

People's movements in Thai cyber world after Sept 19, 2006 coup

Background

Thailand's 1997 Constitution, that was torn up by the coup, was said to be one of the best charters the country has ever had, and it was written in a way that involved the most public participation. Its strong points were to guarantee rights and freedom, allow for strong premiership and administration, and provide a system of checks and balance.

It can be said that the 1997 Constitution created one of Thailand's most powerful prime ministers. Strengthened by the constitutional design and coupled with his capacity, Thaksin Shinnawatra was believed to have crippled the mechanism of checks and balance, one of the charter's three pillars, and instead used it to abuse his political foes.

But that perhaps was not so much of a sin as Thaksin's setting out to turn Thailand into being extremely liberal, with clear plans to turn rural subsistence farmers into entrepreneurs, building hopes for many people. He became one of the most beloved prime ministers, and his party unprecedentedly in Thai political history won majority seats in Parliament.

Somehow, these were part of the grounds for the coup to take place on Sept 19, 2006 eventually, as the 'Network Monarchy' (see Duncan McCargo), which had long reigned supreme, started to feel challenged. How on earth could the King's prestige be challenged in Thailand? This is dangerous. This does not mean a challenge only in a cultural aspect, but also economic. The Thai King delivered his Sufficiency Economy when the country was struck by the economic crisis in 1997, and ever since the Network Monarchy has fervently promoted the idea, almost to the point of it becoming a national ideology.

It should be noted that after the revolution that overthrew the Absolute Monarchy in 1932, Thailand has become a democracy with the King as Head of State. In other words, the King is not involved in politics, and he has excelled on this in the past 60 years.

Nonetheless, political stumbles throughout the past 75 years have more or less had something to do with issues about the monarchy. To avoid the same fate as that having happened to the former minister who had to resign due to his freedom of expression, I have to say that the monarchy has been exploited by political groups to destroy the others. And that was what happened to Thaksin, resulting in the Sept 19 coup. Even right now protesters on the street are claiming one of their reasons for protest is that there is a plot to turn Thailand into a republic.

And this has to do with the media. One of many charges for ousting Thaksin before the coup was media interference. In fact, it must have been completely failed interference, as nearly all the media have been unanimous in destroying Thaksin.

It is a phenomenon that mainstream media have been active political actors in overthrowing the government and welcoming the coup. There has been consent among the media that 'the media must choose sides'. The defeat in the media front has made politicians in Thaksin's camp to launch their own websites and a TV station.

Believe it or not. Thai professional media associations have released a historic statement regarding the issue of genuine media versus pseudo media. Regardless of the rhetoric, it could only be interpreted that only they themselves, the associations, were the real media, and all else were not.

Advocates of citizen media and reporting must be at a loss. All bloggers just vanish into the air.

In fact, what sparked and spearheaded the movement ousting Thaksin and inviting the coup was a media group which owns a news website which ranked number one in terms of the number of viewers in news category, and has its own satellite TV channels. It has led the rallies long before the coup until now.

In short, the most popular alternative media, the mainstream media and urban people were united to overthrow Thaksin, and welcome, or at least stay silent, the coup.

How come, however, the coup rapidly lost legitimacy, and the immediately-formed interim civil government needed to schedule deadlines for writing the new constitution and holding a general election within one year?

There were economic and external pressures. And the resistance grew more and more. Of course, the people did not communicate through the mainstream media, or TV channels or the Manager media, but they used the internet, posting comments on web-boards on a daily basis, about the torn-up 1997 Constitution, about the coup and the junta, about Thaksin, and about the monarchy.

Under the military regime, there was no doubt about what kind of fate the alternative media or these websites had to face. But it was not easy for the junta because media interference was one among the reasons for toppling Thaksin; therefore, the Council for National Security (CNS) could not overtly interfere. Nevertheless, FACT reported that 15,000 websites had been closed, with most of them being pornographies and a few hundred being political websites or blogs. YouTube was one of them. And there were police raids to arrest two cyber activists whose screen names were Praya Pichai and Ton Chan who created blogs to criticize the monarchy.

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In Thailand, there are about 8 million people who can access the internet, out of the whole population of 63 million.

In the category of political and news websites, www.manager.co.th has the highest number of viewers. The website belongs to a mainstream media group which once had been one of the biggest in the country, before the economic crisis in 1997.

Similar to what happened elsewhere in the world, the cyber world has become increasingly popular since around 2000, and the mainstream media in Thailand have turned to the internet to seek broader and more diverse markets.

Thai civil society has also kept up with the trend, though less active when compared with those in the Philippines and Malaysia. www.thaingo.org was launched as an information hub for Thai NGOs, but due to its specific content for specific groups of readers, it has not been much successful in terms of the number of readers (up to 600 hits per day).

In 2003, Jon Ungphakorn founded www.prachatai.com to be independent online media, with an inspiration from MindaNews in the Philippines. Initially, the number of Prachatai readers was almost the same as that of Thai NGO. The news was mostly about the people's sector. The content was adjusted in 2004 to have more focus on political news, to respond to the increasingly more contentious politics at that time, and the number of readers grew.

In light of the Sept 19 coup, Prachatai was an alternative source of information which was not provided by mainstream media. The number of hits increased, and has remained high until now, about 15,000 hits per day.

Other alternative websites including www.sameskybooks.org and www.midnightuniv.org which are more scholarly oriented have drawn more attention. Same Sky presents leftist content and has become a forum for academics, students and others to discuss issues that are forbidden in mainstream media; that is, issues of the monarchy and the military which are two main institutions that have dominated Thai politics for the past 75 years.

To discuss these two sensitive issues, internet users can use web-boards of Prachatai and Same Sky almost freely, because both websites keep censorship to the minimum. The Midnight University imposes censorship at the discretion of its webmaster, but this is relatively very minimal, compared to censorship in mainstream media, both conventional and online.

The Sept 19 coup not only resulted in more traffic to alternative news websites, but also resulted in more websites including www.19sep.org which was created by an anti-coup activist Sombat Bunnngamanong on the night of Sept 19, with the intention to provide space for discussions and mobilization against the coup. Later the domain name of the website was hacked, so www.nocoup.org was created to replace it. According to Sombat, there were 3-4 volunteers who helped run the site. The number of hits was about 3,000 per day.

www.dcode.com was an exclusive website for those who admired Thaksin and the Thai Rak Thai Party, and were against the coup. They had been regulars of Rajdamnoen web-

board of www.pantip.com, which was temporarily closed during the coup. Later Dcode became open for general public and was renamed as www.saturdayvoice.com, providing news on politics and anti-coup activities, as well as facilitating discussions among members of the anti-coup group 'Kon Wan Sao', with the traffic of 3,000 hits a day.

Then there came many more pro-Thaksin websites including www.ptvthai.com (online/satellite TV channel), www.shinawatradio.com and www.cptradio.com (taxi drivers' online radio stations), www.hi-thaksin.net, www.thaksincomeback.org, www.serichon.com, www.norporkor.com (anti-coup Nor Por Kor website), www.secondclass111.com (website of 111 former Thai Rak Thai executives who were banned from politics for 5 years along with the party dissolution as ordered by the junta-installed Constitution Tribunal in 2007), and <http://warotah.blogspot.com>

In addition, later there were more new websites that claimed to be media for the people as a response to the mainstream media which were perceived as biased. These include <http://www.modkanfai.com>, <http://thaienews.blogspot.com>, www.thaifreenews.com, www.thaipeoplevoice.org, www.thai-grassroots.com, www.newskythailand.com.

There are also some interesting blogs including etatdedroit.blogspot.com, www.fringer.com, bangkokbundit.blogspot.com (by a foreign academic based in Thailand), and biolawde.com. Most bloggers who are against the coup and active in presenting contents through their blogs are all academics, with small groups of readers.

There is also a group of cyber activists called FACT –Freedom Against Censorship Thailand, which was founded by CJ. After the coup, when it was found that a lot of blogs and websites had been blocked, this group of cyber activists and academics distributed software to the public to filter through the blocked content.

In conclusion, despite the atmosphere of the coup, Thai cyber world seems to have been more active. However, this is just the beginning. We need to wait and see in the long term. The Computer Crime Act that has recently been in effect is what the Thai government has in store to deal with the cyber world.