family had given him 250,000 baht to help pay for anti-Thaksin demonstrations.[7]

[7]For detailed discussions, see http://bangkokpundit.blogspot.com/2007/11/bleg.html and http://www.sameskybooks.org/board/index.php?showtopic=4224&st=0&gopid=18437&# (accessed October 24, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The renewed PAD movement of 2008 followed much the same pattern. Criticism of PAD actions and tactics was distinctly muted in most newspapers, partly because of the movement's implicit support from the monarchical network. After August 29, Princess Sirindhorn instructed the Red Cross to be on constant standby in case any of the demonstrators were injured. After October 7, the Queen gave immediate financial support to hospitals to treat injured demonstrators, and she personally presided over the funeral bathing rites of Angkana Radubpanya-avut, a PAD supporter who was fatally injured. Princess Chulabhorn accompanied her to the funeral, at which the Queen reportedly told Angkhana's father that her daughter was a "good girl" who "helped protect" the country and the monarchy. In the past, the monarchy had always expressed solidarity with members of the security forces who had been killed or injured while on active service; now the tables had turned. The Queen also told Angkhana's father that the King has been informed of the situation, and that a royal donation to help the injured came directly from him.[8] While these could be construed simply as words of comfort, the Queen's actions had implicitly political overtones. They also contrasted with a statement made by Princess Sirindhorn while in Connecticut the previous week:

> The princess was asked at a press conference following her talk whether she agreed with protesters who say they are acting on behalf of the monarchy. "I don't think so," she replied. "They do things for themselves."[9]

While the divergence between the statements of the Queen and the princess might be seen as representing contrasting royal views—a "split" in the palace—in fact, the two positions are eminently consistent. In a network, people may "do things for themselves," which have the effect of helping to protect the monarchy, and they are, in turn, appreciated by the palace.

Indirect monarchical support for the antigovernment movement took place largely behind the scenes. Among the supporters and backers of the PAD were various MRs and MLs (minor princes and princesses), along with relatives of privy councilors and big-name bankers. Preeda Tiasuwan, jewelry trader and former leader of the group Businessmen for Democracy, was a key financier of the PAD—and a close personal friend of Anand Panyarachun. Piphop Thongchai, one of the core leaders of the PAD, was a member of the Anand-Preeda inner circle. In a remarkably bold statement at a public meeting on September 6, one member of this circle declared that the extraordinary actions of the PAD were justified in the special "late reign"

[8]*Bangkok Post*, October 14, 2008.

[9]See http://thainews.prd.go.th/newsenglish/previewnews.php?news_id=255110120006. This source also discusses the case: http://www.prachatai.com/english/news.php?id=838 (accessed October 31, 2008).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

circumstances that prevailed.[10] Under different circumstances, the speaker might have been slapped with a lèse-majesté suit—a common tactic used by the PAD against its opponents. Anand showed his own colors by presiding over the October 14 funeral rites of Police Lieutenant Colonel Methee Chatmontri, a head of the PAD guards, who was killed in an explosion on October 7. Ironically, Methee may have been transporting explosives in his jeep. That same day, PAD supporters apparently fired guns at the police and drove a pickup truck into a group of police officers,[11] abandoning their pretenses of nonviolence. At the funeral, Anand sat close to PAD leaders and Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, who was hailed by PAD-supporting crowds as Thailand's next prime minister.

Yet elite support for the PAD was only one dimension. Most of these attending the 2008 PAD rallies were very ordinary folk. While the 2006 rallies had attracted a younger crowd of activists, the hard-core participants in 2008 were often in their fifties, and many were female: middle-aged women having the time of their lives. A lot of PAD participants were retired civil servants, including large contingents from the south, largely Democrat Party supporters. Supporters appeared transfixed by the speeches of Sondhi and other PAD leaders, who had assumed (aging) pop-star status, and tended to repeat PAD taglines endlessly.

A Democrat MP, Somkiat Pongpaiboon, was one of the five core leaders of the PAD; while the party never officially endorsed the PAD, neither was there any attempt to discipline Somkiat, or clearly to differentiate Democrats from demonstrators. Several Thai friends told me they rarely or never joined the "demos," but their mothers were rallying night after night. Bangkokians had very polarized feelings about the PAD—a common sentiment was *bua PAD*, "bored of the PAD"—and the majority of long-term protestors came from the provinces. An ABAC poll conducted on October 8–9 found that 47.7 percent of Bangkokians supported the PAD, while 42.9 percent were opposed; only 9.4 percent were neutral.[12] Among PAD supporters, no less than 59.5 percent declared that loving the nation and defending the monarchy were more important than their own lives and families.[13] While just over half of the respondents did not agree with using the police to disperse the crowds, more than 80 percent opposed the PAD's tactics of surrounding police headquarters and Parliament. Popular arguments that the PAD versus pro-Thaksin clashes represented a struggle between the urban middle classes and the rural masses were far short

[10]Personal communication, September 8, 2008.
[11]Even the PAD's unofficial English-language Web site acknowledged that at least one PAD supporter was wielding a gun on October 7. See http://pad.vfly.net/en/297/nick-nostitzs-blog-fact-hoax-summary/ (accessed October 24, 2008). Some of the images on this site are very disturbing.
[12]Full details are given at http://www.ryt9.com/news/2008-10-10/44883013/ (accessed October 24, 2008).
[13]48 percent of non-PAD supporters gave the same response, which needs to be understood as somewhat ubiquitous in a Thai context.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the mark: Thailand contains much urban in the rural, and even more rural in the urban.[14]

Ranged against the PAD were opposing forces, most prominently the UDD, a progovernment, pro-Thaksin movement.[15] The two sides clashed on a dozen occasions, mostly directly in Udon Thani on July 24, when a PAD guard was killed, and in the early morning of September 2, when one UDD member was killed.[16] UDD activists were trained by Major-General Khattiya Sawasdipol, a rogue cavalry officer with a shopping list of grudges; their protests were often linked to government MPs. Partly because of their ad hoc character—the UDD never staged a long-term protest to match the PAD's—the pro-Thaksin activists were less discussed and understood. In any case, much of the Bangkok media was also deeply unsympathetic to the UDD, and tended to paint them as "hired protestors," uneducated people from the northeast and north of the country.[17] Some UDD units apparently referred to themselves as "King Taksin warriors," alluding to claims that Thaksin Shinawatra is either the reincarnation of King Taksin the Great (1734–82), the ethnically Chinese ruler of Siam who was murdered by founders of the present Chakri dynasty, or of Taksin's right-hand man, Phraya Phichai.[18]

Most Bangkok taxi drivers were Thaksin supporters and therefore reluctant to pick up PAD protesters, but after a while, a group of pro-PAD taxi drivers emerged to wait around the demonstration areas for rides. The split among taxi drivers was redolent of wider splits in Thai society. Families, marriages, and lifelong friendships were undermined by the ongoing conflict; some people divided their social circles into two distinct groups, carefully avoiding situations in which the different viewpoints might mix and clash.

The liberal wing of the network monarchy had tried constitutional and political reform during the 1990s—and Thaksin had been the result. The liberals were trumped by royalist conservatives in 2006, when the army staged an anachronistic coup d'état that proved fruitless in reshaping the country's political directions. Looking to the military for answers was now futile, and in September and October 2008, army commander Anupong Paochinda repeatedly rejected

[14]On the urban rural divide, see Nidhi Aeusrinvongse, "Kanprap rabopkanmuang" [Adjusting the political system], September 15, 2008, http://www.sameskybooks.org/2008/09/15/niti/ (accessed October 31, 2008).

[15]To confuse matters, the UDD is also sometimes referred to in English as the DAAD (Democratic Alliance Against Democracy).

[16]For details of clashes see "Thailand: Government and Protestors Should End Political Violence," Human Rights Watch, October 15, 2008, http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/10/14/thaila19975.htm (accessed October 24, 2008).

[17]For a sympathetic discussion of the UDD, complete with excellent photographs, see a piece by Nick Nostick on the blog New Mandala: http://rspas.anu.edu.au/rmap/newmandala/2008/09/14/beyond-the-stereotypes-of-thailands-reds/ (accessed October 24, 2008).

[18]Ironically, t-shirts depicting the statue of King Taksin at Wongwian Yai, Thonburi, were also worn by many PAD guards; both sides laid claim to his maverick legacy.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

calls for another coup, to the growing fury of Sondhi Limthongkul, who sometimes seemed intent on provoking one. Thailand was firmly in the grip of "late reign" national anxiety, which formed the basic explanation for the otherwise illegible performances and processions of the PAD. Terribly fearful of the possible future of the nation and monarchy under the controversial heir to the throne, the network liberals sought to regain the initiative through a new wave of political reform, calling for the creation of a reincarnated Democratic Development Committee (a 1994–95 body, chaired by Prawase, that prepared the initial blueprint for the 1997 constitution). The political program of the PAD and its backers remained muddled, but the goal was clear: Block the ascendance of Thaksin, or other powerful and corrupt politicians, who might otherwise assume total dominance over the country in a post-Bhumibol order.

The ideas supported by the PAD were presented as a "new politics" that would bar corrupt and disloyal politicians from securing or monopolizing power.[19] This new politics would strengthen the bureaucracy and the judiciary against elected politicians. One formula proposed a 70:30 ratio, a Parliament in which 70 percent of representatives would be nominated by occupational groups, and 30 percent would come from direct election. This formula attracted considerable public criticism and was later played down by the PAD leadership, who were themselves divided and confused about means by which a "revolution" could be achieved in the Thai political order.[20] Yet the basic thrust of the PAD's proposals was thoroughly antidemocratic, and was supported in various statements by Anand, Prawase, and other figures associated with the monarchical network. Anand argued that "new politics" would be more participatory: Not only political parties, but also the PAD, public organizations, and people's organizations could become involved. A government of national unity along such lines would be a good idea.[21] Prawase questioned the popular view that the current standoff was a crisis of democracy, arguing that the dictatorial behavior of the government had created the conflict.[22] He had previously proposed the idea of a government of national unity as a way out; another alternative was an interim government in which all MPs would have genuinely free votes to make decisions in the national interest.[23] While such comments remained unelaborated, the

[19]For interviews with Sondhi on the subject of new politics, see "Phim khiew: kanmuang mai" [Green print], *Nation Sutsapda*, July 11, 2008, pp. 12–15; and Shawn W. Crispin, "What Sondhi Really Wants for Thailand," *Asia Times Online*, September 9, 2008, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/JI09Ae01.html (accessed October 24, 2008).

[20]For discussions and translations of "new politics" and PAD thinking in English, see Michael K. Connor's essential blog, http://www.sovereignmyth.blogspot.com/, and his essay "Thailand—Four Elections and a Coup," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 62, no. 4 (2008): 482–85. In interviews with PAD leaders, Connors discovered significant disagreements among them concerning the meaning of "new politics."

[21]*Matichon*, September 14, 2008.

[22]*Matichon*, September 14, 2008.

[23]*Khom Chat Luk*, September 14, 2008.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press

clear import of their statements was a desire to disable political parties as major powerbrokers.

Some of those involved in the PAD were genuine monarchists, but even many prominent figures were "quasi-monarchists," including NGO leaders such as Piphop or PAD coordinator Suriyasai Katasila, who had previously been seen as progressives or even leftists. These quasi-monarchists stifled their misgivings when appropriating the language and symbols of royalism, arguing that the aim of blocking big business from dominating politics was ultimately a progressive cause. In any case, whatever their real views or doubts, PAD leaders became essentially prisoners of their own cause: Facing warrants for their arrest after August 26—initially on charges of treason—they needed to stick together inside the safety of the "big tent" of the protest movement. Suriyasai was declared persona non grata in his home village in the northeast. As time went on, the PAD became captives of their own rhetoric, unable to converse with others, let alone back down or make compromises. Rather than seek to build broad support for their ideas, core leaders made vitriolic speeches—for which Sondhi set the tone—in which they denounced anyone critical of, or unsympathetic, to their actions. Such megaphone posturing served to alienate potential supporters, and to strengthen the PAD's dangerous sense of themselves as an in-group of truth-tellers and savants, whose nationalist loyalties were not properly appreciated or understood. This self-presentation had distinctly cultic overtones, and Sondhi's own language became increasingly demagogic.

Those who live by the screen may also die by the screen. Samak Sundaravej (who had originally made his name as a winning contestant on the television quiz show *Tick Tack Toe*) was ousted by the courts from his post as prime minister in September 2008 for illegally hosting a TV cooking program. On October 16, the army staged an attempted TV coup, somewhat reminiscent of the 2007 Turkish e-coup: The top brass appeared en masse on Channel 3, declaring that the government had lost legitimacy. Army commander Anuphong Paochinda called upon the new prime minister to resign. For the military, tanks were now out and TV sets were in. On November 1, Thaksin struck back, addressing a stadium full of red-shirted crowds via a telephone link, his speech later broadcast on satellite television station MVS. As this is being written, in early November 2008, the winner of Thailand's reality TV political contest remains unclear. Audiences both inside and outside the country look likely to stay tuned for a while yet.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911809000072 Published online by Cambridge University Press