

## THE STATE OF THE REDSHIRTS IN THAILAND – 18 AUGUST 2014

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After years of doing battle on the streets and in parliament, Thailand's pro-Thaksin Redshirts (formally the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, or UDD) and the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai (PT) party are globally scattered, leaderless, and largely demoralized. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the military junta led by the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) systematically flattened Redshirt activity. As many as 381 UDD and PT leaders were summoned to the NCPO. Some were charged with a variety of offenses while others were simply encouraged to tone down their rhetoric. Nearly all who were detained and released have been forced to sign documents renouncing political involvement or overseas travel without NCPO permission. Those who disobeyed their summons are fugitives who have either fled Thailand or are living in hiding. Prominent Redshirt-sympathizing academics abroad have had their passports revoked. This level of political suppression may compound underlying fractures in Thai society, creating a potentially more incendiary environment when the military does begin to dial back its repressive tactics.

Redshirt political gatherings have faced crackdowns, and a fear of retribution – either via a *lèse-majesté* indictment, a military tribunal for defying NCPO orders, or passport revocation – has silenced the Redshirt rank-and-file. At the same time, a lack of overwhelming brutality in the NCPO's treatment of political dissidents has left the opposition with little clear cause to rally around. Still, it is unlikely that the Redshirts are terminally down and out. As Redshirt leader Veerakan Musikapong stated, "UDD never dies." If martial law is lifted, Redshirt factions are likely to take up opposition to the NCPO. The NCPO will look to prevent this outcome by keeping martial law in place for some time, at least in parts of Thailand. Restrictions may endure until after the election currently planned for next year, which is likely to take place under new regulations that will discourage the dominance of large parties such as Pheu Thai and its forerunners.

On August 10, Yingluck Shinawatra returned from Europe where she was visiting her brother Thaksin. She has announced her intentions to fight dereliction of duty charges related to the rice-pledging scheme. Her return ends speculation, in part encouraged by the NCPO, that Yingluck would join Thaksin in self-imposed exile. Thaksin himself has kept quiet as the NCPO has taken control of Thailand. He has reportedly indicated to supporters that they need to lay low and wait for the NCPO to fail to resolve Thailand's economic problems. When combined with the military's crackdowns, this "yellow-light" from Thaksin in part explains the lack of organized resistance – whether violent or otherwise – to the NCPO. Yingluck's return may briefly reinvigorate the anti-coup movement, but whether she resumes an active political role remains in question.

Sixty of those summoned to the NCPO are estimated to have gone into exile abroad, and face a court-martial upon return. There are indications that they intend to establish official organizations-in-exile to rally the Thai diaspora and pressure Western governments to take punitive actions against the NCPO, with the ultimate goal of returning Redshirt elements to power in Thailand. Charupong Ruangsuwan, a former Interior Minister and leader of PT who fled Thailand after the coup, has established the Organization of Free Thais for Human Rights and Democracy (FT-HD) along with Jakrapob Penkair, a former PT spokesman living in exile in Cambodia since 2010. Sunai Julapongsathorn, a former PT MP in Europe, is also involved in FT-HD. The organization has had little impact on Thailand domestically, but so far, no homegrown alternative has emerged.

Meanwhile, the Pheu Thai party is at a standstill, with its official leadership projecting a submissive, passive stance toward the NCPO and most former MPs maintaining low profiles (an exception is former PT executive Col Apiwan Wiriyachai, who was indicted on lèse-majesté charges and has apparently fled abroad). Charupong's resignation from PT leadership automatically dissolved the party's executive board. The party's acting leader (Viroj Pao-in), secretary-general (Phumtham Vejjayachai), and deputy secretary-general (Chavalit Wichayasut), all of whom were detained and released, have expressed willingness to work with the NCPO and distanced Pheu Thai from FT-HD. However, Pheu Thai has not nominated representatives to join the National Reform Council due to perceived differences of opinion with the NCPO. Leaders of PT-affiliated parties, such as Prasaeng Mongkolsiri and Jittra Cotshadet of the Palang Prachathipatai (Power of Democracy) Party, have faced similar suppression tactics by the NCPO. With PT's leaders immobilized, the party is less likely to receive financial support from Thaksin and his allies; at this stage, the future of Pheu Thai as an organization is very much in doubt.

The UDD, which has served as an umbrella organization for an array of factions affiliated with the Redshirt movement, was hamstrung from the outset by the rapid detention of its national and regional leaders. Without these lynchpins, the usually well-mobilized UDD did not launch an effective immediate response to the coup. A Redshirt leader from the Rak Chiang Mai 51 group, Petcharawat Wattanapongsirikul, has called on other northern Redshirt leaders to suspend their activities to work on reconciliation, while another Redshirt leader from Chiang Mai, Pichit Tamool, has suggested the need for more ground-up decision-making. Some Redshirt leaders, such as Veerakan Musikapong, have attended NCPO events and appear to be in at least sporadic discussions with General Prayuth; two of these leaders, Jatuporn Prompan and Nattawut Saikuar, had their two-year jail sentences for illegal wiretapping suspended.

Some anti-coup mobilizers, particularly those associated with the media, are facing criminal indictments. This group includes Sombat Boonngamanong, leader of the pro-democracy group Red Sunday and originator of the viral anti-coup "three-finger salute," Asia Update anchorman Chainarin Kulab-am, academic and leader of the Nitirat Group Worachet Pakeerat, and Chaturon Chaisaeng, Yingluck's education minister who called for the public to fight for democracy at the Foreign Correspondents Club and was immediately arrested. Chaturon is out on bail, but faces a maximum of fourteen years in prison.

Throughout, the lack of violent resistance to the NCPO has been notable. The military apparently anticipated violence, having confiscated thousands of weapons in July as a "morality cleansing" exercise. However, violence has been confined to the restive South. Militant Redshirt Chatchawan Prapbumrung was arrested in connection with February 2014 grenade attacks on the anti-Thaksin People's Democracy Reform Committee (PDRC) and has been disavowed by the UDD; another militant Redshirt leader, Wuttipong "Ko Tee" Kochthammakul, has fled Thailand since being charged with lèse-majesté. Red Siam leader Surachai "Sae Dan" Danwatananusorn, affiliated with Ko Tee, is also in exile. Without in-country leadership, violent groups remain dormant for now.

Overall, Thailand's Redshirts have suffered an enormous setback. Following an effective crackdown by the military junta, the movement's most powerful leaders have either fled the country, are in hiding, or have been forced to renounce politics. Former PM Yingluck's return to

Thailand may not be enough for Pheu Thai to recover its political ground, though it remains to be seen. Looking ahead to the election scheduled for next year, General Prayuth and the NCPO will be keen to prevent a reincarnation of Pheu Thai from mobilizing mass support yet again. Nevertheless, the social and political energies behind the Redshirt movement have not yet dissipated. Once political and security restrictions are eased, the Redshirts could very well resurface, albeit possibly in an altered form.