

## A Brief History of Protest Politics in Thailand (2001 – 2014)

ประวัติศาสตร์โดยย่อ: การเมืองเรื่องการเมืองการชุมนุมประท้วงในประเทศไทย  
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Ram Jotikut<sup>1</sup>

ราม โชติคุต<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

The rise of Thailand's protest politics had begun in 2001 when the Thai Rak Thai Party won the general election and became a new kind of populist government that the Thai people had never seen before. However, Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his cabinet ministers were accused of corruption and manipulating the electoral process to gain more votes. Therefore, Thaksin's regime was toppled by the Royal Thai Army in 2006. Afterward, Thai protest politics intensified and reached its peak in 2010 when Prachatipat government decided to employ armed-force to crackdown the Thaksin's supporters under red-shirt movement. However, after the new round of the general election in 2011, Thaksin's proxy party won the election. His younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra became the first female Prime Minister of Thailand. Nonetheless, Thailand's modern political history was repeated after the Royal Thai Army decided to intervene through another military coup d'état in 2014. From that time on, all protest movements were prohibited under military rule and the so-called reconciliation process continued to work to remove Thailand's protest politics'.

**Keywords:** Thai politics, protest movement, Thaksin regime, color-coded politics

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration, Chiang Mai University, 239 Huay Kaew Road, Muang District, Chiang Mai, Thailand, 50200 E-mail: ram.joti@cmu.ac.th

<sup>2</sup> คณะรัฐศาสตร์และรัฐประศาสนศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ 239 ถนนห้วยแก้ว ตำบลสุเทพ อำเภอเมือง จังหวัดเชียงใหม่ 50200 อีเมลติดต่อ: ram.joti@cmu.ac.th

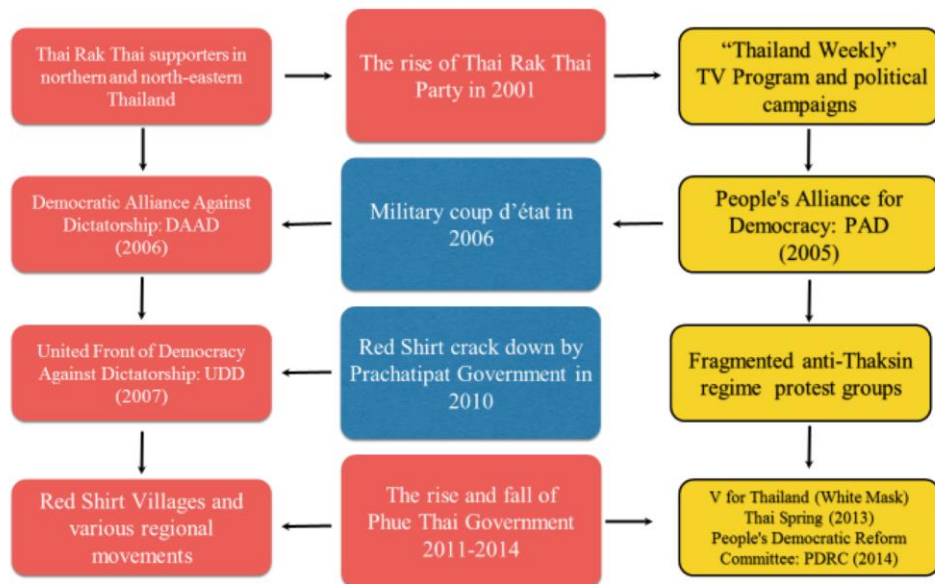
## บทคัดย่อ

การเมืองเรื่องการชุมนุมประท้วงในประเทศไทยในบทความชิ้นนี้ เริ่มต้นในปี พ.ศ.2544 เมื่อพรรคไทยรักไทยชนะการเลือกตั้งทั่วไปและส่งผลให้พรรคการเมืองดังกล่าวสามารถจัดตั้งรัฐบาลประชาชนนิยมขึ้นในรูปแบบที่ไม่เคยปรากฏมาก่อนในประวัติศาสตร์การเมืองไทยยุคใหม่ อย่างไรก็ตาม อดีตนายกรัฐมนตรีนายทักษิณ ชินวัตร และคณะรัฐมนตรี ได้ถูกกล่าวหาว่ามีการคอร์รัปชันและแทรกแซงกระบวนการเลือกตั้งเพื่อให้ได้คะแนนเสียงข้างมาก ดังนั้น ระบอบทักษิณจึงถูกโค่นล้มโดยกองทัพไทยในปีพ.ศ.2549 หลังจากนั้นเป็นต้นมา การเมืองเรื่องการชุมนุมประท้วงในประเทศไทยได้ทวีความเข้มข้นและรุนแรงมากขึ้นจนกระทั่งถึงจุดสูงสุดในปี พ.ศ. 2553 เมื่อรัฐบาลพรรคประชาธิปัตย์ ตัดสินใจใช้กำลังทหารปราบปรามกลุ่มผู้ชุมนุมประท้วงฝ่ายระบอบทักษิณภายใต้สัญลักษณ์ของคนเสื้อแดง หลังจากการเลือกตั้งครั้งใหม่ในปีพ.ศ.2554 พรรคการเมืองตัวแทนของระบอบทักษิณก็ได้รับชัยชนะอีกครั้ง น้องสาวคนเล็กของอดีตนายกรัฐมนตรีทักษิณ นางสาว ยิ่งลักษณ์ ชินวัตร ได้กลายเป็นนายกรัฐมนตรีหญิงคนแรกของประเทศไทย อย่างไรก็ตาม ประวัติศาสตร์การเมืองไทยก็เกิดปรากฏการณ์ซ้ำซ้อนขึ้นมาอีกครั้งเมื่อกองทัพไทย ตัดสินใจก่อรัฐประหารในปี พ.ศ.2557 นับจากเวลานั้นเป็นต้นมา การชุมนุมประท้วงทั้งสิ้นได้ถูกสั่งห้ามภายใต้กฎหมายของรัฐบาลทหาร และกระบวนการที่เรียกว่าการสร้างความปลอดภัยก็ถูกนำมาใช้เพื่อทำลายล้างการเมืองเรื่องการชุมนุมประท้วงในประเทศไทยให้หมดสิ้น

**คำสำคัญ:** การเมืองไทย, การชุมนุมประท้วง, ระบอบทักษิณ, การเมืองเรื่องเสื้อสี

## Introduction

This article is an empirical explanation on the development of political protest movements and protest politics in Thailand since the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra and the Thai Rak Thai Party in 2001 until the latest coup d'état in 2014. Because the author intend to focus on the contestation and polarization between the two protest movements, the red shirts and yellow shirts (and the anti-Thaksin groups), therefore the article will pay more attention to the emergence and evolution of the two Thai political protest factions. The aim of the article is to present factual information on the circumstances that led to the extensive antagonism between the red shirts and yellow shirts (as well as the anti-Thaksin groups). The article is divided into four main parts: the rise and fall of the populist Thai Rak Thai Party (2001-2006); the military junta, yellow shirts and street politics (2007-2008); the red shirt uprising and the government's crackdown (2009-2010); and the resurrection of the Thaksin regime and the new face of protest movements (2011-2014). The information in this article came from the author's collection of daily news clippings and memos or reflective notes (Groenewald, 2008) between 2011 and 2014. The materials were mostly retrieved from online media, for both international and Thai contents.



### 1. The Rise and Fall of the Populist Thai Rak Thai Party (2001-2006)

2001 was a critical year in the political history of Thailand when rural mass-based Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) won a landslide election. The TRT won 248 members of parliament out of 500 in the Thai parliament. This was the first time in modern political history that one political party seized the majority in the lower house and formed the government without any cooperation with smaller parties. On 9 February, Thaksin Shinawatra, the billionaire turned politician, was elected as Thai Prime Minister by the TRT’s MPs (Harker, 2003). The appearance of Thaksin and his party not only changed the political landscape in Thailand; as hinted at by most political scientists (McCargo & Pathmanand, 2005), it also separated the Thai people into two conflicting political factions: the Thaksin supporters and the protesters.

During the first four years under Thaksin's TRT administration, the Thai people, particularly those in the countryside, gained many benefits from the party's populist policies. Poor farmers enjoyed the government's debt moratorium program. Rural villagers had more opportunities to export their products and improve their standards of living through local enterprise encouragement measures. Patients received more quality treatment from the cheap public health subsidization scheme. The community development fund was handed out to the rural villages in every corner of the Kingdom of Thailand. The TRT government employed both capitalism to empower the business sector and socialism to strengthen the grass-roots economy under their "dual track" economic development plan (Phongpaichit, 2004). Thailand under Thaksin was able to remove the IMF's debtor status before the initial deadline for the last payment in 2003.

The TRT government also initiated draconian security measures to counter the drug trafficking gangs and actively took part in George W. Bush's war on terrorism. Thaksin believed that the drug traders financially supported separatism in Thailand's three Muslim-majority southern provinces. Therefore, the TRT government tended to use a hardline military approach to deal with the drug traffickers and the southern separatists (Storey, 2007). These controversial anti-drug and anti-terrorist strategies were closely watched by the international community, particularly the United Nations (AsianTribune, 2003). Hence, the Thaksin government received a warm welcome from the Thai rural masses. In the meantime, Thaksin was also strongly criticized by scholars for the parliamentary dictatorship, for silencing the media and for public harassment of intellectuals as well as human rights abuses (Pasuk & Baker, 2009).

On 26 December 2004, the southern part of Thailand was hit hard by the Asian Tsunami triggered by an earthquake under the Indian Ocean. At that time, hundreds of seaside resorts were demolished and many tourists from around the world were among the 5,400 dead (BBC 2009). Thaksin employed his CEO management-style to handle the disaster in a more effective way when compared with the previous red-tape-laden Thai governments. Most Thai political scientists believed that this successful crisis management was one of the factors that brought victory to the TRT party in the general election for the second time (Richburg, 2005).

In February 2005, the TRT party unsurprisingly won the general election with a majority of 375 out of the 500 seats in the lower house of the Thai parliament. Thaksin Shinawatra became the first Thai prime minister since the 1932 bloodless revolution who was elected through democratic means for a second term. The re-election of Thaksin and the TRT was also seen by intellectuals as a good indication of the ideal democratization in Thailand, since voters elected their favourite party based on its policies. However, 2005 was also the year that the Thaksin government was challenged by the street protests that led to the military coup a year later.

The anti-Thaksin, anti-TRT protest movement began in late 2005 when Sondhi Limthongkul, the owner of Manager Media Group and Thaksin's former business ally, initiated a political campaign to expel Thaksin and his ministers. Sondhi's crusade against the Thaksin government was accelerated when his political talk show was removed from the state-run TV channel because the content was laden with criticism of the government. Afterwards, he turned his talk show into a full scale anti-government protest action in the Thai capital's main public park. Sondhi's movement was widely welcomed by the Thai

urban middle class in Bangkok and most regional big cities. Sondhi also took advantage of his mass media networks, especially the ASTV satellite TV channel, which accused Thaksin of planning to change Thailand into a republic and defying the King, and most importantly made accusations of him engaging in large scale corruption (Tejapira, 2006).

The controversial issue that triggered off the first political demonstration against Thaksin was the sale of Shinawatra family's share in the Shin Corporation to the Singaporean government's investment company, Temasek Holdings. The Thaksin family's transaction was worth more than 73,200 million Thai baht (approximately £1,470 million) and was completed without any tax payment, which sparked intense public outcry (Arnold, 2006). The anti-Thaksin protesters were mobilized to conduct public rallies in Bangkok in early February 2005, followed by the formation of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). The PAD protesters were known as the 'yellow shirts' since they preferred to wear costumes in yellow, the King's birthday colour, when joining the protest activities. The PAD's leadership was a combination of a middle-class business tycoon (Sondhi Limthongkul), a professional protest leader and Buddhist sectarian advocate (Major-General Chamlong Srimuan), a university lecturer and politician (Somkiat Phongpaiboon), a high-ranking NGO activist (Phiphob Thongchai). and a highly experienced state enterprise labour union leader (Somsak Kosaisuk) (Tejapira, 2006).

The PAD's protest strategy was mainly to conduct a peaceful demonstration on the streets of Bangkok with the aim of eliminating Thaksin and uprooting his regime through political reform. Various PAD political demonstrations were held in Bangkok as well as in provincial cities, even in the TRT's popular areas. At the same time, pro-Thaksin

government groups were mobilized by local administrators to counter the PAD movement in Bangkok. Most of the counter-PAD protest groups were rural people from the north and north-eastern parts of Thailand. However, the pro-government protest movements were guided by the state authorities and did not form into a solid, unified organization.

Following the sale of Shin Corp's shares, the political campaigns by PAD continued to intensify. The yellow shirts called on the prime minister and his government to resign immediately for selling of national assets and avoiding tax payments. On 24 February 2006, Prime Minister Thaksin dissolved the parliament and called sudden elections for 2 April. Thaksin justified his decision via Thai TV channels and blamed the street protesters for trying to overthrow his government. Thus, he hinted that the new round of the general election would be the best way to solve the political deadlock (BBC, 2006). Nonetheless, the main opposition political parties led by the Prachatipat Party boycotted the election by not sending their representatives to compete.

In March, Sondhi submitted a petition to King Bhumibol and asked for his intervention to avoid political violence. The PAD's protesters also asked the King to remove Thaksin and appoint a new prime minister from his 'King's men' (Ganjanakhundee, 2006). Nevertheless, the Thai monarch dismissed the request, giving the reason that it was an undemocratic and irrational act (Nation, 2006b). Instead, the King demanded the jurisdiction to resolve the political stalemate. As a result, the constitutional court overturned the election result in which the TRT won the majority of seats in the House of Representatives. The reason given for the invalidation was a problem with voters' privacy inside the voting booths (Nation, 2006a). As a result, the court ordered a new round of elections in October 2006.

In the meantime, the mass media network of Sondhi, particularly the Manager Newspaper widely published articles on the notorious ‘Finland Plan’, a plot by Thaksin and his allies to overthrow the royal dynasty and seize control of the whole country. The Thaksin strategy contained five steps: 1) create a one-party system; 2) reorganize the whole bureaucracy and judicial system; 3) capitalize the national assets; 4) reform the constitutional monarchy system; and 5) centralize all state affairs under TRT control (Sidhisamarn, 2006). However, Thaksin denied the accusation and took legal action against Sondhi for defamation (AsiaMedia, 2006).

The new round of elections as previously announced by the court never happened, however since the Royal Thai Army chiefs decided to stage a *coup d'état* and remove Prime Minister Thaksin during his United Nations summit visit. The coup leaders, the heads of the Thai armed forces and police agency, paid a visit to King Bhumibhol shortly after the martial law announcement. Even so, the King made no comment on the latest bloodless coup and the overthrow of the elected government (BBC, 2006). Nevertheless, some Thai critics believed that the deposing of the Thaksin government was authorized by the monarch himself (Ungpakorn, 2007).

## **2. The Military Junta, the Yellow Shirts and Street Politics (2007 - 2008)**

The military junta led by the army chief General Sonthi Boonyaratglin established themselves as the Council for Democratic Reform (CDR). General Sonthi informed the foreign ambassadors that the CDR’s position was to save Thai democracy from the “rampant corruption” in the Thaksin government (Economist, 2006). General Sonthi also promised to restore the participant democracy through a free and fair election within one year. The CDR was later transformed

into the Council for Democratic Reform under the Constitutional Monarchy (CNS). The new CNS abandoned the 1997 constitution and drafted an interim one (BangkokPost, 2006). The junta also appointed retired General Surayud Chulanont as a caretaker prime minister. In just two days after the military coup, the PAD leaders announced the dissolution of their protest organization, because their goal of toppling the Thaksin government had been accomplished (Nation, 2006c). In the meantime, most of the TRT party's leaders were arrested while some of them fled the country. The party was finally dissolved in May 2007 by court order as they were found guilty of breaking election law. 118 TRT executives were also banned from involvement in political activity for five years (Nation, 2007).

A public opinion survey conducted after the coup showed that most people in Bangkok supported the latest military intervention. Nevertheless, the coup was opposed by some civil groups, university students and scholars. A handful of protesters gathered around Bangkok's landmarks to resist the junta's rule. Meanwhile, public protests were also held inside two major Thai university campuses, Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University. Most of the anti-coup protest activities were peaceful and sporadic. In the meantime, Thaksin's supporters, who live mostly in provincial areas in the north and north-eastern parts of Thailand together with the urban lower class in Bangkok, formed a political pressure group, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), commonly known as the red shirts. The group's objective was to fight against the military junta, the Thai traditional elites and the PAD movement. The red shirts strongly believed that the yellow shirts supported the removal of the Thaksin government. During the military rule in 2006-2007, the UDD organized

sporadic anti-coup protest activities and conducted the counter-demonstration against PAD in the following years.

The first general election since the 2006 coup was held in December 2007. The People Power Party (PPP), the re-established version of the defunct TRT party, won 233 out of 480 seats in the parliament's House of Representatives. Most of the PPP's votes came from the north and north-eastern regions of Thailand. The election result showed that a majority of Thai voters still favoured Thaksin and his political party (BBC, 2007). The PPP's leader Samak Sundaravej, former Bangkok governor and celebrity food critic, became the new prime minister of Thailand in February 2008. Samak publicly announced that he been nominated by Thaksin and vowed to bring back the former premier and his populist policies (Horn, 2007).

In March 2008, the PAD was re-established with a new mission of deposing the Thaksin nominee government. During the official announcement at Thammasat University, Sondhi urged the yellow shirt protesters to remobilize and jointly resist the Thaksin regime and his ruthless capitalism as well as to defend the nation, religion and monarchy (ASTV, 2008). The street protests by PAD were renewed in May to oppose the attempt to amend the 2007 constitution before escalating into a full scale anti-government protest activity in front of the government house one month later. The yellow shirts pressed Samak and his nominee government to resign but the prime minister refused their request to leave or dissolve parliament (Nattion, 2008). Instead, the premier unexpectedly paid a visit to the King and briefed the monarch on the current political situation (BBC, 2008c).

As a result, the 30,000 crowd of PAD supporters decided to besiege the government house compound and transformed the place

into their protest base. The seizure prevented the government and civil servants from working in the prime minister's office. All the government works were paralysed by the PAD protest. At the same period, the yellow shirt protesters in regional areas interrupted the railway traffic and blocked two important airports in the southern tourist provinces. Thai authorities countered the protest movement by issuing arrest warrants for all of PAD's protest leaders for insurgency and illegal assembly (Fuller, 2008).

On September 2008, the Thai constitutional court ordered the prime minister to resign, finding him guilty of violating the constitution. The constitutional court judge indicated that Samak gained outside interest by receiving money from a private company to host a TV show (BBC, 2008). Soon after the court's announcement, the PPP MPs planned to vote Samak back into position since he was not banned from political activities. However, the PPP faction from the north-eastern region boycotted the vote and instead elected the deputy prime minister, Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law, to become the new prime minister (BBC, 2008a). This vote result was seen by many political observers as a move to bring the country's premiership back to the Shinawatra family.

Under the Somchai government, one of the most influential charismatic yellow shirt protest leaders, Major General Chamlong Srimuang, was arrested in plain sight by the police in October 2008. The imprisonment of Chamlong provoked the yellow shirts to escalate their protest activity. Therefore, the capture of prominent PAD leaders was seen by the Thai media as a deliberate action by Chamlong so that the PAD could start a new round of anti-government protests (MatichonOnline, 2008b). As a result, the yellow shirts gathered to surround the parliament building and prohibited Somchai from

declaring government policies to parliament. This time, the riot police decided to use tear gas to disperse the protesters. The clash left one person dead and nearly 400 protesters injured (Mydans & Fuller, 2008).

In November 2008, the PAD initiated the protest tactics called 'Operation Hiroshima' and 'Operation Nagasaki' to take control of the Thai international airport (MatichonOnline, 2008a). Hundreds of the yellow shirts blocked all the main roads to the Suvarnabhumi International Airport, the main airport, located on the outskirts of Bangkok, and Bangkok's domestic airport in the Don Muang district. All international and domestic flights at the airports were indefinitely cancelled. The Somchai government ordered the Thai armed forces to break up the yellow shirt demonstrators and restore law and order, but the army chief, General Anupong Paochinda, refused to obey. Instead, the influential army chief urged the prime minister to resign and called for a new round of elections to solve the political conflict (MacKinnon & Lewis, 2008). Some international media believed that the PAD's seizure of the airport was approved by senior authorities in the royal palace or the army (Bell, 2008).

After the weeklong takeover of the airports, the yellow shirts ended the operation and declared victory when the Thai constitutional court declared the banning of the prime minister and 59 other ministers from any involvement in politics for five years. The court also ordered to dissolve the PPP party and the other two coalition parties for the charges of electoral fraud. The PAD's protesters regarded the court's decision as their victory. Nevertheless, they vowed to return if another Thaksin-nominee government was formed (Hawkins, 2008).

Soon after the PPP's termination, their members regrouped under a new political party name, the Phue Thai Party, to regain power in the parliament. However, the majority in the lower house voted for the opposition's leader, Abhisit Vejjajiva, a 44-year-old British-born, Oxford educated politician, to become the new prime minister (BBC, 2008b). Foreign journalists hinted that the first and most difficult work for the new and youngest ever Thai prime minister was to cool down the political tension caused by the division between supporters and protesters of the fugitive Thaksin Shinawatra (Head, 2008).

### **3. The Red Shirts Uprising and the Government's Crackdown (2009 - 2010)**

The new Prime Minister was warmly welcomed by the yellow shirts and Thai urban middle class, particularly in Bangkok. Despite that, the rise to power of Abhisit Vejjajiva was questioned by both international and domestic mass media and critics. Some of them contended that Abhisit's premiership came from his Prachatipat Party's links to the traditional elites, the army and the royal palace (2008). The removing of the PPP party was a "judicial coup" and the installation of Prachatipat was a "silent coup" against the Thaksin proxy government performed by the courts and the Royal Thai Army respectively (Rojanaphruk, 2008).

Therefore, shortly after Prime Minister Abhisit took office, the red shirt protesters began their full scale protest at the government house in April 2009. During the political rally, the exiled Thaksin announced via a long distance video broadcast from Dubai that former Prime Minister General Prem Tinsulanonda, the president of King's privy council, was behind the "silent coup" against his brother-in-law's

government as well as the mastermind behind the 2006 military operations to remove his government (Bell, 2009). Consequently, the aim of the UDD's protest was to demolish the so called "Amatayatipatai", or the noble elites who control the country behind the scene. The red shirts also called for Abhisit to resign, the dissolution of parliament and a new round of free and fair elections.

On the other side, the yellow shirts protest movement was transformed into a new political party. The PAD's leaders jointly founded the New Politics Party (NPP), which shared the same political ideology with the yellow shirts movement. The NPP proposed a controversial political reform plan to clean up Thai politics. The Thai 'new politics' under the NPP's proposal was to create a new kind of national assembly in which only 30% of the MPs are directly elected by the people, while the other 70% are appointed. The PAD's initiative was seen by international media as non-democratic and tending toward fascism (Somasundrum, 2008).

During the East Asia summit held in Pataya, the seaside resort city not far from Bangkok, UDD demonstrators broke into the conference building and forced the summit to be cancelled. Prime Minister Abhisit imposed a state of emergency in Pataya city and evacuated the Asian nation leaders out of the chaotic area via airlift (BBC, 2009b). The red shirts also violently attacked the prime minister's vehicle when he was trying to leave the venue. In the meantime, the red shirt leaders declared their victory and asked the protesters to return to the main gathering in Bangkok.

Throughout the time of the traditional Thai New Year long weekend, 100,000 red shirts assembled at Government House and the Royal Grand Field in Bangkok's old town. The Abhisit government

announced a state of emergency in Bangkok and ordered the troops to surround the protest areas. As a result, two people died and more than 100 red shirts were injured from the clash. As revealed by Human Rights Watch, the red shirts initiated an attack on Thai soldiers with guns, explosive materials, slingshots and rocks (Bell, 2009). However, some international media hinted that the use of violent means to deal with the protesters was a serious mistake for Abhisit government (Abuza, 2009). In the early morning of the Thai New Year day (13 April), Thai soldiers used tear gas to disperse the red shirt protesters in central Bangkok. The next day, thousands of troops moved to clear the red shirt demonstrators from around the government building. The red shirt leaders decided to end the rally but vowed to go on with the anti-government campaign (BBC, 2009a).

During the months of March and May 2010, the red shirt protest activities intensified after the Thai Supreme Court announced the seizure of Thaksin's assets. Most red shirt protesters from the north and north-eastern provinces of Thailand continuously travelled to join their fellows in Bangkok despite attempted roadblocks conducted by the authority. The UDD's protest at the old town district of the Thai capital went on peacefully with the call for the resignation of the premier. Then in April 2010, the red shirt leaders decided to move their protest to Bangkok's luxurious, tourist-attractive Downtown area. At this time, the government imposed a state of emergency and sent the troops in to crack down on the red shirt gathering.

On 23 April, Veera Musikapong, one of the red shirt leaders, offered a cease fire and to call off the protest if the Abhisit government agreed to dissolve parliament within 30 days and to hold an election within three months. Veera's offer was seen by the international media as a protective measure for the red shirt protesters

during the negotiation process (Doherty, 2010). However, the proposal to hold an early election was rejected by the prime minister after the protest leaders refused to end the rally as promised. The red shirts also called for the deputy prime minister, Suthep Tueksuban, who was responsible for the killing of the red shirt protesters, to be punished (McElroy & MacKinnon, 2010).

A month later, the red shirts led by three influential PTP politicians (Nattawut Saikua, Jatuporn Prompan and Veera Musikapong) built a bamboo barricade and transformed their protest site in Bangkok's Downtown into a formidable stronghold to prevent the military crackdown. However, the troops used tear gas, rubber bullets and live rounds to dismantle the red shirt camp. The clash left at least eight people dead. The last violent incident in mid-May occurred after the red shirts militia's leader, General Khattiya Sawasdipol, commonly known as "Commander Red", was assassinated by a sniper during his interview with the New York Times's journalist (BBC, 2010). The clash between the red shirts and Thai soldiers went on for nearly a week and more than 30 people died. Some business buildings at the clash sides were torched by the protesters, including Thailand's biggest shopping mall, the Central World (Fenner, 2010).

On 19 May, Jatuporn declared the red shirts leaders' decision to call off the demonstration. The aim of the declaration was to prevent further bloodshed after at least 74 people were killed since the beginning of the campaign (Bellman, Barta, Watcharasakwet, & Frangos, 2010). Soon after the end of the rally, most red shirts leaders surrendered themselves to the authorities at the Thai police agency's headquarters, not far from the protest site. The political atmosphere in Thailand after the mid-May crisis was relatively calm under the seven-month government's state of emergency. However, when the

ban on political activity was lifted in January 2011, more than 30,000 red shirts returned to Bangkok for the first demonstration since the political violence. At this time, the red shirts demanded the extensive investigation of the bloody crackdown performed by the Abhisit government and called for the release of their protest leaders, who were charged with terrorism (CNN, 2011).

In the meantime, the red shirts in provincial areas, mostly in the north and north-eastern Thailand, founded the notorious ‘Red Shirt Village’, the self-proclaimed protester’s communities. The establishment’s objective was to protect themselves from state authority’s harassment after the brutal crackdown. The provincial red shirt leaders also preferred to use the villages to empower local red shirts for the demanding of democracy and justice. International media believed that the red shirt villages phenomenon revealed the failure of the Abhisit government to calm down the anti-government groups before the new election (Szep & Ahuja, 2011).

#### **4. The Resurrection of the Thaksin regime, the “Great Masses of the People” Uprising and Another Military Coup d’état (2011 - 2014)**

The new round of the general election since the political crisis was held on 3 July 2011. The Thaksin proxy political party, the Pheu Thai Party, won a majority of 262 out of 500 seats in the lower house. Yingluck Shinawatra, the younger sister of exiled Thaksin became Thailand’s first female prime minister. The international media believed that Yingluck accepted the premiership against her own will because of her brother’s request (Sidner, 2011). The Yingluck government administered Thailand in the same way as the TRT and PPP parties did in the past. The populist economic policies or

‘Thaksinomics’ was reintroduced and most of the red shirt leaders became members of parliament and the state’s ministers.

In the monsoon season of 2011, Thailand was hit by severe flood in several areas. Most farmlands, residential areas and historical sites along the Chao Phraya River were damaged by the flash flood. In mid-October, the Thai capital city and surrounding provinces were also hit by the deluge. The Yingluck government used every available measure to protect the inner city and the valuable industrial complexes but failed to do so (Harvey, 2011). International media hinted that the 2011 flood was Thailand’s worst water disaster in half a century. The flood caused more than 800 people to lose their lives and damaged the value of the economy by an estimated £28 billion. The disaster also disrupted the supply chain of electronic products and automobiles since Thailand is the industrial hub of many multinational hi-tech companies (Head, 2012). Even then, the Yingluck government was strongly attacked by several opposition groups for their ineffective flood management, but the red shirts still firmly supported the government. The movement was converted from an anti-government protest movement into a pro-government and political pressure group since the PTP won the election. The red shirts’ main tasks since then were to protect the Yingluck government and counter every anti-Thaksin faction.

During the year-end of 2012, a new anti-Thaksin protest movement emerged via the social networks, particularly Facebook and Twitter. The members of the group, called ‘V for Thailand’, wore the Guy Fawkes white mask to join the protest activities on the streets of Bangkok and some provincial cities. The white mask symbol was inspired by the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ activists who protested the U.S. government’s stock market support policy (Sapsomboon, 2013). The

white mask protesters were mostly from the urban middle class that wished to resist the Thaksin regime and nominee government as well as the parliamentary monopoly and corruption (AFP, 2013). In the meantime, a think tank group from the anti-Thaksin faction was formed under the name of ‘Thai Spring’. The group was led by retired police General Vasit Dejkunchorn and former senator and university lecturer, Kaewsan Atibodhi.

The group also launched an online webpage called the ‘Thai Spring Forum’ to function as a virtual conference room. The aim of Thai Spring Forum was to expose the misuse of state power by the Thaksin’s proxy government for their own interest and to unmask Thaksin’s plot of launching a new phase of rampaging Thai country. The forum was held weekly and performed live broadcasts via online channels, especially YouTube (Nation, 2013b). Between June and August 2013, the first phase of the Thai Spring Forum was held six times in cyberspace. As hinted at by Vasit during the press conference, the objective of this forum was to empower Thai people with ‘truth’ about the Thaksin regime and the hidden agenda behind the attempt to pass the amnesty bill by Phue Thai Party. Therefore, most of the content that was being discussed on the forum was an in-depth analysis of Yingluck’s government policies (Dailynews, 2013).

The Thai Spring Forum took place online side by side with the V for Thailand’s street protest activities. Meanwhile, the red shirts also attempted to conduct a counter-movement against the white mask demonstrators, periodically. In mid-June, around 200 red shirts attacked the white mask protesters in Thailand’s northern city of Chiang Mai. As reported by the Thai media, the local police were present at the scene but did not try to stop the red shirts from assaulting the V for Thailand protesters (Nation, 2013a).

During the same period, Yingluck's government introduced a national reconciliation plan with an attempt to pass an amnesty bill that would benefit the protesters jailed between the 2006 coup and 2010 political turmoils. The amnesty bill called 'Vorachai's Amnesty Bill' was initiated by Vorachai Hema, a Phue Thai Member of Parliament. The introduction of the bill sparked a new round of street protests in Bangkok. In early August 2013, around 4,000 people gathered in one of the famous public parks in Bangkok as part of the protest movement called the Democratic Force to Overthrow Thaksinism (PEFOT). The PEFOT's leaders, mostly retired high-ranking military and police officers, believed that the prime minister had tried to bring her brother back home by passing the Vorachai's Amnesty Bill. The street protest by PEFOT's protesters triggered rumours of another military coup attempt but the army chief came out to deny this possibility (Roberts, 2013).

On 23 August, the PAD's eight core leaders declared their resignation from the organization's leadership. From the PAD's final statement, the decision to give up their posts by the PAD's leaders came after the opposition Prachatipat Party's MPs declined to leave the parliament to join the people's street protest movement. Besides, several of the PAD's leaders were charged with criminal offences from their anti-Thaksin protest activities. Hence, their political involvement was limited by court orders. They would have to break the court orders if they were going to push for political reform. In addition, the PAD also accused the Prachatipat Party as part of the problem that had prevented Thai politics from becoming reformed and that the party should be responsible for the consequences (ASTV, 2013; BangkokPost, 2013).

However, some Thai political commentators believed that the resignation *en masse* of the PAD's core leaders was not a total dissolution of the ultra-royalist yellow shirt movement. The event was temporary and the PAD were ready to regroup at the right time. The resignation was just a reflection of the failure of the PAD's leaders to "free Thai politics of the influence of Thaksin" and to clean up the corrupt Thai democratic system "via a military coup and replaced with appointed representatives instead of elections". So far, the stepping down of the PAD's leaders was not the end of anti-Thaksin protest as other protest movements that shared the same political goal as PAD had recently emerged (Saiyasombut, 2013).

In September 2013, Prime Minister Yingluck initiated the special reconciliation forum in an effort to overcome the political differences in Thailand. The government invited key political figures from the ruling Phue Thai Party, the yellow shirts and anti-Thaksin political factions, and the opposition Prachatipat Party as well as international leaders to join the convention (Arbis, 2013). However, the Prachatipat and former PAD leaders refused to take part. They believed that the forum was a one-sided initiative and would be dominated by the Phue Thai faction. Instead, the opposition party called on the government to postpone the controversial amnesty bill until a more conducive atmosphere was in place (Ghosh, 2013).

November 2013 was the period in which the huge protest movement in Thailand was revitalized again. Thai protesters gathered on the streets of Bangkok on the first day of the month when Thai parliamentarians passed the controversial 'Vorachai Amnesty Bill' that could permit the exiled Thaksin to return (Amy Sawitta Lefevre, 2013a). The bill was called the 'Sweeping Amnesty Bill' since anyone who was involved in the political turmoil since 2004 could be discharged of all

guilt, including former Prime Minister Abhisit and his colleagues, who were responsible for the killing of the red shirts in 2010. It was also possible that the law could restore Thaksin's assets that were seized by the court in 2010 (Fully, 2013).

At this time, the tens of thousands of Thai protesters who took to the streets of Bangkok were not only the anti-Thaksin and Pheu Thai government people but also the red shirts, who felt that the government betrayed them by 'resetting' all the guilt of those responsible for ordering the troops to fire on the red shirts in 2010 (Head, 2013a). Therefore, the anti-government demonstrations at this time were wide-ranging. The protest was led by the opposition Prachatipat Party and the royalist group. Meanwhile, most protesters came from various sections and social classes such as academics, students, and office workers as well as the yellow shirts (2013a). Nevertheless, Prime Minister Yingluck insisted later that her government would not re-introduce the controversial amnesty bill if the Senate rejected it and called for the protesters to end the political rally (Amy Sawitta Lefevre, 2013b).

On 20 November, the Thai constitutional court made a judgment that Yingluck's government proposals to amend the constitution that had made the Senate fully elected were illegal (BBC, 2013). Prior to the court verdict, the red shirts gathered for a political rally in Bangkok. Red shirt leaders announced that they dismissed the court's decision regardless of its ruling. The aim of the red shirts gathering at this time was to show their rejection to the non-elected constitutional court authority and to counter the anti-government protesters (Nelson, 2013). The red shirts also feared that the court would decide to dissolve the Pheu Thai party in the same way as the Thai Rak Thai and the People Power's parties had been dissolved in

the past. However, the court rejected the request to dissolve the Pheu Thai party as expected by the red shirts.

At the end of November, Suthep Thaugsuban, former Deputy Prime Minister during the Prachatipat government, launched the new anti-Thaksin regime protest movement called the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). Suthep's decision came after the Pheu Thai government survived a censure vote in the parliament (Amy Sawawitta Lefevre, 2013). The new protest movement was supported by a variety of yellow shirt groups including the opposition Prachatipat Party. The majority of Thai people in Bangkok and the southern parts of Thailand were also supporters of this newly established political pressure group (Sinpeng & Contributor, 2013). As declared by Suthep, the PDRC planned to siege all government agency buildings and state enterprises in Bangkok as a part of a 'popular revolt' agenda (Reporters, 2013). The PDRC also aimed to install a new People's Assembly to replace the parliament. The new assembly would consist of 300 representatives from professional organizations and 100 members appointed by the PDRC. According to Suthep, the main and immediate task of the new People's Assembly was to reform the corrupted political system in Thailand (Gazette, 2014). Beyond that, Suthep vowed to overthrow the Thaksin regime within the first month of 2014.

During the month of December 2013, the PDRC employed various types of protest tactics, especially the surrounding of governmental organization buildings, to gain more popular support. On 9 December 2013, Prime Minister Yingluck dissolved parliament and called for an election. However, the PDRC protesters believed that Thaksin Shinawatra still controlled the caretaker government. Therefore, they vowed to continue their protest actions (Head, 2013b). The PDRC's slogan "Reform before the election" was widely supported

by the middle class in Bangkok and a majority of people in the southern part of Thailand. Thus, the PDRC also attempted to nullify the election process. On 25 December, the PDRC surrounded the indoor stadium that was used by the election committee as a registration place for electoral candidates. The new round of elections was scheduled to take place on 2 February 2014.

In mid-January 2014, the PDRC launched the protest operation called ‘Shutdown Bangkok, Restart Thailand’ to remove the Thaksin regime’s puppet government before the election (Head, 2014a). Under this protest tactic, the PDRC’s protesters occupied the main road junctions in Bangkok to ‘shutdown’ the capital. On 21 January, the government declared a state of emergency to allow the use of military force to secure peace and order. During the period of ‘shutting down’ Bangkok, the situation was highly confrontational and prone to violence. The government appointed caretaker Labour Minister Chalerm Yoobamroong to head the Centre for Maintaining Peace and Order (CMPO). Accordingly, Mr. Chalerm announced the arrest of Suthep on the charge of mutiny.

On 2 February, the snap general election was held as planned but was also disrupted by the PDRC’s protesters. The protesters blocked most of the polling stations in the southern provinces. According to the Thai Election Commission, around six million voters were affected by the closures (Head, 2014b). Nevertheless, the ruling Phue Thai Party expected to win the election but the electoral process was disrupted and incomplete. Eventually, the constitutional court declared the 2014 election invalid a month later. The court ruled that the election was unconstitutional since it did not occur on the same day nationwide. Meanwhile, the polls were not held in a number of

constituencies because the candidate registration process had been blocked by the protesters (BBC, 2014a).

Beyond that, Thailand's constitutional court also removed the caretaker Prime Minister Yingluck from office on 7 May 2014 with the charge of violating the constitution. The court ruled that Yingluck and nine cabinet ministers were dismissed for the unlawful transferral of the National Security Council chief in 2011 (Hume & Olarn, 2014). After the removal, caretaker Deputy Prime Minister and Commerce Minister Niwatthamrong Boonsongpaisan was nominated by the cabinet as a new caretaker Prime Minister. In the meantime, the PDRC's leader launched the 'final-all-out' battle to uproot the Thaksin regime. Employing the latest protest tactic, the anti-government protesters were dispatched to occupy five TV stations, the Government House and the parliament (T. Nation, 2014). In the same moment, the UDD's protesters also staged a demonstration in Bangkok to express their support for the removed Prime Minister Yingluck and other ministers.

On 20 May 2014, the Royal Thai Army declared a nationwide martial law to prevent the escalation of the protest and unrest situations. Two days later (22 May 2014), Thai army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha announced the seizure of political power to restore law and order, suspended the constitution and vowed to reform the corrupted political system. According to parts of the country was likely to escalate (Fisher, 2014). The governing military body the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) was established. Meanwhile, the caretaker Prime Minister and his ministers were ordered to report to the army. Any political gathering of more than five people was also banned. According to the PDRC's leader, the coup plot had been planned since 2010 and the coup leader told that it was the army's duty to take over his role to overthrow Yingluck government

(Campbell, 2014). However, the senior Thai military denied that the military coup was planned in advance (BBC, 2014b).

The military junta issued many orders that called for most of the political figures, such as protest leaders, prominent academics and social activists, to report to the military. Some Thai dissidents who failed to do so were charged with a criminal offense. Warrants were issued for some of the red shirt movement leaders and their Thai passports were revoked. Anyone who tried to defy the military with symbolic protest actions was also ‘invited’ by the military police to ‘develop mutual understanding’. In the meantime, the NCPO asked other countries not to aid overseas Thai dissident movements since that kind of support should be considered as an intervention of Thailand’s internal affairs (Xinhua, 2014).

Nevertheless, Thailand under the military rule in the second half of 2014 was calm and somewhat peaceful. The junta initiated the campaign to return happiness to the nation. Under the campaign, Thai people were offered free meals, weekend public music concerts, free films, live FIFA World Cup football matches on free TV and various kinds of entertainments (Wohlwender, 2014). However, the civil liberty of the Thai people was limited since the 22 May coup. Nonetheless, the coup leader announced via Thai television that the junta planned to work towards returning the Thai people to democratic rule within 15 months (AFP, 2014). According to General Prayuth, the first priority and immediate task for the ruling military body was to focus on the reconciliation process that would wipe out the violence-prone Thai colour-coded politics.

## 5. Conclusion

The rise of Thailand's protest politics had begun in 2001 when the Thai Rak Thai Party won the general election and became a new kind of populist government that the Thai people had never seen before. Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra initiated various rural-based sets of policies. His 'Thaksinomic' economic scheme was employed to generate more income among the rural and grassroots Thai people. The TRT was also the first Thai political party that won a general election for a second time. Thaksin also became the first Thai civilian head of government that was re-elected to the office. However, Thaksin and his cabinet ministers were accused of corruption and manipulating the electoral process to gain more votes. The elitesp- and middle-class-based protest organization the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or the yellow shirts, was formed in 2005. The main objective of the royalist and traditionalist PAD was to overthrow Thaksin and his cabinet ministers from office.

In 2006, the Royal Thai Army decided to intervene by staging a military *coup d'état* to remove Thaksin while performing his duty at the UN's headquarters. At that time, the anti-coup and Thaksin supporter movement was founded under the name of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) or the red shirts. Thailand was returned to democracy in December 2007 when the general election was held. The People Power Party (PPP) of Thaksin won the election and became the ruling party in the coalition government. During 2007-2008, Thai protest politics intensified when the PAD besieged Thai international airports to press the PPP government to resign. However, the Thai constitutional court ordered to dissolution

of the PPP and other the two coalition parties with a charge of election fraud.

The new government under the conservative Prachatipat Party faced one of the most violent protest situations in Thailand's political history. In 2010, the red shirts staged a huge political demonstration in central Bangkok after Thaksin's assets were seized by order of the Thai Supreme Court. The government decided to break down the protester's camp in the lucrative shopping district through the use of force. The red shirts struck back by burning down the largest shopping mall in Bangkok and nearby buildings. Some protesters and authorities were also injured from the sporadic gun battles on the streets of Bangkok.

However, after the new round of the general election in 2011, Thaksin's proxy party won the election. His younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra became the first female Prime Minister of Thailand. At that time, the yellow shirts were fragmented into various anti-government groups. Nonetheless, they were regrouped under the name of the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). This protest organization was led by the former Deputy Prime Minister and opposition MP. Eventually, political history was repeated after the Royal Thai Army decided to intervene through another military *coup d'état* in 2014. Thus, all protest movements were prohibited under military rule and the so-called reconciliation process continued to work to remove Thailand's 'colour coded politics'.

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