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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Class War or Class Welfare? The Red Shirt Siege in Bangkok**

Antonio L Rappa

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*Abhisit Vejjajiva prevented the worse excesses from engulfing the rest of the country. The prime minister has the coalition parties, the army, civil society groups, the Privy Council, and the Royals behind him. It came to no surprise that the beleaguered Red Shirt insurgency crashed and burned at Lumphini-Rajprasong. But wasn't Lumphini-Rajprasong a case of classic textbook "Class War" in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*

AN AMERICAN assassin hired by a local Sukhumvit-based boss learns compassion the hard way in the movie Bangkok Dangerous. He eventually loses his nerve and is reduced to an emotional pancake. By contrast, in the real world of Thai politics, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva used "an iron fist in a velvet glove" tactic while dealing with the Red Shirts at Lumphini-Rajprasong. Abhisit avoided a critical error by not imposing martial law. Instead, he imposed a state of emergency.

The difference between martial law and a state of emergency is that the former weakens and destroys the economy in the long-term. Martial law is a sign of political weakness and authoritarianism. The suspension of civilian rule would have heightened human rights abuses. For these reasons, Abhisit was prudent not to impose martial law: it would have "killed the goose that laid the golden eggs".

### **The Lumphini-Rajprasong Camp**

The Red Shirt Camp, adjacent to Bangkok's main shopping belt, was an area of 3,500 metres protected by wooden barricades, walls of tyres, and a cache of stolen weapons. The Red Shirts showered and slept there. They ate from mobile kitchens and make-shift stalls. The proprietor of one of these stalls named "Carlos" – who also works as a foreign embassy driver by day – identified groups of intelligence officers in surveillance-mode outside the Camp. He said, "Red Shirts for the poor, Yellow Shirts for the rich". This was their slogan for class war. But was there ever one in the first place?

Some of the richest people in the world are Thai. Indeed, many Thai people in Bangkok experience a standard of living that is well above many of their Asian counterparts. Thailand is also home to several Thai billionaires. Thai culture tends to make even the richest-rich avoid ostentatious displays of wealth. Despite the value placed on humility, the neo-liberal capitalist machine is alive and well in the Land of Smiles. Class distinctions between the richest-rich and the poorest-poor remain stark.

### **Class War?**

Not a few months ago, luxury cars were on display in high-rise shopping centres while a man without limbs begged for baht in his own urine several stories below along the filthy pavements of Ploen Chit. In a Sukhumvit Soi, a beggar-woman and her crying child live off refuse and restaurant waste. The World Bank, the UN and other world international agencies have held many seminars and conferences on rural poverty and more often than not, Thailand is included in some way or form. At least 19% or about 4 million people form the poorest poor in Thailand's rural northeast; while the *fewest* poor are discovered in Bangkok with 1.9% or about 91,500 people.

Almost two years of sporadic demonstrations led “foreign experts” and armchair critics to predict that time was right for a “class war”.

Genuine class war draws from a build-up of tension between disenfranchised workers and the capitalists who exploit them. The surplus value of labour is thus squeezed out by offering little (to no) pay, long hours, and impoverished working conditions. Also known as the proletariat, these unhappy workers must be well-organised and well-led for a class to become a *class-for-itself* as opposed to a *class-in-itself*. Obviously, this was not the case in Bangkok. The workers were insufficiently disenfranchised, they were inadequately led, and the State was not a horrible, repressive, ogre of persecution. In other words, life in Bangkok is neither solitary, poor, brutish, nasty nor short.

### **Class Welfare**

Rather than class war, it appears that for most of the country, the State, led by Abhisit, had managed the limited insurgency very well with the kind of class-welfare for the injured and those whose properties and businesses were affected. To its credit, the State announced provisions for a 778 million baht fund to help those in the Lumphini-Rajprasong area. Over 27,000 workers and 1,500 businesses were affected. The affected areas amounted to less than 2% of Bangkok Municipality but also accounts for over 60% of central Bangkok's revenue. The State also approved in principle several banks' requests for aid.

To its credit, the State delayed land and home taxes in the affected areas till September 2010 as well as postponed corporate tax and VAT payments for retailers who had their businesses closed but were still paying rent and workers' salaries. Abhisit effectively used this class-welfare strategy to turn the tide against the Red Shirt insurgents.

### **Will Thaksin return?**

For a class war to emerge, the rural areas have to be captured before the metropolitan urban centre (in Bangkok). The failure to effectively stage a class war in the rural areas had doomed the Red Shirt insurgency from the beginning. The Red Shirts would have won if they had captured Ayutthaya, Chaiyaphum, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Chonburi, Khon Kaen, Nakhon Ratchasima, Nakhon Sawan, Nan, Nonthaburi, Pathum Thani, Samut Prakan, Si Sa Ket, and Udon Thani before capturing Bangkok. Thaksin's obvious absence merely postpones the fate of his fledgling followers.

Over the next few months, Thaksin has one final chance to return and lead his followers. Meanwhile, the Red Shirts will morph into another kind of entity before the next election. The Red Shirts may

have lost the battle at Lumpini-Rajprasong, but they have not yet lost the war.

In *Bangkok Dangerous*, Nicholas Cage playing the American assassin, lost his emotions, anonymity, became careless, and asked questions. Prime Minister Abhisit on the other hand won hands down at Lumpini-Rajprasong because he didn't lose his political nerve.

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