

From Assembly to Streets: Contentious Politics in Thailand (1992-2010)¹

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Abstract

Under what conditions do politicians take extra-parliamentarian options to get what they want? Why do politicians engage in street politics? This article examines two major episodes of contentious politics in Thailand, Black May of 1992 and the Yellow Shirts vs. Red Shirts (2005-2010), both of which were supported by members of Parliament. The main hypothesis suggests that MPs engage in street politics when parliamentary options to affect change or to check the power of the executives are foreclosed. Politicians pursue street politics as a strategy to enhance their own bargaining leverage vis-a-vis their legislative counterparts. Whether or not MPs engage in contentious politics depends upon three important factors: a) MPs' degree of agenda setting power within the legislature, b) the cost of mobilizing political support and c) the expected payoff of policy outcome. The case of Thailand will demonstrate that parliamentarians resort to street politics when the benefits (payoffs) are greater than costs (mobilization and agenda powers). Lessons from the Thai case may challenge existing literature on social movements,

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which presupposes the bottom-up process, by suggesting that, in fact, the elite-mass relationship, as related to movements, is the reverse. Furthermore, the Thai movements can provide valuable lessons as to the challenges of newly democratizing states.

Contentious Politics, Social Movements, Political Opposition

What is contentious politics?

Tarrow argues that contentious politics are triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives for new phases of contention by social actors who lack resources on their own.³ People engage in contentious politics, take advantage of changing political opportunities and constraints to use “repertoires” of collective action strategically, and provide opportunities to others to use these in widening cycles of contention.⁴ A form of contentious politics, social movements are sequences of contentious collective action used by people who lack regular access to institutions, who have new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that challenge others/authorities, backed by dense social networks and resonant collective action frames. For Tarrow, these involve four processes/key characteristics: 1) collective challenges, 2) common purposes, 3) social solidarity and 4) sustained interaction.⁵ Social movements emerged out of the process of state formation and citizenship (not an automatic product of modernization). Social movements start out fiercely, but tend to then become institutionalized – they are absorbed into and also transform the state – and this provides hope that the recent mass violence movements of extremism will not persist so intensely and violently into the future.

³ Sidney Tarrow, *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (Cambridge: CU Press, 1993).

⁴ Tarrow.

⁵ Tarrow.

Approaches to Contentious Politics

The body of literature on social movements provides largely four explanations to explain contentious politics: a) structural, b) rationalist, c) cultural and d) phenomenological.⁶

Structural Approach

Scholars of the structural approach to the study of contentious politics attribute interests and capacities to contest to entire collectivities, be it along class lines or kinship lines.⁷ Structuralists seek to illustrate how groups engage in contentious politics within the realms of their social organization. Many structuralists have taken on class-based analysis in accounting for revolutions, peasant rebellions and workers' protests.⁸

Rationalist Approach

Mancur Olson had a profound impact in shaping the discourse on social movements when he put forth his theory that collective action is costly and any rational individuals in groups attempting collective action will have incentives to a free ride.⁹ Such logic makes it especially difficult for mass movements to be organized because benefits gained for individuals in the groups decline as the number of beneficiaries increase. This approach is individual-centered, not group-centered, and focuses on explaining individual choices in light of their pre-defined preferences within the boundaries of pre-defined constraints. Scholars who subscribed to this approach strive to provide

⁶ Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of contention* (Cambridge: CU Press, 2001).

⁷ Tarrow; Charles Tilly, *From mobilization to revolution* (New York: Addison Wesley, 1978); Doug McAdam, "The biographical impact of activism," *How social movements matter*, eds. Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999) 117-149; Barrington Moore, *Social origins of dictatorship and democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

⁸ Moore; Theda Skocpol, *States and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: CU Press, 1979); Susan Eckstein, *Power and popular protest: Latin American social movements* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001).

⁹ Mancur Olson, *The Logic of collective action* (Harvard: MIT Press, 1965).

the bases for individual's decision-making based on perceived costs and benefits in joining or not joining collective action. Rational-choice theorists view mobilization as a calculated response, based on individual assessments of the costs and benefits of non-compliance with the status quo.¹⁰

Psychological Approach

Drawn largely from scholarship in ethnic mobilization and nationalism, scholars taking this approach seek to unearth questions of identity by explaining why individuals partake in social movements based on texts and symbols. Psychological explanations emphasize character traits and stressful states of mind that dispose individuals to rebellion. Persons with authoritarian personalities,¹¹ and persons who are alienated,¹² who feel frustrated and deprived relative to others with whom they compare themselves,¹³ and who are attracted to new norms and values,¹⁴ have all been portrayed as non-rational or intentional in rebelling.¹⁵

Cultural Approach

Culturalists scrutinize norms, beliefs, symbols and values in explicating, causal relation between cultural elements and social movement. Well articulated belief systems and ideologies could be powerfully used to mobilize people to take part in social movements. Similar to the phenomenological approach, culturalists tend to pay particular attention to texts and languages being employed in the process of mobilization.

¹⁰ Eckstein.

¹¹ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political man: the Social bases of politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1960).

¹² William Kornhauser, *The Politics of mass society* (New York: Free Press, 1959).

¹³ Tedd Gurr, *Why men rebel* (Princeton: PU Press, 1970); Ivo K. Feierabend, Rosalind Feierabend and B.A. Nesvold, "Social change and political violence: Cross national patterns," *The history of violence in America*, eds. H.D. Graham and T.R. Gurr (New York: Bantam Books, 1969).

¹⁴ Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of collective behaviour* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

¹⁵ Eckstein.

Gap in the Literature

This article adopts the rationalist approach in analyzing the leadership of parliamentarians in two major episodes of contentious politics in Thailand from 1991 to 2010. Overall the literature on contentious politics and/or political opposition in general largely ignores the agency of leadership associated with these political phenomena. The discussion of leadership in social movements still view the leaders of social movements, or “challengers” to the status quo, as someone who is less powerful, resource-poor or “excluded from routine decision making.”¹⁶ The primary reason for this study looking at the roles of MPs in leading social movements is precisely because these are not “powerless” individuals by any means. They are politicians – influential people – who wield a significant level of public support, as well as formal powers within the political system. It was the elites themselves who engaged in contentious politics. In fact, in both cases they were the very same individuals who either established the movement or united sporadic protest groups into one major anti-government movement.

“Social partyism” – a term coined by Paul Almeida – represents one of the earliest attempts by scholars of contentious politics to get at the relationship between social movement leadership and its alliance, or coalition, with political parties.¹⁷ Based on empirical cases from Latin America, social movement partyism describes a phenomenon whereby some political parties behave similar to social movements and assume a role of institutionalized political actors. Oppositional parties, in particular, resort to more confrontational style of politics by taking on extra-parliamentarian strategies, such as street protests. For Almeida, two key features must be present for social movement partyism: “1) an electoral opposition political party taking up a social movement cause as its own by coalescing with a movement, and 2) the use of social movement party-type strategies (e.g., disruptive

¹⁶ McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly.

¹⁷ Paul Almeida, “Social movement partyism: Collective action and oppositional political parties,” *Strategic alliances: Coalition building and social movements*, eds. Nella Van Dyke and Holly McCammon (Minneapolis: UM Press, 2010).

actions and street demonstrations) to mobilize party members and other groups to achieve social movement goals.”¹⁸

While much has been written about popular protest in Latin America,¹⁹ Almeida’s work is notable because it gets at the question of how one can characterize the behaviour of political parties in relation to social movements and the overlapping roles members of both groups played. However, what is missing from this analysis is an investigation of the role of leadership played by key players from either the political parties or social movements. In essence, this scholarship takes a structuralist approach in looking at collectivities as opposed to individual-level decision making. Moreover, this analysis suffers from two major weaknesses. First, it presupposes that there already exists popular opposition against a particular policy (i.e., neo-liberal policies) and that there is already a movement, mostly anti-government (supporters of a particular policy) that opposition parties could capitalize on. Second, the analysis does not breakdown the leadership or membership of the movement – adopting a more structural approach in treating the movement as whole collectivities.

¹⁸ Almeida.

¹⁹ Cynthia McClintock, *Revolutionary movements in Latin America: El Salvador’s FMLN and Peru’s Shining Path* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1998); Maria Victoria Murillo, *From populism to neoliberalism: Labor unions and market-oriented reforms in Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela* (Cambridge: Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1997); Manuel Antonio Garretón, “Popular mobilization and the military regime in Chile: the Complexities of the invisible transition,” *Power and popular protest: Latin American social movements*, ed. Susan Eckstein (Berkeley: UC Press, 2001); Eckstein.

Political Opposition in Thailand

Figure 1: Major episodes of mass protests in Thailand

	Student Uprising (1973/6)	Black May (1991-2)	Red Shirt vs. Yellow Shirt (2005-present)
Nature of Opposition	Anti-government Anti-corruption Anti-military dominance in politics	Anti-corruption Anti-government Preferred PM nominated by the king	Red: Anti-coup, anti-establishment Yellow: Anti-Thaksin, anti-corruption
Key actors	University students, farmer and labor organizations	University students, urban professionals, Bangkok residents	Red: Mixed, all over Thailand but N & NE regions in particular, trade org. Yellow: Bangkok residents, mixed
Regime type	Democratic	Authoritarian	Authoritarian + Democratic
Previous coup(s)	1971, FM Thanom Kittikachorn 1976, Maj Gen Sangad Chaloryoo; PM Kriangsak Chamanan	1991, Maj. Gen Suchinda Kraprayoon	2006, Maj. Gen. Surayud Chulanont
Members/ Supporters	~100,000 - 200,000	~ 500,000	Red: ~ 500,000 – 1,000,000 Yellow: ~ 100,000 - 500,000
Demands	New constitution Political participation from mass Reduced military role in politics	PM resignation Military out of politics	Red: New election, justice for their supporters Yellow: Ousting PM Thaksin, blocking Thaksin's proxies from power
Govt response	Violent repression Martial law	Repression	Coup Judicial coup Violent crackdown
Outcomes	Govt forced to resign	PM resigned Election	Coup 2006 111 MPs from TRT banned 3 PMs removed from power 109 additional MPs banned Protracted crisis House dissolution

Literature on political opposition, as well as contentious politics in Thailand, is scarce, despite the rather turbulent and, at times, violent development of its contemporary political development. Studies on political opposition generally view various episodes of opposition as events that occurred as part of the political development in the country. With the exception of Hedman, and Hewison,²⁰ there has been little effort to analyze episodes of contentious politics in Thailand in light of the literature on social movements and political opposition. Popular movements against the state or governments in the past have been often analyzed within the literature on democratization. There has been little effort to address systematically and collectively episodes of contentious politics in Thailand, let alone a comparative study of all cases. Given the fact that Thailand has experienced one of the most frequent coup attempts in the world – seventeen in total – since its initial transition to parliamentary democracy in 1932, major episodes of anti-government opposition have been too far and few in between.

Moreover, contentious politics, whether in the case of Thailand or many other countries in the world, is often viewed as a ‘bottom-up’ process, which means scholars pay particular attention to the questions of a) why do individuals get organized, b) how do they get organized, c) the ‘framing effect’ employed to organize the public, etc. Much less emphasis has been placed on analyzing the leadership role played by key actors in these episodes of political opposition. For the Thai case, the frequency and degree of political opposition is analyzed as a suggestion to the degree of development of civic society or democratic development. Hewison argues that the history of democratization in Thailand suggests that political opposition in Thailand is far more complex than the mere effect of the capitalist development of the economy, particularly the rise of the middle and business classes.²¹ Various episodes of political opposition in Thailand are a function of

²⁰ Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, “In search of oppositions: South East Asia in focus,” *Government and Opposition* 32.4 (1997): 578-597; Kevin Hewison, “Political opposition and regime change in Thailand,” *Political oppositions in Industrializing Asia*, ed. Garry Rodan (New York: Routledge, 1996).

²¹ Hewison.

the expansion of political space that marks a slow, complicated, yet gradual development of democracy.²² This study, thus, seeks to provide a new approach to the study of political opposition in Thailand by shedding light on the role of elites and their leadership in major episodes of contentious politics.

Why go to the streets? Incentives and Constraints

The main assumption of this research is regarding politician's motives. Politicians are motivated by votes (office-seeking), specific agenda (policy-seeking) or a combination of both. In the office-seeking model, political actors are concerned about rewards, such as "power, prestige, or a place in a lime light."²³ Others are motivated by policy pursuit, which denotes their participation in the policy process in order to further particular policy objectives.²⁴ Parties vie for allocation of cabinet portfolios in order to benefit from office perks, as well as government policies.²⁵ Whether or not the interests of political elites are motivated by office or policy, or both, it is not clear what options politicians have in pursuing these goals. For the purpose of this study, the focus of the analysis is on parliamentarians because these are political actors who are already in office. This means we can assume that MPs pursue extra-parliamentary strategies to achieve a specific set of policies. Why would they take on extra-parliamentarian measures to achieve policy, or even to improve their chances for office in the next term? While political elites can take advantage of social movements in the public space and temporarily become their ally for electoral or opportunities reasons,²⁶ what might shape the incentives for members of parliament to do so?

²² Hewison.

²³ Ian Budge and Michael Laver, "Office seeking and policy pursuit in coalition theory," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 11.4 (1986).

²⁴ Budge and Laver.

²⁵ Royce Carroll and Garry W. Cox, "The Logic of Gamson's law: Pre-election coalitions and portfolio allocations," *American Journal of Political Science* 51.2 (2007): 300.

²⁶ Tarrow.

MPs face three options in their pursuit of policy X. They can: a) work through the legislature; b) go to the streets or c) give up. The decision to opt for the extra-parliamentary measures is contingent upon three factors:

1. Degree of agenda-setting power;
2. Cost of mobilization/Political opportunism; and
3. Expected policy payoff.

It is simply not sufficient to be voted into office in order to affect policy change. Politicians seek to be elected, theoretically, to represent and pursue policies supported by their constituents. Yet, once in the legislature, the bargaining leverage of MPs varies depending on whether or not they are in government and possess cabinet portfolios. Gamson's Law posits that the distribution of cabinet portfolios depends on the proportion of seats each party contributes to a coalition.²⁷ This model of office-seeking coalition is further extended by Riker,²⁸ who argues that we only see "minimum-winning coalitions" among polities. Constrained by the finite number of cabinet seats, politicians seek to maximize their share of the pie by minimizing the extent to which they share office spoils. Office-seeking is viewed as a zero-sum game and seat considerations are the basis for coalition formation. Such a model predicts coalition governments composed of a majority party with the highest seat share and as few seats allocated to coalition partners as possible. Browne & Franklin take a more empirical stance towards coalition theories by arguing that the number of seats won by cabinet parties approximate their proportion of cabinet portfolio allocation.²⁹ Shapsle and Laver add that most of the policy-making takes place inside the cabinet, not the legislature.³⁰

²⁷ William A. Gamson, "A theory of coalition formation," *American Sociological Review* 26.3 (1961): 373-382.

²⁸ William Riker, *The theory of political coalitions* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1962).

²⁹ Eric C. Browne and Mark N. Franklin, "Aspects of coalition payoffs in European parliamentary democracies," *American Political Science Review* 67.3 (1973): 453-461.

³⁰ Michael Laver and Kenneth A. Shepsle, "Coalitions and cabinet government," *American Political Science Review* 84.3 (1990): 873-890.

Another important assumption I make here is that street politics is a costly behavior for elected politicians. Politicians that engage in street politics could face persecution from the state and their own party, experience physical harm, and can potentially lose electoral and party support. For these reasons, politicians do not opt for the street option unless they believe the expected payoffs for doing so outweigh the costs.

In sum, there are two major assumptions in this hypothesis. First, politicians have a fixed preference for votes or policies, in both democratic and non-democratic setting. Second, the costs of engaging in street politics for political actors, especially MPs, are high.

Figure 2: Summary of key assumptions

	Democratic Government	Authoritarian Government
Politicians/MPs Preference	Office and/or Policy	Office and/or Policy
Costs of Street Politics	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Office - Vote - Position w/in party - Arrest/imprisonment - Physical harm - Financial resources 	High <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Office - Persecution - Political career - Physical harm - Death - Financial resources

MPs from opposition parties or backbenchers have far less influence on the policy-making process than do their parliamentarians in the government counterparts. Indeed, oppositional political parties are the candidates most likely to take on extra-parliamentarian strategies to achieve their political end.³¹ Thus, the first factor that provides incentive for MPs to opt to take to the streets is the fact that they have a lower level of agenda-setting power, which effectively reduces their leverage in bargaining for the policy they seek to pursue. In both cases, which will be examined later in this article, all MPs that

³¹ Almeida.

engaged in contentious politics were drawn from opposition parties inside parliament.

MPs weigh their decision to engage in street politics on the likelihood of gaining leverage in obtaining the office or the set of policies they want. Taking to the streets is a risky business, with many associated high costs. MPs could lose popular support, especially their electoral support base that they would need to maintain (or secure) in order to be re-elected. Moreover, they could risk alienating themselves from their fellow party members, who could affect their future party nominations. Since there are a lot of unpredictable variables and uncertainty, they could potentially fail in their objectives. These costs are not taken lightly and because their decision to engage in contentious politics is strategic, their cost-benefit analysis must yield their expected benefits to be higher than their costs.

A key factor that dramatically both increases the chance of a successful extra-parliamentarian political opposition to the government, as well as reduces the cost of mobilization, is to have a reliable source of popular support. There are two major ways MPs could achieve this: a) establish coalition or alliance with existing anti-government forces (often with various organizations or student groups) and b) mobilize their existing electoral support base. Key individuals and leaders who participate in both oppositional political parties and nongovernmental organizations or social movements act as brokers bringing social movements into closer collaborations with electoral parties.³² Such individuals promote the mutual interests of the party and movement in working together on economic policy issues. Such membership overlap promotes the coordination of meetings, protest campaigns, strategies, resource exchange,³³ and shared goals among movements and oppositional political parties. In the absence of such interpersonal ties, there would be much more distance between these two distinct types of organizational arrangements, making alliances costlier in terms of the time needed to

³² Ann Mische, *Partisan politics: Communication and contention across Brazilian youth activist networks* (Princeton: PU Press, 2008).

³³ Mario Diani, "Networks and participation," *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. Snow, et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

build mutual trust. Political parties can use their organizational structure to mobilize in the streets by calling on their supporters in multiple locales to participate in collective action campaigns. Political parties may also act inside the polity to push for the retraction of economic liberalization measures. These insider activities provide social movements with an incentive to join with political parties that can work on their behalf inside parliament. Having an advocate inside the polity also raises success expectations for activists encouraging wider mobilizations.³⁴

To overcome the collective action problem,³⁵ these MPs use their position as public authorities in combination with what Tilly, Tarrow and McAdam termed “innovative repertoire” to direct and guide flows of collective action.³⁶ In all our cases, techniques commonly employed included public entertainment (concerts, speeches), hunger strikes, Buddhist principles, etc. These performances have the framing effect to make the issue of joining anti-government efforts a salient issue for the public. Most importantly, these political actors act on ‘political opportunities’ that are presented to them to capitalize. These are not planned episodes of contentious politics, but rather there is a great amount of spontaneity that presents an opportunity for opposition MPs to recalculate their strategies and view street politics as an alternative option to battling it out in parliament or giving up on their desire to empower their influence. In the cases that will be examined, the political environment at the time of major episodes of contentious politics is one where there has been an unconstitutional overthrow of elected government (a coup), which results in sections of the public opposing (overtly or covertly) the government.

³⁴ Bert Klandermans, *The Social psychology of protest* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

³⁵ Olson.

³⁶ McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly.

Major Episodes of Contentious Politics in Thailand, 1990s-2010

Black May (1991-1992)

Black May began in February 1991 when a group of top military leaders staged a coup against PM Chatchai Choonhawan – the first democratically elected government after decades of authoritarian rule. Next, on 22 March 1992, another highly corrupt and fraudulent election took place,³⁷ involving numerous cases of election fraud and vote buying. Almost \$US 100 million was spent buying votes. Not surprisingly, the election results were viewed with great cynicism, and the pro-military party won the most votes and formed a coalition government with four other parties. Suchinda Kraprayoon – the leader of the 1991 coup, who had previously staunchly opposed taking any position in the government – took the premiership. Although this was technically constitutional, many people saw this as a continuation of the military rule that had overthrown the previous government. Several opposition leaders began to publicly oppose Prime Minister Suchinda. Some staged hunger strikes, drawing great attention from the media, and a large mob turned out in the streets in support of the opposition.

Opposition leaders, the media, and non-governmental organizations demanded that the current Prime Minister resign and called for an elected Prime Minister. Suchinda refused to concede to the people's demands and began to retaliate against the demonstrators. The violence quickly escalated in the days leading up to the massacre of 17-20 May 1992. During the mass demonstrations, Major General Chamlong Srimuang, leader of the main opposition party (Palang Dharma Party) was able to attract some 100,000-strong crowd to observe his hunger strike and listen to his demands for a new constitution and Suchinda's resignation. As the crisis reached a boiling point, King Bhumibol brought both Suchinda and Chamlong together on national television and demanded that the two put an end to their mutual grievances and work together through parliamentary

³⁷ Suchit Bunbongkarn, "Thailand in 1992: In search of a democratic order," *Asian Survey* 33.2 (1993): 219.

processes. Following the broadcast, Suchinda issued a blanket amnesty to those involved in the violence and to himself, then he resigned.

Black May and the events preceding it are often viewed as a clear-cut conflict between the people versus the (military) state; “Angels versus Demons”. Yet, within the political elite circle, there was significant support for Suchinda premiership and the military-backed government. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate various parliamentary channels that opposition parties sought to check the power of the executive, as well as the government. It must be noted while the Samakkhi Dharma-led government functioned as if it were a democratic government, it was not fully democratic.

Figure 3: Actions taken by coalition government and opposition parties (1991-1992)

	Coalition Government (Samakkhi Dharma*, Prachakorn Thai, Social Action, Chart Thai, Rasadorn)	Opposition Parties (New Aspiration**, Palang Dharma, Democrat, Akekapap)
Suchinda as PM nominee	195 votes of support (all govt.)	180 votes against (all opp.)
1991 Constitution	Leave it as is	Propose 4 major amendments to make it democratic
Senate	Viable option	Not viable as all 270 members were appointed by House Speaker, who was the coup leader of 1991
House Dissolution	Oppose it	Not all opposition parties support this option

*Head of the coalition government

**Head of the opposition

Figure 4: Actions taken by opposition parties in parliament (1991-1992)

- Heads of all four opposition parties demand that the House Speaker review the procedure for premier nomination. PM must be an elected MP, not appointed.
- All opposition MPs dress in black everyday in parliament.
- All opposition MPs walk out whenever PM Suchinda speaks and go outside to give speeches to their supporters on the streets
- Opposition MPs use their time during parliamentary sessions to oppose Suchinda's premiership and strongly urge coalition parties to reconsider their position.

The government declared a state of emergency and moved in 3,500 more soldiers to the demonstration areas. Despite the fact that the violence had subsided and peace was restored, the soldiers opened fire for fifteen minutes straight in order to break up the crowds; however, the crowds gathered closer and remained united. A little later, tanks moved in to surround the demonstrators, along with 7,000 more soldiers. Gun shots rang out, and this time the crowd began to disperse in all different directions. The core of the demonstration, around 3,000 people, laid flat on the ground. More than a thousand of them were detained, and Chamlong was arrested. Then some 50,000 demonstrators gathered again in rows and began marching to the Ministry of Justice, holding images of the royal family and waving Thai flags. The king finally intervened by summoning Suchinda and Chamlong to a televised meeting where both parties were "asked" to find a compromise. Suchinda eventually stepped down, paving a way for a new government to be installed.

Red vs. Yellow Shirt Movements (2005-2010)

Since 2005, Thailand has been trapped in cycles of mass demonstrations, street violence, marshal laws and unstable societal conditions. The most recent clash between the two opposing forces

was, by far, “the worst ever seen in a 100 years,” claims renowned Thai historian Chanvit Kasetsiri.³⁸ The “Bloody May of 2010” differs from the anti-government protests of 1992 and 1973 in that occupation of key business areas and arson of some 30 buildings was specifically aimed at destroying the current administration’s purported financiers. Most notably, the fact that the Red Shirts had their own security forces – led by Maj. General Khatiya and his military faction – provided crucial leverage for the Reds in its bargaining with the government. Direct attacks on the government’s political and financial base, coupled with the willingness of the Red Shirts to confront the army, were not only unprecedented, but they also made compromise between the two parties much harder to attain.³⁹ With government forces having retaken the occupied areas of Bangkok and emergency decree still in place, uncertainty prevailed concerning the future of the current Thai government and generally of the Thai state itself.

Broadly speaking, the “Red Shirts” are one of two kind: firstly, supporters of ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who championed pro-poor policies and drew his largest support from the country’s poorest regions of the north and the northeast. Secondly, the Red Shirts are “pro-democracy” proponents, who opposed the military coup in 2006, and subsequently objected to a series of “undemocratic” measures designed to weaken Thaksin’s political influence, such as the seizure of his assets and disbandment of Thaksin’s political party. The Red Shirts represent an odd mix of the rural and the urban poor who advocated against the current government, the elite and the “establishments” of the country,⁴⁰ as well as some highly educated, affluent urban segments of society, who want to see Thailand moving

³⁸ Chanvit Kasetsiri, “Chanvit points Bloody May incident the worst in 100 years - protest crackdown by Abhisit only pleased the Bangkokians; Thaksin was involved in torching,” *Matichon Daily* [Bangkok], 20 May 2010, (in Thai).

³⁹ Thanong Khanthong, “Who’s who among the Reds,” *The Nation Daily* [Bangkok], 28 May 2010.

⁴⁰ Thitinan Pongsudhirak, a renowned Thai political scientist, provides a succinct description of the establishments in Thailand as “the royalist-conservative coalition of army officers, palace insiders, ruling coalition parties, the PAD and Bangkok’s co-opted civil society.” See Thitinan Pongsudhirak, “Thailand’s unstoppable Red Shirts,” *East Asia Forum Quarterly* 2.2 (2010): 13.

forward in its democratization process. The common threads that pull together the Red Shirt movement are their shared beliefs concerning the Thai government's disrespect for the wish of the majority; the gross injustice that exists in government practices; and the country's many "double standards".

The People Alliance for Democracy (PAD), or the Yellow Shirts, who initiated the mass demonstrations against Thaksin in 2005 that culminated in the September coup, draws their support largely from the Bangkok middle class and elite. The rise of Thaksin and his populist political engine shook the Bangkok-based establishment to the core.⁴¹ The Yellow Shirt movement was a reaction to what many in Bangkok saw as a highly corrupt, manipulative, and dangerously authoritarian leader who threatened "the old ways" and disrespected the country's core institutions: the military, the bureaucracy, and the monarchy.⁴² The color yellow – a color associated with the royal institution – is worn by the PAD supporters to advance the impression that it is a pro-monarchy movement, one that seeks to do whatever it takes to protect the monarchical institution from perceived threat. Two of the top leaders of the Yellow Shirts – Chamlong Srimuang and Sonthi Limthongkul – were once Thaksin's allies. Such tales of betrayal and vengeance are commonplace once one begins to look beyond the surface of Thailand's recent violent crisis.

Ironically Jatuporn – one of the core leaders of the Red Shirts – began his political career as one of the student leaders during Black May, upon which it was brought to the streets of Bangkok largely by Chamlong (now a top Yellow Shirt leader). He joined Chamlong's party, Palang Dharma, in 1996, but switched allegiances to Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party in 1998 – being one of the instrumental people helping in founding TRT. He ran for election in 2007 as a party list candidate from southern Thailand and was elected MP, which

⁴¹ Thitinan explains that critics of Thaksin believe Thaksin has misruled the country and led Thailand down the authoritarian route – under the guise of a popularly elected leader – "for the purpose of graft and aggrandizement." See Thitinan Pongsudhirak, "Thailand since the Coup," *Journal of Democracy* 19.4 (2008) 140-153.

⁴² The generals who overthrew Thaksin cited Thaksin's disrespect for the king as one of the reason for his dislodge.

represents his current position. He was one of the eight founding members of the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship (DAAD) in 2007, which later changed its name to National United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), known more widely as the “Red Shirts”. His involvement with the Red Shirts was prior to him being elected as an MP, but he took up several leadership roles with the Thai Rak Thai (later the Palang Prachachon Party and Peau Thai Party).

Future Research

The story of both Chamlong and Jatuporn are not unique. According to my preliminary research on both episodes of contentious politics, there have been a number of MPs involved in street politics. There have also been other political actors who gained direct political benefits from engaging in street politics, such as being nominated as electoral candidates, getting elected as MPs, gaining leverage within their own political parties, etc. In the paragraphs below, I outline my research design and methodology as related to my ongoing research endeavors.

The main hypothesis suggests that MPs engage in street politics when parliamentary options to affect change or to check the power of the executives are foreclosed. Politicians pursue street politics as a strategy to enhance their own bargaining leverage vis-a-vis their legislative counterparts. Whether or not MPs engage in contentious politics depends upon three important factors:

- a) MPs’ degree of agenda setting power within the legislature;
- b) Cost of mobilizing political support; and
- c) Expected payoff of policy outcome.

Variables

Dependent variable: parliamentarian’s engagement in street politics.

Independent variables: degree of agenda-setting power, political resources and expected payoffs.

Control variables: political system, institutional factors (within-case study).

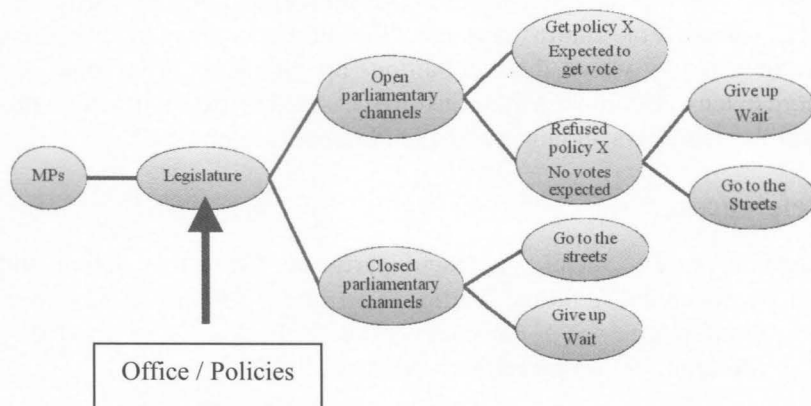
Variation on the dependent variable: yes.

Case Selection

The cases of the Black May and the Red vs. Yellow Shirts Movements were chosen for three major reasons:

1. There is a variation on the dependent variable. Only some MPs engaged in street politics, but not others. What explains this variation?
2. Both cases lend a comparative leverage to explaining variation on the dependent variable. Thailand's oscillation between democratic and authoritarian regime provides an exceptionally unique case to test whether or not regime type has an effect on street politics. Between 1989 and 1993 (the Black May case), Thailand oscillated between authoritarianism and democracy, intermittent by a coup. Similarly, the color-coded movements spanned over the period of democratic and military governments, interrupted by a coup. Such variation in the regime type permits an examination of its effect on the dependent variable. Moreover, the post-coup environment for both cases permits a control effect on the dependent variable.
3. There are a number of political actors that took part in both episodes of contentious politics, albeit in varying capacities. These "repeated" actors provide an interesting puzzle as to their incentives and constraints in their pursuit of street politics.

Figure 5: Diagram of causal mechanisms



The central hypothesis posits that street politics become an option only when normal parliamentary channels for MPs to affect change are foreclosed. Extra-parliamentarian options, such as going to the streets, are chosen only when parliamentary options are exhausted or when MPs see no chance of getting what they want in the current legislature or in the foreseeable future. MPs give up pursuing what they want in parliament or wait it out until the next election when they perceive their chance of winning the next election as a possibility.

This article adopts a rationalist approach in seeking to illustrate and explain the roles of political actors in leading major episodes of contentious politics in Thailand over the course of four decades. Parliamentarians participate in street politics when benefits outweigh the cost. Based on the assumption that politicians are rational political actors, whose key interests are to maximize votes or policies, oppositional MPs whose parties have significant electoral support base and access to financial resources are most likely to engage in contentious politics when faced with an “opening” of political opportunity. At times of a build-up of public discontent towards the ruling government, opposition MPs can and do “hijack” the situation

to assume leadership in social movement. Street politics, at least in the Thai case, becomes a strategy for some opposition MPs to gain leverage both inside the legislature (for policy) and outside parliament (for votes). For future research, the author seeks to trace the mechanisms by which these conditions operate in order to conduct a more extensive comparison of the three cases. The extent to which this hypothesis will travel beyond Thailand remains to be seen.

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