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Thailand's Andrew Jackson Moment

By Stanley A. Weiss

BANGKOK-It was the rowdiest presidential inauguration in American history. On March 4, 1829, thousands of Americans flooded into the White House to revel in the election of Andrew Jackson as the seventh President of the United States. To them, Jackson was one of their own: the orphan son of backwoods farmers, a rough, frontier populist who thumbed his nose at the country's ruling elite and threw open the doors of democracy to a broader cross-section of the country than ever before.

The chaos was not universally appreciated. One observer compared the scene to "the inundation of the northern barbarians into Rome." A Supreme Court justice took one look at the shambles left behind and darkly declared it the beginning of "the reign of KING MOB."

I can't help but think about Jackson here in Bangkok, where pro-government "red shirts" and anti-government "yellow shirts" are clashing, reenacting their own version of "King Mob." After all, it was Jackson who sent an envoy to the court of Siam in 1832, establishing the first diplomatic link between the U.S. and what is now Thailand. Today, Thailand is undergoing its own Jacksonian moment in the form of one man: exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Like Jackson, Thaksin rapidly rose to power by casting himself as a "backwoods kid" championing the rural poor. Though critics are quick to point out that Thaksin's family is one of the richest in the northern city of Chiang Mai, Thaksin touts his "rags-to-riches" rise: a police lieutenant colonel who failed at various business ventures before building (with the help of sweetheart government contracts) a telecom empire and then riding a populist wave into the prime minister's office in 2001.

Since 2006, when the military overthrew Thaksin, a bitter power struggle has divided Thai politics along geographic and class lines. The red shirts-mainly the rural poor from Thaksin's underdeveloped northern home-support Thaksin and his "power to the people" policies. Meanwhile, the royalist yellow shirts-made up of the Bangkok elite, members of the military and middle class professionals-hail from the south, despise Thaksin's excesses, and prefer rule by the privileged.

Tensions died down somewhat with the 2011 election of Thaksin's younger sister Yingluck, but flared up again when Yingluck attempted to ram an amnesty bill through Parliament permitting Thaksin to return to Thailand from his exile abroad. The minority Democrat Party-which hasn't won an election in 20 years-resigned in protest, demanding that an appointed "people's council" reform an electoral process

they believe has been hijacked by the Shinawatras. Yingluck called new elections for February 2, which the Democrats boycotted, leaving the government mired in uncertainty.

It may seem like a lot of fuss over one man, but Thaksin is positively toxic to the Thai establishment.

While millions see Thaksin's meteoric rise as an inspiring story of self-made wealth, to Bangkok's ruling elite-many of them close to the ailing, 86-year-old King Bhumibol and the royal family-Thaksin is every bit the Jackson-like northern barbarian invading Bangkok. He is an unworthy usurper, a rich rustic who clawed his way to the top, bought his fellow yokels' votes with handouts, and used his political power to amass still greater wealth while squeezing the rest of the country.

As the political analyst and longtime Thailand resident Jeffrey Race explains, "In keeping with the [Buddhist teachings of the] Middle Way, political figures have been moderately corrupt but with sensitivity to the transience of life. No one until recently attempted to dominate either the state or the economy." Thaksin, Race notes, has amassed billions by consistently choosing "My Way" over the modest "Middle Way."

"This is not elite against poor," the strategic consultant Joe Horn says to me. "This is elite revolting against uber-elite. It all had to do with Thaksin's monopolizing power."

But the elite's problem with Thaksin is not merely personal-it's political.

For a country in which the rural poor had been marginalized for seven decades, Thaksin built his political career promising to narrow the gulf between the rich and the rest. Under Thaksin, Thailand witnessed the establishment of rural credit funds, universal healthcare, and education reforms. In four years, "Thaksinomics" cut poverty in half. While noting that many of Thaksin's policies were "fountains of self-serving corruption," Race acknowledges that the exiled prime minister was "the only recent political force to push policies bringing substantial and genuine uplift to rural areas."

Predictably, many rich and even middle class Thai resent this focus on the poor in the provinces, whom they dismiss as uneducated "buffaloes" undeserving of an equal stake in Thai society. Many of the recent protests, for instance, have centered on a rice subsidization scheme that Yingluck implemented-popular with rural farmers but not with the Bangkok elite, who gripe that it has cost taxpayers \$21 billion, helping to fuel middle class rage.

As a financier friend tells me, they say, "I pay my taxes, but what do I get? Why does all the money go elsewhere?" People in Bangkok are upset because even maids or waiters have the same right as they do to vote." In their eyes, the policies Thaksin set in motion are less about bettering the whole country than bribing a part of it. And in a nation where the rural poor make up more than half of the electorate, those "bribes" will keep the yellow shirts out of power indefinitely. "The opposition knows they can't beat Thaksin in elections," Horn says, so they've taken to the

streets, threatening the country's fragile democratic institutions.

What yellow shirts fear more than anything is that if he returns, Thaksin—who is known to be close to the heir apparent to the throne, Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn—will win Maha's ear and splinter the decades-long alliance between the Bangkok elite and the crown.

This is not the way democracy should work. Ultimately, if Thailand is to experience real progress, both sides must recognize that politics isn't a zero-sum game. As Thai political scientist Thitinan Pongsudhirak writes, "Electoral winners cannot do as they please after scoring at the ballot box; they must accommodate the interests of the losers more openly and more systematically."

In other words, Thaksin and his party may be popular enough to continue winning elections, but that doesn't mean they should ride roughshod over everyone else once in power. And instead of crippling democratic institutions through massive boycotts and protests, what if the yellow shirts revived their electoral prospects by proposing their own policies to improve the lives of the average Thai citizen? As Horn puts it, "Just because the Democrats have been unable to beat Thaksin does not mean democracy can't."

Andrew Jackson—the man who ordered the genocidal Trail of Tears that decimated America's native tribes—was certainly no saint. Neither is Thaksin, with a long list of graft and repression to his name. But Jackson's genius was unleashing the raw energies of mass participatory democracy, and helping to shape a two-party system better representing rich and poor alike.

"Thaksin's problem is he read too many books on American democracy," a senior Thai political advisor tells me. "For Thailand's sake, hopefully the lessons of Jacksonian America haven't been lost on him."

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