

Rural-Urban Networks and Transitions in Asia: Re-spatializing Cultural and Political Imaginaries

*Jointly organised by the Asian Urbanisms Cluster of the Asia Research Institute
and the Cities Cluster of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,
National University of Singapore*

25 – 26 February 2010

Redrawing the Thai Political Space: The Red Shirted Movement

Chairat Charoensin-o-larn

Thammasat University, Thailand

ccn@tu.ac.th



Not to be quoted without permission from the author

ABSTRACT

A new group that has evolved from the supporters of Thaksin Shinawatra following the coup of September 19, 2006, the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (NUDD) Red in the Land, better known as the Red Shirts, has gradually transformed itself into a political force in defense of electoral democracy in Thailand. Consisting largely of people from the countryside, this “grassroots” constituency benefited greatly from Thaksin’s populist policies and programmes. However, they felt cheated when their elected government was forced out of power by the coup and later attacked by protests from the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and by an increasingly activist judiciary. Thaksin’s populism coupled with NUDD’s rallies and campaigns have raised the political consciousness of the grassroots, providing them with a new political subjectivation and hence making them a new political subject in Thai politics. By calling for equality and justice for all Thais, the Red Shirts have entered into forbidden territory hitherto reserved solely for urban Thai elites. The Red Shirts are in the process of redrawing the Thai political space to make themselves fully counted and thus heard.

INTRODUCTION

On December 10, 2009, the anti-government “National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (NUDD) Red in the Land”ⁱ (“*Naewruam prachatipatai tortan phadetkarn haengchart daeng thang phan din*” or, in short, *Nor por chor*), better known as the Red Shirts, launched a massive rally and demonstration at the Democracy Monument in the heart of Bangkok. December 10 is Constitution Day. The demonstrators called for a reinstatement of the 1997 constitution, which had been abolished by the coup of September 19, 2006.ⁱⁱ This demonstration is politically significant in at least two ways. First, the timing was quite sensitive because it coincided with the occasion on which the Thai people celebrate His Majesty the King’s birthday, which is on December 5. The Abhisit government seemed to know full well about this event for it had extended the celebration period from the initially announced dates of December 3-7 to December 13 in order to deter the Red Shirts’ planned gathering. The government had hoped that the extension would have persuaded the Red Shirts either to cancel their plans due to public pressure or to organize a smaller protest. It was hoped that if the Red Shirts actually held their planned demonstration, this would have raised questions about their loyalty to the King. The demonstration would then be regarded as an attempt to destroy the atmosphere of peace and joy among the Thai people on this auspicious occasion. However, the Red Shirts went ahead with their plan, and the number of people who participated in the protest was impressive.

Did this mean that, for the members of the Red Shirts, an anti-government political campaign took precedence over showing loyalty to the King? Or did it mean that Thailand’s rural masses, who are the main component of the Red Shirts, are now capable of distinguishing between reality and illusion. In reality, they are the uncoun^{ted}ⁱⁱⁱ of Thai society and politics while the illusion is that this group is one among equals as Thai citizens. Was their determination to participate in the Red Shirt rally an attempt to make them count politically? Finally, fugitive ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by the coup of September 2006, would probably have wanted to test the strength of the movement as well as his popularity prior to waging any “final battle” against the Abhisit government. The size of the protesters would at least tell him how far he could go in his pursuit of power against the Thai establishment. Thaksin’s first attempt to stage a nationwide uprising against the government in April 2009 ended in total disarray.

Second, at the December 10 rally, the Red Shirts had made explicit their determination to overthrow the Abhisit government by staging a series of massive rallies starting in January 2010.^{iv} They claimed to bring more than one million protesters nationwide to dislodge the government in Bangkok. The first rally of the new round of demonstrations to unseat the Abhisit government began on January 11 as a protest against what was perceived to be concrete evidence of the practice of a “double standard” of justice in Thai

society. The site of the protest demonstration was Khao Yai Thieng Mountain in Nakhon Ratchasima's Si Khiew district, where Privy Councillor and ex-premier General Surayud Chulanont owned a plot of land and a house on the top of the mountain, which was alleged to encroach on a forest reserve. The Red Shirts accused the Abhisit government of discrimination, for, while many villagers were being sued and forced off the land, the public prosecutors had decided to drop the forest-reserve encroachment charge against General Surayud on the grounds that the ex-premier had had "no intention to break the law."^v

As a result of Red Shirt pressure, General Surayud was ordered by the Royal Forest Department to return the controversial plot of land to the state.^{vi} As a privy councillor and ex-premier, the Khao Yai Thieng incident was an embarrassment not only to General Surayud but to the entire Thai establishment, who were always preaching their moral superiority over the Thai public. General Prem Tinsulanond, a Privy Council president and former prime minister once inappropriately compared General Surayud, when the latter was appointed prime minister by the September 2006 coup leaders, to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in terms of capability and integrity. Similarly, the Red Shirts held a rally at Khao Soi Dao in Chantaburi on January 23. The idea on that occasion was to expose another instance of encroaching on a wildlife sanctuary and forest reserve by a business group closely associated with General Prem. The controversial area of 400 rai on Khao Soi Dao is part of the 4,000 rai golf course named Soi Dao Highland Golf Club and Resort.^{vii} The business group in question consisted of influential executives of the Bangkok Bank, for whom Prem served as a chief advisor. Prem presided over the opening ceremony of the golf course a decade ago. According to the Red Shirt protesters, the Khao Soi Dao case serves as another specific example of a double standard in law enforcement against the wealthy parties who were encroaching on forest-reserve land. The protestors demanded that both Prem and Surayud resign from their Privy Council posts.^{viii}

In addition to the charge of keeping a double standard, the Red Shirts saw General Surayud as a nominee of its archrival Privy Council president General Prem Tinsulanond. General Prem himself was considered by the Red Shirts the *de facto* leader of the *ammart* (aristocrats). He has meddled in Thai politics and has his hands in military reshuffling and even in several coups, which are not the business of the Privy Council president. The two men were seen by the Red Shirts as the real masterminds of the 2006 coup that toppled their beloved leader Thaksin Shinawatra from power.^{ix} Before the September 19, 2006 coup, this kind of criticism against the King's men was not only unthinkable but also forbidden. Prem himself has long been the untouchable in Thai society and politics. Any criticism leveled against him had been met with a fierce response from the Thai army. When the late ex-premier Samak Sundaravej criticized Prem in early February 2006 for tacitly siding with Thaksin's main opponent, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), by improperly lecturing on His Majesty the King's fourteen principles for good governance, his television program, "This Morning in Thailand," was immediately suspended. Samak's comment was seen by the Thai armed forces as an insult to Prem. However, during the 2009 Songkarn rally, the Red Shirts publicly established their front line and hence a new political space by issuing relentless attacks on Prem. Even Prem's alleged homosexuality had been derided openly at Red Shirt rallies without retaliation from the armed forces. What has brought the King's men under such severe criticism? By criticizing Prem, who is the King's chief advisor, the Red Shirts ran the risk of being seen as disloyal to the King. As the army chief General Anupong Paochinda once said: "Any Thai person who reveres the monarch should not criticize privy councillors because they were advisors and worked for His Majesty the King."^x

Between March 26 and April 14, 2009 the Red Shirts staged massive rallies in front of Government House in order to bring down the Abhisit government.^{xi} The climax occurred on April 8 when Red Shirt leaders claimed that the number of protesters amounted to over one hundred thousand. The Red Shirts then announced their ultimatum that both Prem and the government resign. When these demands were not met, the demonstration turned violent. On April 9, Red Shirt taxi drivers used their cars to block main roads and the Victory Monument, bringing the city to a standstill. A number of protesters then went to Pattaya to

disrupt the ASEAN summit on April 11.^{xii} There was rioting in Bangkok during April 12 and 13 when protesters attacked the prime minister's car at the Ministry of the Interior, torched public buses, and threatened to set a gas truck on fire.^{xiii} The government responded by invoking an emergency decree,^{xiv} and the military marched out to suppress the protesters, with the result that two persons died and one hundred and twenty three were injured. The event was dubbed the Songkarn riot because it took place during the Songkarn holidays. Military suppression of the Red Shirts only served to intensify the standoff in an already divided nation.

Prior to the Songkarn riot, the Red Shirts had held gatherings in several provinces to mobilize protesters. After the riot, the Red Shirt leaders learned the hard lesson that a reliance on agents to bring protesters to a rally site in the same way that politicians rely on canvassers to acquire votes can have disastrous results. Thus, they had to be well prepared for the new round of battle against the Abhisit government by systematically organizing the rural masses nationwide by themselves. While the Red Shirt leaders in Bangkok busily set up their political operation school (*rongrean patibutkarn karnmuaeng nor por chor*), Red Shirts throughout the country started building their networks. The political operation school is a kind of workshop in which Red Shirts are brought together to receive political training from the leaders. Once they receive instruction, they return to their local areas and start training other Red Shirts. Thus, Red Shirts nationwide form their own groups, then invite the leaders or their representatives in Bangkok to give them training. The network is growing so rapidly that the leaders in Bangkok are unable to accommodate local demands. Their objective is to turn Thailand into a "sea of red" (*daeng thang phan din*).

Moreover, a series of protests and demonstrations had been held extensively in Bangkok and the countryside as rehearsals for the real battle to come. On July 26, a gathering of the Red Shirts in different locations nationwide was organized in celebration of Thaksin's sixtieth birthday. On July 31, a massive rally was held at Sanam Laung to deliver the signed petitions of people nationwide in support of the petition seeking a royal pardon for Thaksin. On August 17, a massive rally was held in Bangkok to coincide with the submission of 3.5 million signatures of Red Shirts throughout the country, contained in 380 boxes, to His Majesty the King asking his pardon for Thaksin. On September 19, a large rally was organized in memory of the third anniversary of the September 2006 coup. Then came the December 10 rally on the Constitution Day mentioned above.

Before the "final battle" against the Abhisit government, which was scheduled to take place in late February 2010,^{xv} at the same time that the Supreme Court's Criminal Division for Political Office Holders was to read its verdict in the case involving Thaksin's 76 billion baht asset seizure, a series of mass rallies and demonstrations throughout the country was organized. In other words, since the Constitution Day rally, the Red Shirts intensified their mobilization activities in almost corner of the country to the point where their claim to be able to bring in one million Red Shirt protesters to Bangkok to oust the Abhisit government could not be underestimated. The whole idea behind all these multi-faceted gatherings was to raise the political consciousness of the protesters by acquainting them with the issues of injustice and "double standards" by means of "speaking truth" to the *ammart*. In January alone, the Red Shirts mounted at least eight rallies in Bangkok and the provinces.^{xvi} The most notable but controversial one was on January 18 in Bangkok where a rally took place outside the office of the Privy Council, and an open letter was submitted calling for the council to show their colors over the Khao Yai Thieng and Khao Soi Dao cases.^{xvii} This was an unprecedented rally at the doorstep of the office of His Majesty the King's top advisers.

More significantly, the coming together of Red Shirts at the provincial and district levels intensified after the Constitution Day rally. Almost daily since January, there were all kinds of activities conducted by provincial Red Shirts in order to bring people together and provide NUDD leaders and speakers with an opportunity to bring them up to date on the current political situation. These activities ranged from the

countdown on New Year's Eve in many provinces to the selling of tickets for Chinese dinners and concerts, the setting up of the NUDD political operation school, and ordinary gatherings. All of these events were done for the sole purpose of getting people to hear Red Shirt leaders or their representatives talk in public meetings about their struggle against the aristocracy. They have to pay and they are willing to pay to listen to these leaders talk about politics and their struggle against the *ammart* in the same way that businessmen or academics pay for attending a seminar or workshop. And the people listen attentively.^{xviii} Those who cannot attend, watch the People channel, the MV5 channel, or listen to the community radio, and read a variety of Red Shirt published media such as *Voice of Thaksin*, *Truth Today Magazine*, *Thai Red News*, and *Red Flags*. The Red Shirts have to pay their own expense to attend the rallies either in Bangkok or in the nearby provinces. Once at the rally sites, they have to buy everything, starting with food, water, T-shirts, jackets, and souvenirs. This is totally different from attendance at the PAD rallies, where food and water are not only free but in plentiful supply. The Red Shirt phenomenon is both astonishing and unprecedented in Thai politics.

At this moment, Thailand's Red Shirts have come close to becoming what Hardt and Negri call "multitude."^{xix} They have built their own strong network and have come to possess both "tendency/commitment" and "quality" in the Benjaminian sense.^{xx} The uncouneted of Thailand have begun to recoup their lost political space. They are no longer the politically passive people described by Hindley four decades ago.^{xxi} To paraphrase Rancière, the part that have no part in Thailand have begun to take part, attempting to turn their noise into speech.

WHO ARE THE RED SHIRTS AND HOW DO THEY RISE?

Who are these Red Shirt people? How can they come together in such large numbers and so many locations in a way that is unprecedented in the history of modern Thai politics? Perhaps they are the first real "mass" movement that Thailand has ever produced. The prolonged protests and demonstrations of the Red Shirts have exceeded all expectations and defied all the expressions of contempt against them by the Thai urban elites. Generally speaking, the Red Shirt movement originates from the assemblage of three main political groups:^{xxii} (1) the opponents of the September 19, 2006 coup, including the Saturday Group against Dictatorship, the 19 September Network against the Coup, the White Dove (*nogpirap khao*) and June 24th groups;^{xxiii} (2) a group of young democracy-lovers who could not tolerate injustice that they were seeing in Thai society; and (3) the supporters of ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra. Overseas Red Shirts in many parts of the world can also be classified within these three categories. Together they formed an anti-coup and anti-dictatorship front in 2007 under the banner of the "United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship" (UDD) (or *Naewruam prachatiptai khabrai phadetkarn* or *nor por kor*). Their goal was to oust the coup-installed Prime Minister General Surayud Chulanont, a former army chief and privy councillor. After their campaign against the draft charter in the national referendum in August 2007, the UDD changed its name to the "National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (NUDD) Red in the Land" (*nor por chor*). The idea was to broaden their support base among the grassroots in the fight against what they term *rabob ammartayadhipatai* (aristocracy).^{xxiv} As for the color red, it was derived from their deployment during the campaign against the 2007 draft charter. During the campaign, red was used to signify their opposition against the draft charter. Despite a failure to block the charter, the Red Shirts managed to galvanize the population into casting more than ten million votes nationwide against the draft charter.

After the successful installation of the military-backed Abhisit government from the Democrat Party in late 2008, the Red Shirts have continuously rallied against the government under the slogan "Red in the Land." They vowed to make Thailand become a sea of red. The Red Shirts regarded the Abhisit government as undemocratic and thus illegitimate because the Democrat Party did not have a majority vote in the parliament. With the help of the armed forces, the Democrats had simply stolen political power from the

now-defunct People's Power Party (PPP) of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, which had obtained a majority vote in the general election in December 2007. The Red Shirts demanded that the Abhisit government return power to the people through the dissolution of the House of Representatives. Abhisit declined.

Along with the notion of *ammart*, the Red Shirts deploy the old notion of *phrai* or corvée labor in the traditional Thai *sakdina* society.^{xxv} The new use of the notion *phrai*, which, in this context, simply means ordinary people or commoners, serves two purposes. First, it is used as a weapon to attack Privy Council president General Prem Tinsulanond, who always presents an image of himself as an aristocrat despite his *phrai* origin. Bringing Prem down to his social roots makes it easier for the Red Shirts to attack him. Prem, previously an invincible figure in Thai politics, now has been made to appear as just an ordinary person who can be easily criticized, verbally and symbolically, in Red Shirt rallies. Elevating the King while attacking his chief advisor has been the Red Shirts' main strategy for fighting against what they perceive to be the "aristocracy." Second, the notion of *phrai* signifies the status of commoner among members of the Red Shirts. In other words, they want to project themselves as members of the grassroots, not the elites, in Thai society. If the PAD has invented the term "Thaksin regime" as its main weapon for fighting Thaksin, then the Red Shirts have recently revived the old *sakdina* social regime under the new label of *rabob ammartayadhipatai* to serve as their common foe in the fight for a return to democracy. Language in the form of a proper name has played a significant role in political struggles in contemporary Thailand.

Historically speaking, the three components of the Red Shirts mentioned above are all newly emerging political subjects in Thai politics. The supporters of Thaksin are by and large rural voters who have benefited greatly from the populist policies and programs of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) organization. They felt cheated when their elected government was forced out of power by the September coup. Besides, they have begun to feel the impact of being political outcasts whose votes are not counted. Both their chosen parties—the TRT and the PPP—and their chosen leader—Thaksin Shinawatra—have been rendered powerless by the Thai establishment. Indeed, what Thaksin has accomplished in the realm of Thai politics has been to forge alliance with the marginalized people in the countryside who had long been ignored by Thailand's traditional and urban elites. In effect, Thaksin's populist politics,^{xxvi} no matter how problematic it may be, opened up the limited political space long dominated by the urban educated elites. Thaksin has transformed the way in which Thai politics had been operating. He has given priority and privilege to people's power at the ballot box. Thaksin has instituted a totally different political game, and this has both bewildered and astonished the Thai urban elites. To use a Deleuzian term,^{xxvii} Thaksin has deterritorialized Thai politics, disrupting the balance of power among the established institutions. Politicians and the rural masses have gained more space in the new balance of power at the expense of the established elites. The coup of September 2006 was a direct response to Thaksin's new political game. As for the anti-coup groups and the democracy-loving groups, they are the new breed of political activists who have no direct relation to the October generation. Neither do they have any linkage to the mobile-phone mob of the May 1992 uprising. On the contrary, they are a new generation of young "netizens" who learn by chatting on the Internet, in particular the rachadamneon chat room at the Web site panthip.com, groups like the student Red Shirts and the FARED (First Aid Red Shirts).^{xxviii} After many of the Web sites used by them were closed down, these young Red Shirt cyber warriors moved to their own Web site at www.thaifreenews.com. One student Red Shirt gave his reason for becoming involved in the movement this way: "Thaksin is a victim of the aristocracy but we do not fight for him.... we want genuine democracy."

These two groups of young Red Shirts are not Thaksin supporters. However, they cannot stand to see Thai democracy being stolen either by the military or the PAD. Many young Red Shirts want to see a new era in Thai politics where there is no longer anyone orchestrating events behind the scenes, be they military strongmen or some charismatic extra-constitutional figure. Some of them want to see the monarchical

institution truly outside politics. In short, the young Red Shirts have begun to imagine a new political space for Thailand. These components of the Red Shirts pose challenge to the commonly accepted belief that the Red Shirts are all Thaksin's lackeys. On the contrary, they demonstrate that there exist within the movement those who do not support Thaksin. And they need each other. In their eyes, Thaksin is a permanent scar on the movement that must be accepted. Those who do not support Thaksin admit to the fact that he is a popular leader and therefore that being allied with him means being allied with the masses. As a movement, the Red Shirts are, as one newspaper columnist puts it, "an unholy alliance of many groups wanting to tear down the old political order."^{xxix}

It is quite obvious from the discussion above that the origin of the Red Shirt movement is not in Thaksin Shinawatra *per se*, as widely perceived. Rather, it stems from the alliance of multiple and different groups who are opposed to the coup d'état. The pro-Thaksin groups began to take over the movement only after the "company of three" (*samkleor*), namely Veera Musikhapong, Jatuporn Prompan, and Nattawut Saikua from the "Truth Today" (*Khamjing wannee*) television program, established their hegemonic leadership. This was accomplished after a split within the Red Shirt leadership was reported in August 2009, when the leaders at that time publicly severed ties with Jakrapob Penkair-led fraction, which had made known their preference for a communist-like violent struggle. According to Jatuporn, "We want democracy under the King as head of state; therefore, our activities are limited to attacking Privy Council president Prem Tinsulanond or lower figures [so as] to prevent an escalating fight transgressing the constitutional monarchy."^{xxx} Meanwhile Jakrapob and his associates formed another group called "Siam Red," detaching themselves from the mainstream Red Shirt movement.^{xxxi} Nonetheless, other ex-communists within the movement, leaders such as Weng Tojirakarn, Jaran Dittha-apichai, and Vipoothalaeng Pattanaphumthai, did not join the Jakrapob group. The two groups parted ways over the strategy to file a petition seeking a royal pardon for Thaksin. The Jakrapob group argued that given the fact that the Red Shirts had severely attacked Prem, the chance that the Privy Council president would endorse the petition would come to naught. Moreover, the petition move was in contradiction to the Red Shirts' overall campaign against the aristocracy. Jakrapob himself once told the BBC: "I believe the room for unarmed and non-violent means to resolve Thailand's problem is getting smaller every day."^{xxxii}

Since the majority of the Red Shirts are Thaksin supporters,^{xxxiii} it is worth going into detail on how they are awakening politically. There are at least two types of Thaksin supporters. One is the rural voters and the other is the urban poor including the working class in the city. Both groups are held in contempt by the urban elites because they are felt to be uninformed and ignorant and need to be guided by the urban elites. In the early stages of joining the Red Shirts, these people are often referred to as a "hired mob" and the demonstrations in which they participate as a "pre-paid rally," a reference to the use of a mobile phone with a prepaid card.^{xxxiv} Fully aware of such expressions of contempt, they emblazoned their T-shirts with such messages as "No need to hire me, I came here myself." The contempt shown by the urban elites has ignited these groups of Thaksin supporters, fueling their rapid and exponential growth. If Karl Marx compared the peasants to "a sack of potatoes" who were unable to organize themselves to fight against the bourgeois, then in the eyes of the Thai urban elites, the Red Shirts are just a bunch of misguided people who are easily seduced by Thaksin's populism. At the height of the Songkarn rally, one newspaper columnist said of them: "The barbarians are at the gate."^{xxxv} Charoen Kanthawongs, a Democrat MP once told a Malaysian newspaper, the *New Straits Times*, of his disdain for the northeasterners who make up the majority of the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts this way: "People in the northeast are employees of people in Bangkok. My servants are from the northeast. Gas station attendants in Bangkok are from the northeast."^{xxxvi} Clearly he had no concern for the opinions of these people.

The Red Shirts' main complaint is the undemocratic nature of Thai society and politics. They cite as examples the September 2006 coup, which overthrew their elected government; the rallies of the PAD, which laid the groundwork for the coup; the 2007 constitution, which aimed at weakening politicians and

political parties by stipulating many articles detrimental to the democratic system as a whole; the untoward role of the constitutional court, because of its questionable verdicts to dissolve the TRT and PPP parties; the Privy Council president, who blatantly took sides in a political dispute by masterminding the September coup and its aftermath; and the failure of the state to take prompt legal action against the PAD's seizure of Government House and two major airports. In short, the Red Shirts are offering concrete evidence of what they feel constitutes a "double standard" in Thai society and politics. Angered at what they perceive as systematic injustice since the September coup, the Red Shirts have painstakingly built a case that allows them to take the moral high ground and promote the righteousness of their cause. No wonder that the number of converts to the movement grows daily. Unfortunately, the Thai establishment has not only ignored them but also consistently antagonized them by refusing to acknowledge the merits of their complaints. The movement has grown steadily from the supporters of Thaksin and the opponents of the coup to become crusade for democracy. Most of the demonstrators I talked to during the Constitution Day rally told me that their decision to attend the rally was their own, that they were not hired by someone else, and that they came to show their opposition to the military coup and to call for a return to democracy. Moreover, they were demanding justice for all, not the unequal treatment inherent in the aristocratic social system, which expressed itself in the form of the *ammart* and *phrai* relations.

THE POLITICS OF AESTHETICS^{xxxvii}

I was struck by the fact that the same script was being read by the Red Shirt protesters and their leaders over the same theme of the *ammart* holding to double standards. However, I don't think that the Red Shirts are being programmed by their leaders. If the real world they encounter is not in accordance with what their leaders talk about on the rally stage, in the workshops of the operation school, on the People channel, MV5 channel, community radio, or in the Red published media, then it would be extremely difficult to mobilize the Red Shirts to such a level that they are now. Furthermore, to say that the Red Shirts are being hired or misled by Thaksin is an oversimplification. In other words, I am arguing here that the Red Shirts have experienced for themselves the injustices that they have protested since the September coup. Put another way, what has happened in the real world of Thai politics since the September coup has been an eye-opener for the Red Shirts. Their leaders have simply articulated and simplified the whole situation for them in the form of a binary opposition between aristocracy and democracy. The theme on the rally stage always goes something like this: "Stop the double standards, overthrow the aristocracy," "No justice, no peace," and "Red in the land, democracy in the country." The three pillars of Thailand's dominant ideology (Nation, Religion, King) are not sufficient to satisfy the sensibility of the Red Shirts. There is a need to open up a space for a new pillar called democracy.

To put it in a Rancièrian perspective, the Red Shirts have adopted a particular "partition of the sensible" in their fight against the Thai urban elites. Ranciè's aesthetics focuses on the way in which spheres of experience or sensibilities are partitioned. This partition determines, among other things, who are counted and who are uncounted as legitimate members of a society. Ranciè differentiates between political subjectivation and identification.^{xxxviii} The former is aimed at disrupting the social hierarchies while the latter complies with them. Therefore, politics, for Ranciè, is characterized by a process of subjectivation in which a given identity is relinquished through a process of dis-identification in order to open up a new space where equality can be realized. In other words, politics, for Ranciè, refers to an interruption of the dominant social code to pave the way for a new subject to emerge. In this regard, Ranciè reserves the term "politics" for specific and relatively rare forms of action, those that disrupt social hierarchies in order to create equality:

I now propose to reserve the term *politics* for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing. . . . Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only

place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise. . . . Spectacular or otherwise, political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogenous assumption. . . .^{xxxix}

Since every society creates its own uncouneted subject culminating in “the wrong,” politics then begins when the part that has no part decide to take part, turning their noise into speech. For Rancière, politics is essentially an eruption of the rule to demand the recount of the uncouneted. Rancière thus assigns a significant role to the uncouneted in his democratic politics. For him, the uncouneted is not a failure or an obstacle but rather a necessary condition for democratic equality. Thus, the objective of Rancière’s politics is to “bring the nonrelationship into relationship and give place to the nonplace.”^{xl} Similar to politics, democracy, for Rancière, is reserved for a moment when there is an interruption in the order of things that society establishes. Before the emergence of politics in the Rancièreian sense, everybody follows the rule set forth by a society or by “police logic.” However, Rancière’s politics begins when this rule is questioned. Rancière’s politics of aesthetics is thus an attempt to create a new political subjectivation derived from a new partition of the sensible whereby there is a new space for the uncouneted.

Consequently, it is argued here that the Red Shirts in Thai society could be regarded as the uncouneted in the Rancièreian sense of the term, and their politics is exactly the kind of politics of aesthetics described above. The Thai rural electorate or grassroots (*rakyat*) who constitute the major portion of the Red Shirts are the most notable example of the uncouneted in Thai politics. Before an election, their votes are counted as one among equals. After an election, if the result is not satisfactory to the urban elites, the rural voters are suddenly discounted as having been no more than prey to the vote-buying practices of politicians or victims of Thaksin’s populism. As elections are embedded in Thai politics as a result of the democratization process under the 1997 constitution,^{xli} they enable elected politicians and political parties with the support of the rural electorate to take over a greater share of the power from the army, the bureaucracy, and the urban elites. The loss of power to elected politicians not only astonishes the Thai urban elites but also forces them to uncount the election, the elected politicians, and rural electorates.

Through a populist platform, Thaksin was able to garner the support and loyalty of the rural electorate, who had had little influence over national politics in the past. Thus, it is not an exaggeration to state that the rural masses have recently learned from Thaksin’s populist politics how to use electoral democracy to overcome the deep-seated state negligence. The Thai rural electorate, the uncouneted, the people who traditionally were without voice and who have until now been politically invisible, have become increasingly visible as a result of Thaksin’s populist politics, to the level that they astonish the Thai traditional and urban elites. Thaksin’s populist politics has repartitioned the political sensibility of the rural masses, making them realize that their votes really have been counted.

Opponents of Thaksin and his populist politics—most of them supporters of the current constitution^{xlii}—have criticized Thaksin for using populist policies to manipulate the rural electorate for personal gain. Most of the anti-Thaksin groups would like to replace the electoral democracy of Thaksin with their “selectoral” democracy by diminishing the political power of the rural masses. PAD’s call for a “New Politics,” in which thirty percent of Members of the Parliament are to be elected and the rest appointed, has obviously reflected this line of reasoning. The current constitution, PAD’s “New Politics” proposal, and the installation of the Abhisit-led government can be seen as evidence of attempts by the anti-Thaksin groups to rob the newly found political power of the grassroots and their electoral mandate.

In short, Thaksin’s populist politics has increased the political consciousness of rural voters nationwide. They have begun to realize the importance of their votes and vote “rationally,” that is, for a party that responds effectively to their needs and demands. Unfortunately, this pattern of voting has been interpreted by the urban elites as the “selling of votes” for short-term tangible gain under the banner of

Thaksin's populism. Thus, elections partition at the same time both time and power. During election time, power is located in the rural masses, who are the majority of the country. During this time, the rural electorate elects their leaders and their government through the ballot box. However, after the election, the urban elites, dissatisfied with the outcome, enact their power to overrule the mandate of the rural electorate as was demonstrated by the September coup, the activism of PAD, and the maneuvering of the *ammart*. Elections, under such circumstances, will definitely serve as both a means of partitioning the sensible of the Thai voters and, at the same time, a means to reflect the Thai voters' partition of the sensible.

Red Shirt campaigns and rallies of all sorts act as a viable means of partitioning the sensibilities of their members. During their participation in rallies Red Shirt members can see, hear, feel, sense, and think to the point that a particular partition of the sensible among them emerges—namely the partition between the aristocracy and democracy. In this partition, the *ammart* usurps democracy from the Thai people. The identity and consciousness of the Red Shirts have been formed by and large through the work of the Mobile Truth Today program led by the movement's "company of three"—Veera, Jatuporn, and Nattawut. Since the Songkarn riot, People channel and MV5 channel have played a pivotal role in strengthening the identity and consciousness of the Red Shirts nationwide via their various television programs.

With their new political subjectivation, the Red Shirts are able to embark on a new mission of deterritorializing Thai politics by opening new political space for ordinary people. They have successfully entered into forbidden territories in Thailand unknown and inaccessible to them before. The relentless attack on Privy Council president General Prem is a prime example of an act of entering into these forbidden territories. The exposure of Privy Councillor General Surayud's encroaching on the forest reserve on Khao Yai Thiang Mountain is another. Here, it is the nature of the Red Shirt struggle to create a new space for "the political" to exist in Thai society in the sense that they want to go beyond the established norms in Thai society. In other words, Red Shirt protest and demonstration create the situation in which disagreement over certain issue is made possible, leading to the restaging of the new space for dialogue which has not existed before.

Red-shirt consciousness is the consciousness of the commoner or subject who understands that their plight is derived from the structure of inequality within the *ammart-phrai* relation. It is not a variety of class consciousness because the composition of the Red Shirts has come from different groups of people who share the same subject consciousness. Their struggle is not a class struggle because the driving force is not economic. Rather, it is a political struggle whose driving force is the logic of the political. However, it is not a single logic but several: (1) a logic of Thaksin adoration, not of Thaksin as a person but the Thaksinness of Thaksin^{xliii}—his personality, his political schemes, etc.; (2) popular democracy as an avenue for turning votes into political speech; and (3) social justice which calls for the replacement of the hierarchical aristocracy with an egalitarian democracy.

By calling for social justice, the Red Shirt struggle moves from the level of individual to that of structural. The Red Shirts have shown through their protests and rallies that inequality in Thai society is structural, manifesting itself as an aristocratic system disguised as democracy. The Red Shirts do not fight against the *ammart* per se but rather against their close allies such as the army, the judiciary, and the PAD. The Red Shirts have been successful in changing the political subjectivation of the rural masses from the former hierarchical orientation to equality and justice for all. The Red Shirts argue convincingly that the aristocracy is a system of "double standards" while democracy is a "single-standard" system. If PAD activism had led to the resurgence of the aristocracy, then the Red Shirt movement would lead to genuine democracy. The overall impact of the Red Shirt movement has been to lay down a completely new partition of the sensible of politics among the Thai villagers and rural electorate. By participating in the Red Shirt movement, the

Thai rural masses have been elevated to the status of a new political subject with a new political subjectivation ready to penetrate into the restricted zone of Thai politics.

The Red Shirt struggles have added a new reason, new meaning and new logic to their voices, rendering them to become a new speaker with an ability to disagree with the hierarchical “police logic.” This then would make them equal to other members of a society. In this regard, the Red Shirt movement is an aesthetic movement because it is an attempt to reconfigure the existing partition of the sensible in Thai politics by replacing the hierarchical (police) logic with equality. Their politics makes visible the invisible in Thai politics, in particular the rural electorate. The visibility of the uncounted or the wrong can not be easily resolved by issuing a new law, calling for reconciliation or staging a military coup. Rather, it needs to be resolved through equality which is another name of democracy.

CONCLUSION

Despite the shadow that Thaksin casts over the movement, the Red Shirts have been able to enter new political turf. They have begun to form a clear-cut vision of Thai society and politics. Democracy, for them, is not confined to elections or a constitution. Rather, it is a matter of getting rid of the anti-democratic *ammart* who are the major obstacle to Thai democracy. Understanding this vision is critical for an understanding the relationship between the Red Shirts and the Rancièrian politics of aesthetics. In the past, the rural masses or the uncounted have been blamed for being an obstacle to Thai democracy. Now the urban elite, dubbed the *ammart*, are to be regarded as the real problem of Thai democracy.^{xliv} This new partition of the sensible in Thai politics has emerged from the struggle of the Red Shirts.

Furthermore, the Red Shirts have entered a kind of process that Esteva has called the “politics of no,”^{xlv} experiencing Roncière’s process of political subjectivation. They have stood up firmly to say “no” to the *ammart*, becoming a free subject and not *phrai*. They have said loudly and clearly through their numerous rallies that enough is enough. They will no longer endure suppression and exploitation at the hands of the *ammart*. “No justice, no peace,” as they always announce during their rallies. Since the Songkarn riot, they have come to fear no threat from the *ammart* in their fight for democracy, be it lèse majesté charges, a show of force by the army, or intimidation of all sorts by the government, in particular the invocation of the emergency decree whenever they demonstrate, or a threat to stage another coup by the armed forces. They have even challenged the military to stage a coup so that they can come out in force to protest against it.^{xlvi} At this moment, they are waiting anxiously for the right moment to strike back and to recoup their losses from the Songkarn riot. They are, in short, in the process of redrawing the Thai political space to make themselves fully counted and thus heard.^{xlvii}

However, their shortcomings are plenty too. The Red Shirts lack support and understanding from the international community and the Thai mainstream media. In addition, they need to build alliance with the youth groups. Most of the Red Shirt members are women and aged. The most serious weakness of the Red Shirts is the lack of clear-cut vision to move the movement forward. Veera Musikapong, president of the red shirts, spoke on the rally stage in Chainart province on January 15, 2010 that if a million people had turned out to protest against the Abhisit government in Bangkok as planned and the government insists to hold on to power, then he would not know what to do next. He would definitely leave the matter in the hands of the Red Shirts to decide on their own. This kind of attitude is quite dangerous because it demonstrates that the Red Shirt leaders have no concrete plan to control the mob. Furthermore, the Red Shirts lack concrete plan concerning alternative form of government after being able to topple the Abhisit government from power. For example, what kind of democracy they would like to project for the future of Thailand? Without long-term and viable project, their struggles run the risk of being seen as a short-term struggle to bring Thaksin back to power. The removal of the *ammart* and the Abhisit government from the political scene does not mean much if the entire structure of inequality is still intact.

NOTES

- ⁱ This is the official name used by the movement as it appeared on its membership application form.
- ⁱⁱ Details of the coup and its aftermath are discussed in Chairat Charoensin-o-larn, "Military Coup and Democracy in Thailand," in *Divided over Thaksin: Thailand's Coup and Problematic Transition*, ed. John Funston (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), pp. 49-79.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The notion of the uncounted or the wrong is discussed at length in Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), chapter 2, pp. 21-42.
- ^{iv} A detailed account of the political situation in Thailand in 2009 is provided in Chairat Charoensin-o-larn, "Thailand in 2009: A Return to an Unusual Politics as Usual," *Southeast Asian Affairs 2010*, ed. Daljit Singh (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, forthcoming).
- ^v "Threat issued in land row," *Bangkok Post*, January 9, 2010, p. 1.
- ^{vi} "Khao Yai Thieng Controversy: Surayud ordered to give up contested plot of land," *The Nation Online*, January 21, 2010, and "Khao Yai Thieng Controversy: Surayud ready to give up land in a couple of days," *The Nation Online*, January 22, 2010.
- ^{vii} "Surayud pulls down house," *Bangkok Post Online*, January 22, 2010, and "Pro-Thaksin Protest: First rally ever at Privy Council Office," *The Nation Online*, January 19, 2010.
- ^{viii} "Red shirts demand resignation of Prem, Surayud," *The Nation Online*, January 18, 2010.
- ^{ix} "About politics: Surayud faces UDD protest," *Bangkok Post*, January 9, 2010, p. 12.
- ^x "Army chief Anupong completely ruled out coup," *The Nation*, April 1, 2009, p. 1B.
- ^{xi} A detailed account of daily protest activities during this period can be found in "Red-shirt revolution," *Bangkok Post Online*, April 14, 2009.
- ^{xii} For an analysis of the Pattaya Summit disruption as a mere symptom of deep-rooted disease in the Thai body politic, see Michael J. Montesano, "Contextualizing the Pattaya Summit Debacle: Four April Days, Four Thai Pathologies," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, no. 2 (2008), pp. 217-248
- ^{xiii} The Red Shirts argued that most of the violent incidents in Bangkok and Pattaya were fabricated by the government and its allies to justify the violent crackdown on the protesters. They called for an independent committee to investigate the whole event. See "Calls grow for riot inquiry," *Bangkok Post Online*, April 24, 2009.
- ^{xiv} "Chaos Reigns," *The Nation Online*, April 13, 2009.
- ^{xv} "Jatuporn outlines plan for 'last battle'," *Bangkok Post Online*, January 29, 2010.
- ^{xvi} "Pro-Thaksin rally: Red shirts keeping up busy schedule," *The Nation Online*, January 13, 2010, and "UDD plans three rallies next week," *Bangkok Post Online*, January 29, 2010.
- ^{xvii} "Pro-Thaksin protest: First rally ever at Privy Council Office," *The Nation Online*, January 19, 2010.
- ^{xviii} Information on this part is taken from an e-mail correspondence with Dr. Thanet Charoenmueng of Chiangmai University in October 2009.

^{xix} Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), pp. 99-153.

^{xx} Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Understanding Brecht*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 85-103.

^{xxi} Donald Hindley, "Thailand: The Politics of Passivity," *Pacific Affairs* 41, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 355-371.

^{xxii} Pravit Rojanaphruk, "Red shirts more than just a bunch of Thaksin's supporters," *The Nation* Online, April 7, 2009.

^{xxiii} The Saturday Group against Dictatorship (*Khumkhonwonsao maioou padetkarn*) is a staunch pro-Thaksin and middle class groups while June 24th Group (*Khum yisibsi mithuna*) composes mainly of former communists and university students. June 24, 1932 was the date that absolute monarchy in Thailand was overthrown. Members of the 19 September Network against the Coup (*Kleurkhrai sipklao kanya tortarn rattapraharn*) are radical university students and NGO activists. One of its members, Chotisak Onsung, a former Thammasat University student is well known for his campaign against standing up for the Royal anthem in the cinema. The White Dove Group takes a more radical stance against the military coup. Other anti-coup groups include: Friends of Constitution Group (*Khumpuen ratthammanoon*), Globalized Citizen Group (*Phonlamueng piwat*), People's United Front against the Coup (*Naewruam prachachon tortarn rattapraharn*). These groups rallied regularly but separately at Sanam Luang. According to Somyos Phruksakasemsuk, one of the key leaders of the 24th June Group I interviewed in early January 2010, these anti-coup groups helped create "a political community" at Sanam Luang. They worked very hard to raise the political consciousness of the urban poor who attended their rallies almost every night. In addition to their political speeches, these groups distributed newspapers, pamphlets, leaflets, and holding exhibitions against the coup. Their messages were full of contents attacking Privy Council president General Prem and the palace. They began to use the term *ammart* to attack the establishment. The Thaksin's supporters comprise primarily of rural masses and urban poor including taxi drivers. Part of the information in this note is derived from my interview with Dr. Pichit Likitgitsomboon of the Faculty of Economics, Thammasat University in mid-October 2009. More details, see Nick Nostitz, "2006-2007: The Coup and the Birth of Red," in *Red vs. Yellow: Thailand's Crisis of Identity* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2009), pp. 11-15

^{xxiv} As early as mid-2007, this notion was deployed by one Red Shirt academic; see Pichit Likitgitsomboon, "Krabuankarn khubrai taksin phen krabuankarn theenummasuu rabob ammartayathipatai" (The oust-Thaksin movement is the movement which leads to aristocracy), <http://thaksin.wordpress.com>.

^{xxv} A discussion of *sakdina* society is provided by Chairat Charoensin-o-larn, *Understanding Postwar Reformism in Thailand* (Bangkok: Duangkamol, 1988), chapter 6, pp. 131-150.

^{xxvi} A good discussion of populism as a specter of democracy is provided in Benjamin Arditi, *Politics on the Edges of Liberalism: Difference, Populism, Revolution, Agitation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), Chapters 2 and 3.

^{xxvii} Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

^{xxviii} See, "Raingan: naksuksa sueadaeng. . . khaokhuekhainor khaomajaknai?" (Report: Student reds. . . who are they and where do they come from?), <http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/16143>, and "Raingan: FARED peekseekhao khong nakrob seiber sueadaeng" (Report: FARED the white wing of the Red Shirt cyber warriors), <http://www.prachatai.com/05web/th/home/16125>, accessed May 10, 2009.

^{xxix} Pravit Rojanaphruk, "Red shirts more than just a bunch of Thaksin's supporters," *The Nation* Online, April 7, 2009.

^{xxx} "Split emerges in Red Shirt leadership," *The Nation* Online, August 28, 2009. Another split within the Red Shirt leadership took place in early February 2010 when retired General Panlop Pinmanee, voiced his view on setting up a

“people’s army” among the Red Shirts in order to put the “fear into the heart of the opponents.” However, this idea, allegedly had been approved by fugitive Thaksin, was fiercely opposed by the “samklaeo” leadership of the Red Shirts. General Panlop later resigned from the movement. See, “Peaceful protest,” *Bangkok Post* February 7, 2010, p. 2

^{xxxix} Jakrapob’s profile can be found in Pavin Chachavalpongpun, “Jakrapob, man on a (misguided) mission?” *Bangkok Post* Online, May 6, 2009, and Sumes Thongphan, “Klannummob . . . game plienchiwit Jakrapob Penkair (Mob leader . . . a game that changes the life of Jakrapob Penkair), *Matichon Daily* Online, April 23, 2007, p. 11.

^{xxxix} Quoted in Pavin, note 31.

^{xl} According to Jaran Ditta-apichai, a Red Shirt leader I interviewed in early January 2010, those who are pro-Thaksin constitute about seventy percent of the Red Shirt movement, and they are not all as “grassroots” as commonly perceived. On the contrary, Jaran thinks the majority of the Red Shirts are urban middle class living in the cities throughout the country. Most of them are retirees who want to see a better Thailand for the next generation. See also Jaran Ditta-apichai, “*Young maimee thangoak*” (Still no way out), *Thai Post Daily*, August 23, 2009, pp. 2-5.

^{xli} Supoj Wancharoen, “More to protest than money,” *Bangkok Post* Online, April 3, 2009.

^{xlii} “The barbarians are at the gate, how will the govt respond?” *The Nation* Online, April 7, 2009.

^{xliii} Quoted in Bill Condie, “Class war behind Thai colour clash,” *The Observer* Online, December 21, 2008.

^{xliiii} The heading of this section is borrowed from the title of a book by Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

^{xliiii} Rancière, *Disagreement*, pp. 35-36.

^{xliiii} Rancière, *Disagreement*, pp. 29-30, italics in original.

^{xli} Rancière, *Disagreement*, p. 89

^{xli} An analysis of the 1997 constitution is provided by Erik M. Kuhonta, “The paradox of Thailand’s ‘People’s Constitution,’” *Asian Survey* 48, no. 3 (2008), pp. 373-392

^{xlii} A comparison between the 1997 and the 2007 constitution and how they related to the current political unrest, see Bjorn Dressel, “Thailand’s Elusive Quest for a Workable Constitution, 1997-2007,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 31, no. 2 (2009), pp. 296-325 and Allen Hicken, “The 2007 Thai Constitution: A Return to Politics Past,” *Crossroads* 19, no.1 (2007), pp. 128-160

^{xliii} Yukti Mukdavichit, “Khonsueadaeng kap rattammanoon chabab wattanathamtai” (Red-shirt people and the cultural constitution), *Vibhasa* 3, no. 2 (May 1–June 15, 2009), pp. 5-13.

^{xliiii} An interesting piece discussing the role of the Thai elites in obstructing the development of democracy in Thailand is found in Yoshifumi Tamada, “*Prachatipatai karnthamhaiphen prachatipatai lae thangoockjak prachatipatai khong prathettai*” (Democracy, Democratization and the Way Out of It), *Fardiewkan* 6, no. 4 (October-December 2008): 98-139.

^{xliiii} Gustavo Esteva, “The Zapatistas and People’s Power,” *Capital & Class* 68 (Summer 1999): 160-162.

^{xliiii} “Full circle to another military coup?” *The Nation* Online, January 29, 2010, and “Weekly highlights,” *Bangkok Post* Online, January 29, 2010.

Rural-Urban Networks and Transitions in Asia: Re-spatializing Cultural and Political Imaginaries
25 – 26 February 2010
Jointly organised by the Asian Urbanisms Cluster of the Asia Research Institute
and the Cities Cluster of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore

^{xlvi} A different approach but with similar projection regarding the impact of the Red Shirts is found in Michael J. Montesano, “Contextualizing the Pattaya Summit Debacle,” in note 12, pp. 232-233. Montesano considers the political turbulence in Thailand as a beginning of the “revolutionary situation” which would finally lead to a regime change.