

## Mass Movement in Thai Politics During the Period of 2001-2018

Somboon Suksamran<sup>1</sup>, Thuwathida Suwannarat <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> Collage of Innovation and Management, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand

<sup>1</sup> E-mail: somboon.su@ssru.ac.th , <sup>2</sup> thuwathida.su@ssru.ac.th

### ABSTRACT

Political changes in Thai politics in 2011-2018 experienced of mass movements played popular participation in shaping the mode of Thai governments. The general election 2001 enabled the Thai Rak Thai Party led by Thaksin Shinawatt to form the government with populism policies and program. The populism policies pleased and hit the heart of the North and Northeast people who constitutes the biggest number of Thai population. The government pursued and implemented its populism policies so impressive that the mass of these two regions returned this party to the government in the general elections 2005 with the great majority. The government wielded its power without discretion. Cronyism, corruption and abuse of power had been spread out. The opposition within and outside the parliament were deprived of opportunities in business and political arena. As a consequence, there emerged mass movements in opposition against the government. The most forceful one was the People's alliance for Democracy (PAD). Its movements and campaigns were so effective and powerful that they were suppressed by forces. In many incidents claimed lives and injured of the protesters. So much that the military interrupted and eventually, seized power, on September 2005 Thaksin went in exile. The military government called for the general election in January 2008. The election returned the old group to the power. The new government was a short life. A new Prime Minister who was the brother in law of Thaksin replaced the outgoing. But he had to confront with the P.A.D to extent that he could never enter the government Hour. He eventually was convinced by the court for violation of law. He was ousted and his political party was branded. The new government led by potency opinion, Democrat, replace the old power. It was unacceptable by supporters of the old government. They organized mass movement to protest and demanded the resignation of Democrat government. Unlike the P.A.D. the new mass movement which called themselves The United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UFDAD) vowed to protect Thaksin system and against dictatorship, employed violence for change. The Democrat dissolved the parliament and called for a new general election on December 2011. The election returned the "Thaksin System" to the government with absolute majority. The new government under the leadership of Yingluck, Thaksin's sister continued even more risky populism policy that could put economy of the country into jeopardy. While the PAD lowers its profile, new mass movement under the name People's Democratic Reform committee with the King as Head of State launched a serried of campaign against the government and vowed to do away with "Thaksin System". PDRC mobilized millions of people on the streets and called the members in provinces vigorously opposed against the government. The history repeated, the military let by Prayut Chan-ocha stage the coup d'état on July 7, 2014. It concluded that the military and Thai politics are un separable

### Keywords

Mass Movement, Thai Politics, People's alliance for Democracy, United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship

### Introduction

The political changes during the period of 2001-2018 is looked upon as the dynamic interchange of the democratic progress as much as the democratic setback. In the progress and setback, the mass movement had played a great role in the change. The study will look into the socio-economic and political background at the time under study. We will also explore the emergence of the mass movement, their ideas, purposes and strategies. We based our study on literatures, interview the people in the movements. Many of them preferred to remain anonymous. The participation and observation in the activities of the mass movements are employed and these strategies gave us a good and useful information for the study it, however, should be noted that we had less opportunity to be among "the Red" for the reasons of safety. The participations and observation in activities mobilized in various campaigns provided abundant opportunities to collect, data and information used in this study. Though there were some other popular movements played their roles in Thai Politics of the decades, we wished to focus our study on the mass movements which played political roles and brought changes in the government at the time under study.

The mass movements chosen for the study are People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UFDAD), and People's

Democratic Reform Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State (PDRC). We would like to emphasize that mass movement in this study refers to a body of the people who share certain ideas, ideology, and interest. They organize themselves into a movement on the government to achieve their goals.

We also would like to note that the data used in the description of the activities and phenomena in the mass movements rely heavily on mass media especially major newspaper such as Thai Rat, Daily Mail, Siam Rat, Mathichon including TV Station owned by the government as well as those under the supported by the Red, the Yellow and PDRC. Thus, they are not cited in the text to avoid clumsiness. Only important notions are mentioned.

### Theoretical Framework

This study conceives the mass movement as a variation of political participation. It could be a peaceful movement, or it could involve the use of coercive force and violence. The objective of this kind of political participation is to affect changes in the political arena. These include removing the head of the government, toppling the government, changing the form of government, and, in the extreme case, changing the system of governments (Weiner, 1971; Huntington and Nelson, 1976). Huntington and Nelson incited that the

political activities as such could be legal or illegal, but it is legitimate for the people to do so.

### Social-economic and Political Background

In the last four decades there have been remake socio-economic progress in Thailand. Rural areas once marked with lacked behind, under development, poor education, and political naive were no longer looked at as such. Technological advance, internet, website and other digital innovation had penetrated into the villages. Modern communication of various kinds has reached the neural people. Mode of agricultural production had changed the life of the rural people. Education from elementary up to university have been more avails than before. Under these circumstances, ecocultural process and socialization, villagers are no longer political naive but full of awareness and ready to participate in both local and national politics.

The study also considers the idea social movement as well as new social movement which encourage extra bureaucratic polity to work in apparel to the government. The movement would cooperates with the government if they share certain ideological element and interest. The new-social movement is not necessarily against the regime, though their ideological commitment may be different. The movement would rather encourage the civil society to engage in the governance. This would in turn fosters democratic process. Throughout our study these two main ideas, i.e. Mass movement and new social movement, will be illustrated.

The promulgation of 1997 Constitution was a Thai modern political reform, as it recognized a wide range of basic right, particularly in voicing of public opinion on issues of national important and safe guarding people's dignity which were followed the by the 2007 and 2017. Constitutions. Several anti-corruption regulations and principles were laid down. Important independent instructions such as Election Commission, Administrative court, Constitutional Tribunal Anti and suppression corruption committer were set up. Such constitutions have encouraged people participation in political processes and are guarantees their exercise of political right and civic activities in political arcana.

The popular and mass movement in the period 2001-2018 could be viewed as new social movement in the sense that they believed that society had right and legitimate to exert civic power in the change of government.

### Socio-political Changes in Year 2000s

Politics in Thailand has been dramatic since 2001 when Thai Rak Thai Party under the leadership of Thaksin Shinawatra, the IT billionaire tycoon, took power. Popularism policies were introduced and implemented. It was the poor peasants and the under privileged whom constitute the vast majority of Thai people benefited most. They have been overwhelmed with and fully benefited from such policies such as one million Bath for one village Fund, free medical care, one commune-one product and farmer debt suspension etc. In the period time, Thaksin Shinawatra has concentrated his political power by means of merger and acquisition. Other political parties were co-opted into Thai Rak Thai

party. This in effect mean that Thaksin had two-third members of the House of Representative in his party and under his tight control. Member in the cabinet were only his "secretaries" to carry out his will. The merger and acquisition of allied parties left no room for the opposition parties to exercise the vote of censure. Once Thaksin own 2/3 of members of The House of Representatives, he also dominated the majority of members of the upper house. Even the independent organizations whom selected by the Members of the Parliament were patronized and controlled by Thaksin. These autonomous entities have been the greatest disappointment. They became suspected of corrupted and un-trusted by the great number of middle-class people.

Thaksin consolidated executive and legislative power solely into his helm. Government budget not only was used extensively for popularem policies but also distributed among the members of the house to each MP to do populist projects in their provinces. This was the tactic to buy the heart of the poor and underprivileged people. In effect, Thaksin gained popularity and love from these categories of the Thai people. His mode of government was called "Thaksin system".

While Thaksin regime had been admired by the majority of the northeastern and northern voters, it was strongly criticized for self-serving and corruption policies, dictatorial personality, the violation of human right including the killing of over 3,000 people in "war-against drug policy". Thaksin was also accused of abuse of power in violating freedom of the press, bullying the business competitors and destructive to the political neutrality of Thai bureaucracy.

### Political Opposition

The strongest opposition to Thaksin and his mode of government was an amalgamation of middle, upper class, educated and well-off people, including those who had royal blood. They organized themselves in the name of "People Alliance for Democracy (PAD)" under the leadership of Sonthi Limthongkul, the media tycoon, General Chumlong Srimueng, Piphop Thongchai, Somkiat Pongpaiboon and Somsak Kosaisook. PAD committed to upholding the monarchy, religion, fighting against corruption and political monopoly. It revealed the wrongdoing and corruptions committed by Thaksin. These brought out a lot of people to turn against Thaksin. Sonthi ran a popular news website [www.manager.co.th](http://www.manager.co.th) and Satellite television ASTV covering the whole country and extending to some countries in Asia, Europe and USA.

Political rally of PAD had gained momentum and expansive. Sonthi began his political comment program in a state control television in 2005 drawing thousands of viewers. When the program became too much critical to Thaksin, the program was scrapped. He moved his forum to Public Park used his media attracting more and more comrades. By the end of 2005, PAD had escalated their political rallies to street occupations. They accused Thaksin not only on political and policy corruptions but also on his indecent behaviors and attitude toward the monarchy. PAD chose yellow, the royal color for their shirt. This symbolized their alliance, loyalty and commitment to the monarchy. It was one of the major strategies in appealing for support from the

Thai people and in pinning down Thaksin and his political architects and engineers, many of whom were communists accused and received amnesty in 1980s. Equally important strategy was the allegation that Thaksin was ambitious to turn the Kingdom of Thailand into the Republic of Thailand and he would be the first president of the country.

Thaksin government used state machinery suppressing the county wide. PAD, with little success. But after the general election 2005, Thaksin's party won a landslide election and set a single government majority. Thaksin's position was even stronger than before. Accusation of corruption, misuse of state power for personal gain, dictatorship and "unloyalty" on Thaksin had also been escalated by the PAD. From September 2005 onward PAD mobilized the protestors country wide and used blockade strategy at the parliament, government house and ministries. It could mobilize hundred thousand of member all over the country to occupied important streets and places in Bangkok for months.

### Political Polarization

Thaksin not only strongly retaliated PAD with state instruments, but also mobilized popular support through the member of parliament of his party. His strongest support came from the Northeast where the greatest number of the poor live. These people benefited most from the popular list policies of Thaksin. They also heavily depend on government subsidies. They were less sophisticated and less educated than the PAD. Since 6 October 2005 onward they were less mobilized to counteract PAD. They organized themselves into a mass movement called United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UFDAD). While PAD used yellow color as their symbolic, the supporters of Thaksin wore red color and call themselves "Man in Red". Their commitment was to "Protect Thaksin and anti-against dictatorship. Violent confrontation repeatedly took place. The country became divided between the Red and the Yellow.

The division of the yellow and the red has been wider spread. The North and the Northeastern seem to be the Red territory while the West and the South and urbanites, who are wealthier, more educated and self-dependent, tend to favor the yellow. Ideological position of PAD has been clearer than the red from the beginning. They espoused "new politics" that is a clean a decent democracy perseverance of the monarchy and Buddhism. The Red's ideological stand has been varying. At the very beginning, they vowed to protect "Thaksin system" and do away with the "Ammart" which literally mean King's men. It is however understood that the Ammart is one particular privy councilor whom the red believed to be most powerful person over those who could use coercive power and has access to the royal prerogatives. The confrontations between the yellow and the red have become intensified. The Prime Minister could not visit many provinces even in Bangkok. Politics in Thailand during September 2005-September 2006 had been a political chaos. This led to a military coup in September 19, 2006. Thaksin's party under a new name "Palang Prachachon" returned to power with Samak Soonthornrawet as nominee Prime Minister.

The new government was the opinion that it would pass the amnesty law for Thaksin and associates. The PAD which

was subside down during the military rule return to the streets. This time they vowed to bring final destruction to Thaksin system. Thaksin himself dictated the government in exile.

The politics in the years 2008 and 2009 had been so dynamic and full of confusion. Samak Sundravej vowed to take Thaksin Shinawatra back from exile. Political forces and middle-class social movement led by Sonthi Limthongkul's People Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protested against the government. Hundred thousand of the PAD and alliances took to the street demonstrations, both in Bangkok and other provinces. Samak's government resorted to violent measures which led to even more social and political tension. PAD peacefully fought back by seizing the Government House and remaining there for months. On 9 September 2008, Samak was removed from the post by the Constitutional Court for violating section 267 of the Constitution, technically over his role as a paid television show host for a cooking program. Somchai Wongsawat who is Thaksin Shinawatra's brother in law and deputy leader of the PPP was elected on 17 September 2008 to succeed Samak and led the old coalition government, Like Samak, Somchai could not entered the Government House which was usurped by the PAD. Somchai Wongsawat, the 26th Prime Minister of Thailand, was in office less than three months. On 2 December 2009, the Constitutional Court ruled that three parties in the coalition government, namely the PPP, the Chart Thai party and the Matchima Tippithai, were guilty of election fraud in the 23 December 2007 general election. As a result of the court ruling Somchai lost his premiership instantly, and 109 executives of the three coalition parties were banned from entering politics for five years. An extraordinary session of the House of Representatives was convened to select a new prime minister in accordance the constitution. At the session on 15 December 2009, Abhisit Vejjajiva the 44-year-old leader of the opposition Democrat Party was voted to be the 27<sup>th</sup> Prime minister of Thailand.

The dissolved parties sought for a new brand and new leaders. The business conglomerate PPP had picked Phue Thai (For Thai people) as its new brand. A new proxy leader Yongyut Vichaidit, retired high-ranking bureaucrat trusted and approved by Thaksin was selected.

### The Turmoil

The period 2008-2012 under Abhisit Vejjajiva government was a politics of turmoil The Red (UEDAD) under the lead of important numbers of Aris man, Chatuporn, Nathawut and some others resorted to violent means pressuring government to step down. Mobsters were rampant all over Bangkok. They sieged strategic and occupied areas in Bangkok The mobs escalated their actives from blockading the streets, transportation and violating Chulalongkorn hospital, in which at the time the Supreme Patriarch stayed; firing the Emerald Temple which was considered the palladium of the country and committed arson on business centers and government offices both in Bangkok and in the provinces. The government had to declare a state of emergency. It also used to force to retaliate and subdue the violent protesters. From April to May 2010 the country almost became a failed state. The government overran the

mass movement. This chronic incident claimed more than a hundred deaths and over 3000 injured. In the 15 August 2011 Apisit declared the dissolution of the Parliament.

A new general election the was called on the 3 of July 2011. These major parties shared the votes as follow Phur Thai, (former Palang Prachachon and Thai Rak Thai) 265 votes, Democrat 159 and Char Thai Pattana 34. Yingluck Shinawatra who is Thaksin's youngest sister was nominated by the Party to lead the government. Thought she had the majority in the House of Representative Yingluck was very conscious to secure the stability of the government. She decided to form a coalition government by including chart Thai Pattana party, Chart Pattana, Phue Phandin party and Palangchol Party into the government. This in effect the government had 299 numbers of parliament securing stability of the government. Democrat led the opposition parties with 201 seats.

Populism policies which initiated by her brother, were emphasized many more schemes, the most damaging to the country economy had been rice subsidy scheme which proved to be a great failure. The government debts were rising and became a great risk to the country's fiscal discipline (<http://www.economist.com/asia/2158328>) The other schemes also jeopardized both the government's finance and the economy as a whole was, among the others, the subsidy for the First car scheme. While the populism was freely supported by the UFDAD (The Red) the economy of the country suffered the set back. The poll carried out by Bangkok University at that time found that the government's approval rating has fallen to the lowest level. At the beginning of Yingluck's second year in office, discontentment with her government, her leadership and administration had gone high. Natural disaster from the biggest flooding in 2011 worsen not only brought suffering to the people but also condemnation to the Prime Minister and her government for their inefficient management in countering natural disaster. Flooding also hurt the economy even more while, Yingluck was, Hower, confident in her support from the people who voted her to power and the absolute majority in House of Representatives. Discontentment among the others grew up like mushroom. Organized groups were in opposition to the administration and government. They were of opinion that Thaksin system must be terminated if the country could survived politically and economically. (A conversation with a group of tenseness persons, 15 August 2015. At that time, the opposition groups used mass media, social media, and seminar events criticizing, protesting that jeopardized the economy and the society. Their comments and suggestions were sarcastically ignored.

Then it came the last straw, when the House of representatives vigorously tried to pass the Amnesty Bill to give amnesty to the political the mass movements of both the Yellow (PAD) and the Red (UFDAD) launched their campaigns conveying the message that the Amnesty bill would give pardon to the wrong doing in the period. It the bill was passed it would benefit Thaksin and associates who lived in exile.

The rise of the People' Democratic Reform Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as

## Head of State

Amnesty Bill was the mighty force that united opposition protesting to the Bill and government. At the beginning they form a loosely mass movement led by Suthep Thurksuban. They called regular meetings at Samsen Train Station and used it as a platform demanding the withdrawal of the Bill. The rising number of the movement were, at the beginning, the 8 numbers of the House of Representatives who belonged to Democrat Party and they resigned from M.P. position. The movement against the government expanded rapidly and called themselves people's Democratic Reform committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State (PDRC) or Kor Por Por Sor in Thai.

## The Conglomeration of Opposition

As mentioned earlier the opposition to Yingluck government were varied the conglomeration of discontentment's were: (1) business groups who had been deprived of opportunities in fair business competitions and felt that were not only cheated but also bullied by Thaksin system which was perpetuated by Yingluck government and prior governments under Thaksin dictation. (2) The opposition political parties mainly were Democrat Party which important members of the party had been the architects and engineers of PDRC. (3) Those former members and supporters of PAD who were actively involving in PDRC mass movement. They shared is in the conversations that PAD and PDRC shared similar ideology as regard to the position of the monarchy form of government, destruction of Thaksin system and safety and continuation of the monarchy. (5)Politico concerned with no commitment. These groups of people were politically conscious to a decent government, democracy, fair and just society. They were neither for the mass movement nor against any political group. They joined and observed but having their own decision. However, as we talked to some of them, many had joined in the mass movement. They reasoned that the conventional Thai politics would not chang for better.(5) General people, this group of people were like visitors. However, theirs visits contributed to the number of the conglomeration.

### The Campaign

The ideology and purposes of the PDRC was espoused clearly in its name, is democracy with the King as Head of State government reform, no election before reformation. The issues that united the mass movement in soul and blood was the termination of Amnesty Bill. The PDCD was construed the government party persistently fenced it to pass House and careless as the attempt to bring in Thaksin buck. The opposition parties there for withdrew themselves from House session in protest. The Amnesty Bill passed with no opposition at 3.40 am.

Suthep the leader of PDRC harangued the mass movements only the demand for reformation but also to do away with Thaksin system. He vowed that the mass movement would continue its opposition movement to the victory. It appeared that those veterans of PAD had poured the supports both in financial assistances and in manpower in the movement. On 24 November 2013 Suthep called for a million hearts of the Thai mass movement (Khao Sod 30 December 2013). It was

also reported that the mass movements of the PDRC on the 24 November, 9 December and 30 December accounted more than one million on each of these three days (Mathichon, 2 January 2014) PDRC adopted PAD in certain strategies in order to make its campaign effective is they mobilized their members to government offices to stop co-operation with the illegitimate government. Some offices had to close. The PDRC also went on the streets called for supports from the people. The difference between PDRC and the Red was that while the Red employed violence, the PDRC did it peacefully.

That government had to suppressed with forces. This resulted in deaths and injured. In the 9 December 2013 Yingluck, the prime minister, dissolved the Parliament and called for a general election on 2 February 2014.

It was well understood that without any government reform, with the old rules and regulations, the general election would mean nothing but return Thaksin system and cronyism. The PDRC continued their campaign opposing the general election. Their efforts gained millions of supporters. The 2014 general election was eventually declared void. The political turmoil dragged onto 22 May 2014 when general Prayut Chan-ocha seized power from the government. PDRC called off the mass movement.

### The Progress and Setback

Military regime under general Prayut Chan o-cha brought a relief but suspended many aspects of democratic process. Political confusion and turmoil had to trade with political setback in many ways.

Political progress under the period of study could be viewed through the mass movement in that:

1. Thai people have been politicized to the extent that they conceive the political participation is their right. But their ideological commitment not necessarily is the same as manifested in the differences between the Red on one side and the Yellow (PAD) and PDRC on the other side.

2. Economic and social back grounds have shaped their decision to ally with the mass movement while great majority of active participants in PAD and PDRC could be classified as the middle class, the Red were lower middle class and downward.

3. During the period 2001-2018, these has been the growth of social movement, slowly at the beginning but from the last decade the expansion and penetration into to people of middle and lower middle class has been remarkable. Where ideology this new social class cherished, it encouraged the involvement and fostered the civil society to political participation and governance. The activities and engagement of the new social movement in effect balance the abuse of power of the government. Balance of power and check on the use of power of the government was the main element in democratic process.

4. There is a conscious concern in the direction of role and activities of the mass movement which we think it is a category of new social movement. From our study we had shown that PAD and PDRC were fighting for democracy to replace imperfect democracy under Thaksin system. But whether it was one of their strategies or not, these two mass movements seemed to request the military dominated regimes. The period under study we saw two seizures of

power by the military and we had two military dominated regimes for over 8 years and we had three elected governments for about 8 years.

Our final conclusion is that Thai politics like “old wine in the old bottle”. We all hope that the “vicious cycle of Thai politics” comes to an end.

### References

- [1] Charoensinolarn, C. (2003). A new social movement Civil society movement abroad : A survey on the development of status and conceptual implications for democratic development. Bangkok : Colon Publishing.
- [2] Laetharnmathat, A. (2007) The citizen's Politics in the New Millennium. Bangkok: Kobfai Publishing.
- [3] Phongpaichit, P., & Baker, C. (1997). Power in Transition: Thailand in the 1990s. In Political change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation. In Kewin Hewison (ed.). London: Routledge.
- [4] Phongphaichit, P., & Baker, C. (2002). Way of life How to fight : The contemporary people , movement.
- [5] Samutwanit, C, (2011). State and Society : Thai State Trilogy in the Storm of Siam Society. Bangkok : Chulalongkorn University Press.
- [6] Scott, A. (1998). I do logy and New social Movement. London: Unwin Hyman.
- [7] Tarrow, S. (1998). Power in Movement: Social Movement, Collective Action and Politics. Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Thongyu, M. (2007). Change of Isan Farmer Economy. Bangkok : Creative publishing house.