Lars Peter Schmidt: The Background and Consequences of the Military Putsch in Thailand

On September 19, 2006, the military in Thailand staged a putsch, ousting the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Military putsches are something of a tradition in Thailand's recent history, for no less than twenty of these coups took place since 1932. But whereas the last time, in 1991, the military had their own axe to grind, their purpose this time was to avert the threat to royalist politics posed by Thaksin's style of leadership. It pays to take a look at the past.

Coming into force on October 11, 1997, the new democratic constitution incorporated a reform of the electoral system that made voting mandatory, codified the process of decentralisation, guaranteed the implementation of human rights, and established a variety of independent organs to secure the separation of powers. Subsequent developments resulted in a functional democratic system that was regarded as exemplary throughout Southeast Asia. Yet the new constitution was not free from weaknesses. One of the charges levelled against it was that, although it made a strong government possible, it also paved the way for a tyranny of the majority and a parliamentary dictatorship.

Despite a wealth of political disputes, the Thaksin government was successful. In the last few years, the growth rate of the Thai economy sometimes reached six percent. Projects to develop small and medium-sized enterprises were promoted and social-security systems introduced. The government tackled the drug problem as well as the suppression of corruption. Even so, people were vexed with Thaksin's style: He was charged not only with corruption but also with infringing human rights and abusing his power.

No more than a few months after his victory in the elections of February 2005, the masses began to protest against the Prime Minister, demanding his resignation. When the extra-parliamentary opposition movement led by the media grandee Sondhi Limthongkul was founded, protests grew sharper, escalating further when it came out early in 2006 that Thaksin's family had sold their shares in the Shin Corp plc to Singapore for 1.6 billion Euros without paying taxes.

To clear the air, early elections were scheduled. While Thaksin's own party, Thai Rak Thai, emerged victorious, it found itself alone in parliament afterwards, the opposition having boycotted the elections. Thaksin subsequently resigned, and the elections were declared invalid in April 2006. Until the putsch came, Thaksin led a caretaker government while the crisis culminated.

Both the head of government and his critics acted on the public stage throughout. To put the putsch in its proper perspective, however, we need to take a look at another factor which now is and ever was hidden from the public gaze: In Thailand, royalist circles as well as the royal house itself have been constantly present on the political scene for a long time. Their influence on society is extensive, and it is to this influence that we must look for the real reason for this putsch.

In point of fact, it was the discrepancy between monarchy and democracy in Thailand that triggered the coup. Thailand's traditional aristocratic elites retain a vital interest in democratisation only to the extent the process remains under their control. Virtually all

constitutions promulgated so far offered protection to the constituent entities of the monarchy, the royal house and the Privy Council. Especially the latter, a powerful body of advisers to the King, has so far succeeded in maintaining the intransparency that has always surrounded it. This being so, the royal house of Thailand remained a second centre of power next to parliament even in recent years, all the more so because King Bhumipol Adulyadei, who has been reigning for decades, was able to establish himself as a godlike authority by acting as a wise moderator in times of crisis.

While Thaksin was in office, relations between the government and the royal family deteriorated gradually, mainly because the head of government's confidence in his own power was seen by the royalists as a threat. In such an atmosphere, the danger of a putsch was anything but negligible, although it did come as a surprise when it finally happened.

The key figure among the putschists was General Prem Tinsulanondo, a close adviser to the King who, as president of the Privy Council, acts as a link between the latter and the military. His relations with the Prime Minister broke down a long time ago, Thaksin being regarded by the royalists as anything but an aristocrat.

Thailand's monarchy is in a state of upheaval. Although old and severely ill, the King is still regarded as a moral authority. And although there is no question about his successor, his demise would leave a power vacuum behind, with unimaginable consequences. Against this background, the monarchists saw Thaksin with his powerful position as Prime Minster as an incalculable risk that had to be neutralised – and not by elections, either.

Even after his overthrow, nothing illegal could be proven against Thaksin although his policies may well have been doubtful. It is certain that there was no national emergency in September 2006 that might have justified military action. This is a fact that cannot be explained away by the putschists who, by the way, were anything but united behind the operation. While many younger members of the military leadership did feel attached to Thaksin, their commitment proved futile after the King had endorsed the putsch for all to see.

The consequences of the putsch are profound for Thailand: The process of democratisation has ground to a halt and the constitution has been suspended. Parliament, the Senate, the Cabinet, and the Constitutional Court have been dissolved. The country is under martial law, and there is no end in sight, especially as the press – censored by the putschists – has let it be known meanwhile that 83 percent of the Thai population approve the steps taken by the military.

Shortly after the putsch, the military adopted an interim constitution. At the same time, they established the Council of National Security as the true centre of power behind the caretaker government which will be headed by General Surayud Chulanont, a former member of the Privy Council. The interim parliament, which has also been established in the meanwhile, is composed of 83 members of the military, numerous civil servants, and 43 representatives of the private economy.

Similarly, preparations are under way for a constituent assembly, whose main concern will be to change the law relating to the election of the two Houses. Instead of being elected directly by the people, some members of the Senate will be appointed in the future, while others will be elected. Another item to be abolished is the present majority voting system. In view of all this, it appears highly unlikely that a strong, independent government can be formed.

In economic policy, too, changes are becoming apparent, now that the boards of large state-

owned enterprises have been staffed with members of the military who are close to the putschists. Foreign investors now feel insecure and worried about the legal status of their companies.

There is indeed some justification to feel concerned about Thailand's immediate future. On the one hand, there is the danger that the country's return to democracy and the rule of law might turn out to be difficult. On the other hand, a power vacuum might threaten if the succession to the throne is put on the line in the course of the current transformation process. Furthermore, the status of Thailand as a business location in Southeast Asia might be endangered by the meddling of the powers-that-be in Bangkok. And finally, the country's domestic security might come under threat if violence in the south should escalate – a scenario which does not seem all that absurd after the military putsch.