Things Fall Apart? Thailand's Post-Colonial Politics

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[***Abstract***]

This paper argues that Thailand's internal colonial model is facing severe challenges: no longer is it so possible to suppress local and regional identities, or to submerge ethnic difference in an all-embracing but potentially suffocating blanket of "Thainess." In recent decades, Thailand's diverse localities have become increasingly assertive. This is most acutely the case in the insurgency-affected southern border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, but also applies in the "red' (pro-Thaksin) dominated North and Northeast. As the old ruling elite faces serious legitimacy challenges, Thailand's emerging post-colonial politics may require a radical rethinking of the relationship between center and periphery.

Keywords: Thailand, post-colonial, center, periphery, insurgency

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold," is a classic quotation from "The Second Coming," by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939); the first part of the quotation was used by Nigerian

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writer Chinua Achebe, for his eponymous novel (Achebe 1962). In the Achebe novel, the phrase "things fall apart" conveys the sense that a bankrupt political order can no longer remain unchallenged; local Nigerian officials sent by the British colonial state to administer communities turn out to be venal and inept. The British themselves do not loom very large in the plot of the novel: although both missionaries and the District Commissioner do make appearances, the day-to-day operations of colonialism do not require any direct European agency. Rather they are subcontracted to African “court messengers”:

> Many of these messengers came from Umuru on the bank of the Great River, where the white men first came many years before and where they had built the centre of their religion and trade and government. These court messengers were greatly hated in Umuofia because they were foreigners and also arrogant and high-handed (Achebe 1962: 156).

Partha Chatterjee refers to a speech made by Indonesia’s President Sukarno at the 1955 Bandung Conference. Sukarno declared:

> I beg of you, do not think of colonialism only in the classic form which we of Indonesia, and our brothers in different parts of Asia and Africa, knew. Colonialism has also its modern dress, in the form of economic control, actual physical control by a small but alien community within a nation. It is a skillful and determined enemy, and appears in many guises. It does not give up its loot easily (Sukarno, quoted in Chatterjee 2011: 235).

In this rather eerily prophetic speech, Sukarno anticipated the post-colonial politics of many soon-to-be-independent states, in which “a small but alien community within a nation” would capture dominant economic and political power in a way that echoed the form and arguably the substance of European colonialism. What precisely Sukarno meant by the rather pejorative term “alien” is a matter for debate; this could refer to an ethnic community (such as “overseas” Chinese in Southeast Asia), or to a community alienated from the masses by questions of class, identity, or cultural attributes, such the English-speaking elite in certain African countries, or a military elite in various Latin American ones.

Siam, of course, was never formally colonized, and numerous objections have been raised to reading Thailand through the lens of post-colonialism (see, for example Jackson 2010: 37–41). Scholars have argued that Thailand might be best viewed in terms of "semi-colonialism" (Jackson 2010: 44-46) or even "crypto-colonialism" (Herzfeld 2002). But these labels are concerned with trying to capture what Harrison and Jackson term "the ambiguous allure of the West" (Harrison and Jackson 2010), Thailand's complex relationship with Europe and America. Much more salient here is the sense in which Siam was self-colonized by a Sukarno-esque "small but alien community within a nation." Naturally, Thai elites–whether royal, military or bureaucratic–would deeply resent being tagged as "alien." These elites imagine themselves as the embodiment of Thai-ness, and construct the alien as the non-Thai–including anyone Burmese, Chinese, Lao, Malay, Mon, Muslim, or Vietnamese. From the late nineteenth century until around the end of the twentieth century, the self-proclaimed Thai core was able to compel and cajole the non-Thai periphery to embrace the values and behaviors associated with Thai-ness. Around the onset of the twentieth century, the rising tide of Thai-ness peaked, and has since started very slowly to recede. In recent years, identities such as Lao and Malay have sought to reclaim their authenticity, placing the Thai center on the defensive for the first time in over a century. Quite suddenly, the ruling elite faced allegations that the periphery is more authentic than the core; in short, that the real "aliens" are the people running the country, not those being sought to control. This article will argue that Thailand's metropolitan elite belongs to a political culture that is profoundly challenged by the country's provinces.

Thailand is currently in the grip of a politics of anxiety. Superficially, Thai anxiety hinges on fears about the future of the monarchy–fears that have hardly yet been assuaged by the momentous passing of King Bhumibol in October 2016, and the subsequent installation of King Vajiralongkorn–not to mention concerns that tensions between those who support and oppose the controversial former premier Thaksin Shinawatra may at some point lead to further bloodshed. Thailand's military seized power in May 2014, promising to "restore national happiness"–but after three years, the nation remains rather unhappy. To state the obvious, all recent Thai coups have ended badly: why should this one be any different?

Yet on another level, these national anxieties are concerned with much larger questions than current political polarizations: can Thailand survive in anything resembling its present form? The borders of the Siam/Thailand have been repeatedly re-drawn since the nineteenth century, and presently include many areas to which present-day Burma, Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia might legitimately lay claim. However, the primary source of anxiety is not a literal loss of territory to a neighboring state. Rather, it is the fear of devolution: abandoning the model of capital-city centralization and mistrust of potentially rebellious regions on which Thailand's internal colonialism has long been based, and moving in the direction of a more diverse, accommodating and pluralistic state. In the same 1955 Bandung address, Sukarno also declared:

> We are living in a world of fear… Perhaps this fear is a greater danger than the danger itself, because it is fear which drives men to act foolishly, to act thoughtlessly, to act dangerously (Sukarno in Chatterjee 2011: 252).

Parallel fears to those which confronted the leaders of newly emerging nations in the 1950's, as they shook off the mantles of European colonialism and emerged into a world bitterly divided by the cold war, are now experienced by Thais who see the beginning of the end of internal colonialism in its current form. For Thai elites –the monarchy, the military, elite bureaucrats and capital controllers –the ultimate fear is that they will wake up to find themselves branded as the other, the aliens, by the mass of the country's population.

An image of a group of Thai soldiers manning a checkpoint offers a metaphor for the country's wider politics. The photograph, taken in 2006 by Ryan Anson in Sungai Padi, Narathiwat, shows five soldiers in camouflage. All the soldiers are looking in the same direction, some sitting, some standing, but none of them alert to dangers from the militants who have killed thousands of people in a virulent insurgency since 2004. Anyone who regularly visits Thailand's Southern border provinces will observe similar checkpoints that do not move in years, manned by personnel whose lack of alertness makes them profoundly vulnerable. The Patani checkpoint is a symbol of a complacency that borders on paralysis. Under the circumstances, it is quite surprising that more Thai police officers and soldiers have not been killed in the Deep South. This image is a metaphor for the ongoing situation in the trouble region, and arguably also a metaphor for Thai politics in a broader context. To avert crisis, calamity and violence, planning and preparedness are extremely important; by engaging in acts of collective denial about impending dangers, those dangers can readily be magnified.

When people are fearful, anxious, and frustrated, they cannot think clearly as to what to do, how to plan, and when to make a move. This is the problem currently facing Thai politics. The politics of anxiety operates at different levels and dimensions. At its core is the anxiety over the new direction for Thailand/Siam as a nation-state. During the nation-building period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bangkok or Central Thailand took possession of a range of territories, including those regions now called the North, Isan, and the South. Many of the native of these lands were not "Thai." They included the Lao in Isan, the higher class Lao (or "Lanna") in the North, and Malays in the South. The effort to build a nation-state during the reign of King Rama V relied on the suppression of these ethnicities in order to create a sense of modern nation-state, purportedly in order to save the state from being colonized by the West. In essence, Bangkok deployed policies of internal colonialism to create the country that eventually became "Thailand" (see Brown 1996: 109-117). The legacy of internal colonialism can still be seen today, in a country where only those in the capital city have the right to elect their own governor, and where all other governors are dispatched to the provinces by the Interior Ministry.

The process of internal colonization not only involved governors being appointed and sent from Bangkok, it also involved creating regional elitism whereby locals were recruited and sent to study in Bangkok, and whose mindsets were reprogrammed to accept the Bangkok norm–an ideological change–and later sent back as appointees to administrative positions. Also created was a core national identity, based on an education system in which Thai was the only acceptable medium of instruction, and the systematic suppression of both secular and religious regional leaders. A trinity of "Nation, Religion, and King' was introduced by Rama V1, one which came hand in hand with constructed notions of "Thai-ness." Making people loyal to these national institutions involved inculcating in them a sense of being Thai and thus suppressing their other, pre-existing local and linguistic identities (for a definitive account see Connors 2007, especially pp. 128–52).

Nevertheless, serious concerns about the sustainability of the internal colonial model are now emerging. The dominance of the center has been shaken, as can be seen from the outbreaks of resistance to Bangkok's power in different parts of the country. Regional populations are less willing to accept Bangkok's longstanding hegemony. Bangkok's colonization may soon begin to unravel, at least in its present form: and that is something Bangkok elites cannot readily accept.

Thai politics have gone through an ongoing cycle of crisis and revitalization in the past 12 years, dating from the time when Sondhi Limthongkul staged his first anti-Thaksin protests in late 2005. Thailand has witnessed the center's various fights to retain control: the first incarnation of the People's Alliance for Democracy [PAD] in early 2006, the crisis over the April 2006 election, the rise of judicialization, the September 2006 coup d'état; the dissolution of Thai Rak Thai and the banning of 111 politicians in 2007; the rise of PAD 2 in 2008, with the ensuing occupations of the Government House and Suwannabhumi Airport, and the demise of the Somchai Wongsawat government; the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit debacle at Pattaya and 2009 red shirt protests (see Montesano 2009); the huge 2010 redshirt protests and their violent suppression by the military (Montesano, Pavin and Aekapol 2012); from 2011 to 2014, the return to power of pro-Thaksin forces, and a would-be prime-minister-in-exile trying to run the country from Dubai; and since the coup of May 2014, the struggles of the National Council for Peace and Order to impose military-style discipline on a restless and divided nation, while continuing to claim that democracy will shortly be restored. During this constant succession of crises and calamities, central power has struggled to hold on.

Thailand's pervasive national anxiety operates on several levels. On one level, national anxiety is a day-to-day problem–how will the latest crisis or cliffhanger be resolved? On another level, national anxiety is linked to concerns and ceaseless whispers about the politics of royal succession. But most deeply of all, national anxiety reflects concerns that Thailand's over-centralized state is unsustainable, that the country as a whole needs to be re-imagined if it is to survive in anything like its present form. While such anxiety is most clearly seen in the restive Deep South, where a militant movement is openly challenging the legitimacy of the Thai state through violence, the problem goes much broader and deeper. The southern conflict is an extreme form of the problem, but the social fabric of the country is badly frayed in numerous respects.

While Tamara Loos rightly warns against glibly equating the historical struggles of Patani with contemporary conflicts in Bangkok, she also notes that "interrogating Siam's imperial past at this moment in time is essential" (Loos 2010: 91)–and any such interrogation requires a discussion of the South. The three southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat have a total population of 1.8 million–marginal in relation to Thailand's total population of around 69 million. Malay Muslims, broadly defined (for a critical discussion of the term, see Montesano and Jory 2008) account for around 80 per cent of the population. Despite their formal status as Thai citizens, many Malay Muslim call themselves "Malay" (*melayu, nayu*) and tend to reserve the term "Thai" for Thai Buddhists. After a longstanding tributary relationship with Ayutthaya and Bangkok, the region formally became part of Siam in 1909, just over a century ago. Since the theft of an arms arsenal from a military camp in January 2004, more than 6000 people have met violent deaths in insurgency-related violence in the Deep South. Former counter-terrorism advisor to President George W. Bush, David Kilcullen, argued that at least between 2004 and 2007, Thailand's Deep South was ranked the world's third most intensive insurgency after Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively (2009: 121). Yet despite the intensity and severity of the violence, it has attracted relatively little international diplomatic or media attention

Attacks have been launched at key localities, including government offices and military targets, but the majority of those killed have actually been civilians. Contrary to what the general Thai public believes, more Muslims have been killed than Buddhists. Some of them were killed by government security forces while some by allies of the insurgency itself. Given how insurgencies operate in other countries such as Algeria, this should not come as a surprise (see Hafez 2003). Militants frequently target those Muslims perceived as collaborating with the Thai state. Typical of the Muslims targeted have been teachers at government schools, elected local politicians such as village headmen or sub-district administrative organization members, and business owners, such as those who supply food to the military or had any ties with the Thai authorities. It boils down to the insurgents' belief that they need to have complete control of their own people before waging war against their enemy. They are convinced that killing Muslims who work for the government will undermine the functioning of the Thai state, which would eventually be doomed to fail.

If Muslims in the region were asked which provinces they disliked the most, Nakhon Sri Thammarat would probably be ranked first, closely followed by Surat Thani, Pattalung, and Songkhla, suggesting a conflict between upper southern and southernmost provinces. When I visited Pattani in January 2009, a number of Malay Muslims expressed a wish that newly-installed prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, a Bangkokian, would take personal control of the southern conflict, rather than delegating it to deputy premier Suthep Theuksuban (from Surat Thani) or deputy interior minister Thavorn Sennium (from Songkhla) (see Srisompob and McCargo 2010: 171–72). Abhisit's decision to delegate authority over the Deep South to Suthep and Thavorn reflected a longstanding pattern, whereby Bangkok uses the predominantly Buddhist upper South to govern the Muslim-majority lower South. Most Malay Muslims would rather have Bangkok send governors from the Northeast or North than from any of the upper southern provinces. Within the internal colonial system, the conflict not only involves a clash between Bangkok and peripheral regions, but also involves "middlemen," such as elites from these power broker intermediary provinces, who are usually regarded by distant regions as their arch enemies, given that they help to perpetuate the system.

In a report written by Chaiwat Satha-Anand for the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC, 2005–06) chaired by Anand Panyarachun, while "reconciliation" and "justice" were repeatedly mentioned, there was no discussion of autonomy or decentralization of power (NRC 2006). Rather, the focus was on depicting Thailand as an already benevolent state which should provide more access to justice. When the people are granted neither control over their own budget nor the right to choose their representatives, what sort of justice was possible? The discourse of "reconciliation," which has recurred at various junctures in Thai public life since 2005, is terribly vague. Analyzed from a political perspective, the Southern conflict is a power struggle, reflecting a lack of legitimacy for the existing system of rule in the region. Malay Muslims have their own cultural, religious, and political traditions, which they would like to see accommodated by the Thai state through a reorganization of power. Unfortunately, the NRC report simplistically viewed the problem in terms of a "good versus evil" dichotomy. According to the report, the Southern violence was caused by a few "bad people" and troublesome government officials (National Reconciliation Commission 2006: 3). Therefore, if bad government officials are moved out of the region and replaced by good officials, relatively small adjustments in policy–such as recognizing the use of Patani Malay as a second language–could produce dramatic results. Fairness would be achieved by listening to all parties involved. But the NRC's approach was extremely idealistic and moralistic. A central focus on good versus bad people would not suffice to address the problem seriously. Consulting all parties, as suggested in the NRC report, would only address superficial worries while leaving deep rooted structural problems–which often went unspoken–untouched (for a critique see McCargo 2010b).

There is a widely held assumption that the Thai state is fundamentally good and governed by virtuous rule since it is governed by virtuous entities: virtuous Bangkok, virtuous political institutions, and the virtuous three pillars of Thai society–Nation, Religion, and King (on virtuous rule see Streckfuss 2010). Therefore, any conduct by the Thai state must be deemed righteous. Problems only arise with a few “bad” individuals who do not follow the prevailing moral codes and thus need to be removed from positions. This view reflects a pervasive kind of pseudo-Buddhist discourse: the concept of good versus evil is deeply ingrained in Thai society. But in reality, “bad” or “thuggish” individuals are only a symptom of Thailand’s political problems, not the core reason why abuses of power occur.

Many Thai people want to believe that the southern conflict is not a political problem. If Thais were willing to acknowledge that some Patani Muslims do not like the Thai state and Bangkok Thais, and nor do they especially venerate the country’s traditional institutions, they would need to acknowledge that Thailand is facing a very serious set of issues. Since they prefer to deny the seriousness of the situation, they instead blame the ongoing violence on drug traffickers, goods smugglers, and common criminals. In reality the core problem is ethnic identity, not religion. This ethnic issue, however, must be examined in its political context. The southern conflict therefore is a political problem arising from the people’s resentment toward Bangkok’s historical colonialism. The locals want the Thai state to grant them more control over their own affairs. However, this is the very last thing that the Thai state wants to do. Rather, the state demands that all Thais–especially those from ethnic and religious minorities–to proclaim their loyalty to national institutions and to participate enthusiastically in government initiatives. Indifference or merely passive support are not enough: active engagement is demanded. It can be concluded that both the Thai state and the Patani Muslims take pride in their history and identity, and neither one of them is willing to lose face.

To do away with the colonial model would require a new approach to restructuring the power system. In recent years, a wide range of figures from across Thai society have proposed or expressed support for different forms of decentralization (McCargo 2010a). These figures range from people associated with the monarchical network, to others firmly at the pro-Thaksin end of the political spectrum. For instance, Dr. Prawase Wasi, former royal physician and prime mover behind the 1997 "people's constitution" has spoken of reviving regionalization across the country, not just in the South. Former Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and current deputy premier Chalerm Yubamrung have at different times called for a special administrative region in the South. Former Democrat Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has referred to a special cultural region. Even the late Samak Sundaravej, another former prime minister, once talked positively about an "Aceh model." These models have not found their way into the mainstream discussions, however. Behind closed doors, those who have studied the conflict seriously understood that it is a political problem in urgent need of a political solution, along the lines of some form of decentralization of power (see McCargo 2010a). An important exception is the work of Dr. Srisompob Jitpiromsri of Prince of Songkhla University in Pattani, who works closely with a network of civil society organizations in the region. He has proposed a series of options for decentralizing power in the South, ranging from a special ministry for the area, to an elected regional assembly and an elected regional governor. But mainstreaming these ideas is very difficult: Thailand's intense political divide makes it almost unthinkable for those who had advocated decentralization of power to the South to sit in a room together, let alone debate their ideas in a public forum.

The southern conflict has helped to exacerbate anxieties among Thai Buddhists both in the South itself, and in other parts of the country. Phrae Sirisakdamkoeng examined online postings on web forums such as that hosted on www.pantip.com, to see how forum members reacted to news about attacks on Buddhist laypeople or monks (Phrae 2009, 2012). She found that online commentators expressed their opinions using profane language, professed hatred towards Muslims, and sometimes peppered their postings with virulent negative statements. The Southern violence was regarded by many forum posters–who were predominantly Buddhists from Bangkok and central Thailand–as a threat to the trinity of Nation, Religion, and King.

The number of monks in Bangkok temples has declined dramatically, while most abbots in temples across the country are elderly, and not well attuned to the changing nature of Thai society. Buddhist fears clearly manifested themselves in 2007 during the new constitution drafting process. At that time, a group of campaigners demanded that the new constitution specify Buddhism as the national religion. This move demonstrates many people's insecurity and anxiety over the country's future, fear of the emergence of Islam, and fear of restiveness in the South. Buddhist groups therefore tried to look for something to hold on to, something which gives them a sense of security. The great majority of Buddhist monks who support the idea of making Buddhism a national religion, believe that to do so would upgrade their status in Thai society. Few Buddhist monks seem able to understand that officially nationalizing their own religious institutions would harden social divisions and militate against the values of tolerance that Buddhism is supposed to embrace. Ironically, the sangha is pervaded by deep internal conflicts between two rival *nikai* (sects), which in many respects parallel the wider political divide between pro and anti-Thaksin forces in Thai society as a whole.

The Thai state tries hard to control and manage Islamic affairs. The establishment of the Sheikh ul-Islam Office (Chulajamontri) has long served the main purpose of controlling the nation's entire Muslim population. Ironically enough, the elections for provincial Islamic committee members themselves are plagued by many conflicts, accusations of outside manipulation and vote-buying, as in ordinary local elections. In recent years, the attempts of the Thai state to micro-manage Islam and subordinate it to the control of the majority have proved largely unsuccessfully, and indeed counter-productive.

In addition to the Southern conflict and to fears about the future of the Buddhist sangha, national anxiety is reflected in several other phenomena, especially the clashes of political ideals and identities that have been reflected in color-coded protest movements since 2005. These are most vividly seen in the redshirt, and yellowshirt movements, though at various times other colors, including pink, blue, and even "multi-colored shirts, have assumed political connotations and salience.

T-shirts proclaiming *lukchin rak chat* [People of Chinese Descent Love the Nation] were briefly popular among the yellow shirts of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) movement during their 2008 occupation of the Government House (see Kasian 2009). The PAD's anti-Thaksin demonstrations in both 2006 and 2008 reflected their shared anxieties over the nation's future in response to the former Prime Minister as a domestic threat to the monarchy; these anxieties were clearly projected onto Thaksin. The yellow shirts challenged Thaksin's claims–as a prominent Sino-Thai who had never sought to conceal or play down his ethnic origins–to speak on behalf of Thailand's *lukchin*. The PAD was a coalition of people from disparate backgrounds: Chamlong Srimuang who was an army officer and Sondhi Limthongkul, a media proprietor, teamed up with a union leader, an NGO activist and a Democrat MP to spearhead the movement. But both Chamlong and Sondhi were also well known as Sino-Thais who had made good by accommodating themselves, especially in later life, with the interests of the royalist Thai elite.

The t-shirts suggested a tussle for the loyalties of Sino-Thai citizens and voters who had been torn in competing directions by the rise of Thaksin. Thaksin had presented himself as the representative of the entrepreneurial Sino-Thai who were frustrated by the inefficiency and ineptitude of the bureaucratic elite, adopting a “can-do" attitude to the country's problems. The PAD asserted that there was no incompatibility between celebrating a Sino-Thai identity and maintaining a high level of loyalty towards the monarchy and the nation. But the very fact that Sino-Thais felt the need to assert such sentiments–and to support moves such as challenges to Cambodian plans to declare the disputed Preah Vihear (Khao Phra Viharn) temple complex a UNESCO World Heritage site–arguably illustrated underlying feelings of insecurity about their identity and the future integrity of the Thai nation (Pavin 2010: 112–13).

Another fascinating feature of the PAD rallies was their demographic base. Typically, political protests are led and dominated by the young, as was the case with the huge student 1973 and 1976 rallies in Bangkok. But on more than one occasion in 2008, I dined out with Thais in their thirties who phoned their parents at around 10 pm to determine what time they would come home from PAD demonstrations. The phenomenon of protesting parents and concerned kids was a curious reversal of the normal pattern of political demonstrations, illustrating the extent to which the older generation was animated by a fear of losing the world and the nation with which they had grown up. The same prospect was viewed by younger people with equanimity or perhaps resignation, testifying to a generational divide that cuts across the color-coded divides of the protest groups. Chatterjee argues that the anti-democratic politics of the PAD, which demonized Thaksin and at various times called for the ouster of elected governments through monarchical or military interventions, are examples of “counter-democratic forms in the domain of civil society of the middle classes” (Chatterjee 2011: 25). For him, they reflect the fact that “the urban middle classes show a marked lack of faith in the efficacy of elections," (2011: 25) a phenomenon also to be found in India and many other postcolonial democracies.

Majority of PAD supporters are beneficiaries of the existing political order. They range from retired and serving government officials, the lower middle class, and the average middle class with more access to privileges. They try to protect their privileges from attacks by new societal forces represented by Thaksin, the redshirts, and those who make up the core of the pro-Thaksin electorate and movement.

The identity of those who make up and support the redshirt movement is crucial to any understanding of Thai national anxieties. Naruemon and McCargo (2011) interviewed and surveyed demonstrators who participated in the redshirt rallies between March and May 2010. They found that the redshirts could best be termed “urbanized villagers” who vote in their home provinces, but often live and work for much of the year in greater Bangkok and other cities. Are these people “poor farmers,” as they have been widely depicted? Yes and no. They may not be financially secure but they often do have some farmland. But their daily lives are not devoted to agriculture: they work largely in the service and industrial sectors. They are not poor in terms of income or assets; however, they are chronically insecure because their major earnings come from informal businesses, such as small-scale vending activities which do not produce steady income. Not only are the redshirts not very radical, they also aspire to have a secure middle class lifestyle. They are eager to swap motorbikes for pickup trucks and to support their children through higher education; accordingly, they reject or ignore the romanticized, royally-inspired discourse of the sufficiency economy, and they do not want to return to live in villages and revert to subsistence agriculture.

Redshirts have a number of key political stances. They regard Thaksin as the champion of their interests; his Thai Rak Thai Party became the first political party explicitly to address their needs. They are frustrated over the issue of "double standards," a catch-all phrase embracing a number of perceived issues of judicial unfairness. These include what they see as kid-gloves treatment for PAD leaders involved in the 2008 airport and Government House occupations, and harsh sentences handed down to redshirt figures convicted on lese majeste and other charges. They want to bring Thaksin back to power through electoral means. They are also opposed to military coups d'état and so-called *amatayatippatai*–rule by bureaucrats or aristocrats. However, their illiberal stances on social issues have been evidenced on several occasions: Chiang Mai redshirts' (by the name *Rakchiangmai 51*) attack on a gay rights parade in February 2009, Ubon Ratchathani redshirts' opposition to the Santi Asoke Buddhist sect, and the redshirts' hostile attitudes towards foreign laborers. The red shirts are characterized by relatively low levels of social tolerance. Within the movement itself, there is a wide range of views toward violence. Some of those interviewed expressed the view that behaving a little thuggishly (*nak leng nit nit*) was good for the movement, an echo of Chatterjee's notions concerning the "criminalization of politics" and the routinization of violence:

> …when a situation has to be demonstrated as intolerable or outrageous, there is frequently a spectacular show of violence, usually involving the destruction of public property or attacks on government institutions or personnel. Violence here is not mindless or blind, but rather, event in its most passionate expressions, calculated to elicit the desired response from the government and the public (Chatterjee 2011: 21)

Incidents such as the May 2010 burning down of Bangkok's Central World Department Store–or the parallel arson attacks on provincial halls in the Northeast–need to be understood in this light. "Political society," in Chatterjee's terms, is much more rough-and-ready than liberal notions of "civil society": political society is concerned with "jobs, housing, living conditions in the slums, prices of essential items of consumption, dealing with the police and the authorities" (2011: 20). Those who gain power within political society have regular recourse to criminality and to the threat of violence.

Yet Bangkok Thais have struggled to emphasize with or even to understand the redshirts, who are typically parodied in the mainstream media as "mobs for hire," with limited education, who are ignorant about politics, and are prone to mindless vandalism. In fact, the view that the redshirts were paid protesters is simplistic, partly because providing food and covering transport costs are a widespread practice for large mass rallies of all kinds–including those of the PAD. While some protestors undoubtedly did receive payments to join redshirt demonstrations, those payments did not define the nature of their participation. Instead of a nuanced understanding of the redshirt protestors, they have come to represent for many Bangkok Thais "the people as a figure of fear"–the topic on which Michael Connors originally planned to write his PhD thesis (Connors 2007: x).

Other authors have attempted to describe the kinds of villagers who support the redshirts using different terms. In a recent book which draws heavily on Chatterjee's notions of political society ("the informal and unorthodox connections that people create with sources of power," 2012: 24), Andrew Walker has described his subjects as "middle income peasants" (2012: 6–10), a rather tricky oxymoron: critics might argue that once you are middle income, you are no longer a peasant.[1] Charles Keyes, on the other hand, calls the same group "cosmopolitan villagers" (Keyes 2012: 348-53). The problem with this reading is that such villagers are not sophisticated enough to be regarded as "cosmopolitan." Cosmopolitans are able to move between different social settings with an easy and self-confident fluency; they are not people bused off to work on Singaporean building sites. The term "urbanized villagers" has been coined in a deliberate attempt to challenge the urban vs. rural dichotomy. The theory of a dual system of democracy as proposed in the "Tale of two democracies" (*songnakara prachatippatai)* by Anek Laothammathat, based on a clear division between urban and rural is no longer applicable, if indeed it ever was (Anek 1996). Since as long ago as the 1950's, Thailand has been experiencing "countrified cities," (for a classic discussion see Textor 1961), while in recent decades the urbanization of rural areas, illustrated by such trends as the booming numbers of municipalities, has grown apace. These trends have been examined in a number of recent studies (see Anek 2010, Apichat et al 2010).

Six million people are registered residents of Bangkok, but twice as many people actually live there. The other six million remain legal residents of their home provinces, the majority in Isan. When a large proportion of those six million people return "home" during the annual Songkran festival, Bangkokians often struggle to find food on the streets. These six million people have "dual identities"–they are neither exclusively urban nor rural; they are simultaneously both. They are urbanized villagers, who are striving to become even more urban (Naruemon and McCargo 2011: 1000–09). As modernity has crept into rural areas, it has become harder than ever to tell where the city limit is; the divisions between a municipality and the adjoining areas of the associated town district (*amphoe muang*) are no longer easily visible. Many sub-district administration organizations yearn to be upgraded into municipalities. The collapse of the traditional urban-rural demarcation line is a key to the reconfiguration of Thailand's identity. If its colonial politics has always been about the city's (Bangkok's) colonization of the rest of the country, now the reverse is occurring. People originally from rural areas are keeping Bangkok functioning. Without these so-called rural people, the Thai capital would be paralyzed. Yet the elite see these groups as a threat to the future of Thailand, rather than an asset – much as secular urban-dwellers in Ankara and Istanbul view the electoral empowerment of those from the villages (McCargo and Zarakol 2012: 74–75).

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[1] A similar criticism is made by Chris Baker in his review "Force of the Farmers," *Bangkok Post,* March 9, 2012.

Electoral power rests in the hands of urbanized villagers who account for approximately 20 million out of the entire Thai population; they are the largest group of voters, and the decisive group in determining electoral outcomes, should they choose to vote largely as a bloc–as has happened in recent general elections. A candidate cannot become prime minister without their votes. Thus, urbanized villagers are the most politically significant group in Thailand, although the Thai elite has not accepted or recognized their electoral strength. Instead, Bangkok's ruling class wants urbanized villagers to reside–at least formally and psychologically–in rural areas, to behave themselves and to refrain from causing any trouble. In reality, urbanized villagers increasingly do not remain in rural areas, refuse to be subservient, and do indeed regularly cause trouble. Their capacity to mobilize through what both Chatterjee and Walker term "political society" (Chatterjee 2011: 25) is formidable. Under these circumstances, the center simply cannot hold. Things are falling apart.

When I visited a self-proclaimed redshirt village in Mukdahan in January 2012, I was surprised to see a huge red banner on display along the main road, declaring this to be a “Pro-Democracy Village,” and stating that the banner had been produced under the sponsorship of a local Pheu Thai MP. The MP's name had later been painted over, but was still legible. Red flags fluttered alongside the banner and along the roads in the community. When I held a meeting with the villagers, they claimed that more than 80 per cent of them were redshirts. What did the district officer think about the big banner, I asked them? He had sent a letter several months ago to the village headman, asking him to remove the banner. The headman, a redshirt sympathizer, passed the letter to those who had erected the banner, who threw it away. The district officer had not made a personal visit to ask that the banner be removed, let alone sent his men along to take it down. In previous decades, rural villagers in the Northeast would not have dared to make such a bold challenge to the authority of the Interior Ministry and the Thai state. Here was a palpable symbol of the withering of state power, of changes to the Thai power structure in which citizens no longer feared government authorities. Instead, the opposite is true. State authorities are scared of citizens and dared not issue them orders that might provoke them.

Similar villages have been mushrooming throughout Isan and the North. On March 25, 2012, Jun district in Phayao declared itself Thailand's first redshirt district (*Matichon* 2012). The claiming of territorial jurisdiction by a political movement is in many ways more threatening than calling a demonstration or even seizing a public building. Are these redshirt villages still part of Thailand? Of course they still are. These villages want to challenge Bangkok-based centralized power and to claim their space in the Thai political landscape. Some redshirt commentators declared online that if there was another military coup, the redshirt zones would proclaim their independence from Thailand. In a similar vein, some conservative Bangkok Thais have suggested to me that Thailand should simply say goodbye to the North and Northeast if the residents continue to cause problems for the country as a whole. They argued that the two regions would not be able to support themselves because they are landlocked.[2]

The 2011 election results showed the continuing political divisions of the country, where Pheu Thai dominated the North and Northeast, and the Democrat Party dominated the South: more evidence for the unraveling of centralized power and its internal colonial instability. The Democrat Party has not convincingly won a general election since 1986, although it was able to scrape together a government in September 1992, and then to secure office by non-electoral means in 1997 and late 2008. Pro-Thaksin parties have decisively won five elections in a row (in 2001, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2011), demonstrating a deep divide between the old power elite and the majority of voters, one that shows no sign of declining.

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[2] Those making such arguments appeared unfamiliar with countries such as Switzerland.

How much longer can the myths of Thai-ness hold different parts of the nation together? Not only is it becoming more and more difficult to define "Thai-ness," the notion itself has also become an issue. David Streckfuss has argued that twentieth century views of Thai history are no longer sustainable: "A centre based history cannot ultimately make sense without its periphery. Rather than continuing with a century of the centre occasionally looking out, the time has come for a history of the periphery looking in" (Streckfuss 2012: 324). The potential for a "tearing apart of Thailand" has reached far beyond the Deep South. Internal colonialism no longer works, and Thailand is entering a new post-colonial order. The current problems facing the country can no longer be reduced simply to a struggle between two competing power networks–the royalist and pro-Thaksin groups (McCargo 2005).

Could the Southern conflict possibly lead to the formation of a new nation? Neither the United Nations nor the world community more generally would want to see the birth of a small, new state squeezed between Malaysia and Thailand. It is unlikely that the idea of creating a new nation will gain international support. Similarly, how many people would predict a new country being formed in Thailand's current North or Isan? This seems even less likely. The key question is not whether there will be a new country called Patani or Isan in the near future, but what political alternatives Thailand faces today. The internal colonial style of administration in which governing authorities are sent from the center to rule the provinces no longer works in the globalized twenty-first century. The answer cannot be, as the post-2014 military junta has done, to suspend local elections across the board. A new system is urgently needed which addresses political needs of the people in Bangkok, central Thailand, and all of the country's regions. The precise nature of any such new system would need to be debated and agreed by Thais themselves, but some form of substantive decentralization is likely to be at its core.

What might appear to be separate phenomena–the Southern conflict, the PAD, the Preah Vihear dispute, the redshirt movement, the polarized nature of electoral politics–are all part of a broader legitimacy crisis in Thailand that is fueled by, but is not synonymous with, growing national anxieties over the country's future in the new reign. The center can no longer hold, at least not in the same ways Bangkok did during the long twentieth century. The inexorable rise of political society seen in the growing confidence of urbanized villagers has undermined the claims of the Thai elite to their place at the core. Through their fear of the people and their anxiety about the outcomes of electoral politics, the Thai elite are becoming alienated from the rest of Thailand; indeed, Bangkokians risk becoming aliens in their own land, as the values and beliefs cherished by the Thai elite are progressively undermined by seismic social and political change.

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