

The Internet & Nonviolent Struggle: The anti-government movement in Thailand 2005-06

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The internet and its technological infrastructure are important elements of nonviolent struggle. This is illustrated by analysing the dynamics of an anti-government movement in Thailand during 2005-06..

Introduction

Nonviolent action has long been practised, and in recent decades, extensively and globally studied. Nonviolent action is based on consent theory in which power of the ruler can only exist through the support of the ruled (Sharp 1973). Communication among those ruled to either provide or withdraw their consent in relation to the ruler is a key element of nonviolent politics. Therefore communication systems such as the postal system, facsimile, print publishing, telephone, radio, and television are crucial practical factors and of major importance relative to nonviolent action (Martin 1996; Martin and Varney 2003).

In today's globalised world the internet is increasingly important for nonviolent action. The internet is a new technology which can increase people's communication power beyond state borders, time and space to reach more and more people. State borders restrict traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspapers. Many movements around the world exemplify this; for example the student movement Otpor in helping to bring down Serbian Slobodan Milosevic in 2000 (Tunnard 2003) and the Chinese-led global online campaign in 2005 against Japanese candidature for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council (Tai 2006, 268-85).

Similar to other technological systems the use of the Internet for nonviolent struggle is multidimensional, political in its usage and political in its structure. In addition to Sharp's (1973) consent theory of power which argues people can directly withdraw the consent from the ruler power does not operate as a singular system. Analysis of nonviolent struggle needs to consider more indirect or structural dimensions of power such as capitalism, bureaucracy, patriarchy, and technology to name a few (Martin 1989; Burrowes 1996, 90-6). Martin (2001) studies many cases around the world and illustrates how

comprehensively technology is related to nonviolent struggle. In this regard the foci of Tunnard (2003) and Tai (2006) are only on the first dimension of internet.

This article examines both the dimensions of utilising the internet for nonviolent struggle and the politics of internet structure. The case study is a nonviolent movement in Thailand during 2005-06 resulting in the expulsion of Thaksin Shinawatra from his position as Prime Minister of Thailand.

From 1992, along with other political media, the internet in Thailand rapidly developed as a major part of the public sphere (Pongsawat 2002) enabling the anti-Thaksin movement to sophisticatedly incorporate internet use with other traditional media to launch powerful nonviolent action both online and offline. Sharp makes reference to the dynamics of nonviolent action (1973, part III) in complicated attacks from the government and pro-government camps as well as counter-attacks from the anti-Thaksin group. This issue will be studied here as a reflection of the importance of internet technological structures for nonviolent action.

It is necessary to remark on the internet's 'political jiu-jitsu' relative to nonviolence of the leading group of the anti-government movement, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). From events in 2008 it will be shown that the relationship between internet technology, nonviolent struggle and the political conditions is so non-linear it is possible that a nonviolent movement using the internet can come up with some violent events.

Background

After Thailand's billionaire telecom-tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra became Prime Minister of Thailand in 2001 the rapid growth of his 'media empire' Shin Corporation attracted widespread criticism as a massive conflict of interest (CPMR 2003).

In order to be free from regulation and accountability he advanced and systematised corruption as well as political interference thereby weakening the balance of power in the Thai political system (Boonme 2004; Tejapira 2004; Phongpaichit and Baker 2005, 10-21; Barn Pra Artit 2007, 64-5). Thaksin re-centralised all kinds of power toward the prime ministry and intervened in a number of important political institutions. Post-election 2001 the agglomeration of other political parties into his own Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party transformed the traditionally democratic institutions like the House of Representatives and Senate into a 'parliamentary dictatorship' as TRT gained a majority. Conventional institutions such as the military, police, and bureaucracy whose structures were normally governed by a non-partisan system were weakened by his arbitrary removals and appointments of high-level officers. Independent institutions including the Election Commission of Thailand, National Counter Corruption Commission, Auditor General of Thailand and Constitutional Court were interfered with. The Administrative Court, Supreme Court and the Monarchy were the exceptions.

Various people were increasingly dissatisfied but there were not many channels of communication for voicing dissent. The government intervened in almost every branch of media (radio, television, and newspaper) taking full control of some either directly or indirectly (Barn Pra Artit 2007, 64-5; Yong 2007). The internet's nature of being difficult to control seemed to be the only way to maintain communication about independent political activities.

The internet was first installed in Thailand in 1992 having a mere twenty-eight users with eight inter-networking computers. The internet population rose to seven hundred thousand in 1998, four point eight million in 2002 (NECTEC 2005) and twelve million or approximately nineteen percent of the population of sixty-three million in 2007 (NTC 2007). During this time the internet infrastructure in Thailand rapidly developed to the degree it could now host other traditional media including online newspapers, discussion forums, sound/video clips and live radio/television broadcasting.

Therefore, in the midst of the political situation described above, the internet emerged as a possible option for waging nonviolent action against abusive and corrupt power. The anti-Thaksin movement during 2005-6 used the internet as a major communication tool.

An anti-Thaksin demonstration began after a political talk show named 'Muang Thai Rai Sabda' (or Thailand Weekly) which informatively criticized Thaksin's policies and behaviours was dropped from Channel 9 on September 9, 2005. The Mass Communication of

Thailand (broadcaster of Channel 9) claimed talk show owner Sondhi Limthongkul, multi-millionaire owner of Manager Media Group (MMG), had insulted the monarchy. Sondhi fought back by launching a series of mobile political talk shows in public places such as university halls and popular parks. Each talk show attracted live audiences numbering in the thousands. Sondhi also broadcast these talk shows through MMG outlets, specifically through subscriber TV channel Asia Satellite TV (ASTV) and Manager Radio. Both could also be watched and listened to on MMG popular online news 'Manager Online' (www.manager.co.th).

On Monday January 23, 2006, just three days after the new Thai Telecommunication Act (2006) was passed, Thaksin's family sold its entire stake in his biggest telecommunications conglomerate, Shin Corporation, to Singaporean Temasek Holdings and received US\$1.88 billion with tax liability exemption. News of this deal triggered diverse protests around the country.

On February 11, 2006 the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) was established with Sondhi Limthongkul as one of five core leaders and declared a nonviolent struggle to drive Thaksin from office. The PAD also acted as a 'major hub' for other anti-Thaksin groups. MMG became a major communication centre in the collection and distribution of news and other political messages from the PAD and other groups. Besides ASTV, Manager Radio and Manager Online, all other MMG outlets including newspapers, magazines, and CDs were mobilized to assist in these campaigns.

Through the agency of the integrated infrastructure of MMG described above the anti-Thaksin movement could expand its communications to target vast audiences both inside and outside the country. People both in physical space and cyberspace could also be in the same 'anti-Thaksin community'. After the general election on April 4, 2006, and despite Thaksin having won 56% (or sixteen million votes), one political analyst of MMG openly claimed about fourteen million people who voted against Thaksin were MMG audience members (Siddhisamarn 2006, 254).

These fourteen million could be divided into three groups. Firstly, ASTV audiences which comprised those who watched the TV program by subscribed satellite dish and through the internet. Secondly, those who had purchased one of around a million MMG produced video CDs the content of which included such things as: 15 episodes of the mobile political chat shows, two panel discussions on Royal Prerogative, recordings of PAD's demonstrations, five episodes of an amateur Chinese opera troupe from Thammasat University Alumni, to a music video "Thaksin, Get out!!". The third group was

comprised of viewers of the Manager Online website. Manager Online was the third most popular website of Thailand both in 2005 (80,653 daily visitors in term of and 1.28 million daily page views) and in 2006 (126,069 unique IP address visitors and 1.57 million page views) (Truehits 2005 and 2006).

There were also other smaller anti-Thaksin websites including 'Prachatai.com' (delivering online popular news among activists) and Midnight University (on-line influential public intellectuals in Chiang Mai University: midnightuniv.org). However, it should be noted there were complexities and tensions in the anti-Thaksin movement. Websites such as Prachatai and Midnight University were anti-Thaksin groups, but also critical of the PAD on many of their demands, especially the PAD's calls for royal and military intervention.

There were pro-Thaksin movements also. The important physical group named 'Caravan of the Poor' moved Ee Taen tractors from North and Northeast into Bangkok for a demonstration. Other websites apart from the TRT website showed support for Thaksin. These included a group of web boarders who set up Rak Muang Thai - Hai Gum Lung Jai Na Yok (love Thailand, encourage the PM); Khon Pan Fa Rak Sa Pra Cha Tip Pa Tai group, and a popular web-based political conversation room in 'pantip.com' named Rajdumnern (its name is a historical avenue of Thai politics).

The major function of all pro or anti Thaksin websites to support or oppose Thaksin's legitimacy diversified to include many controversial issues such as corruption, human right violation and *les majesty*. Therefore, during Thailand's political crisis during 2005-06, it can be argued the internet was one of the crucial spaces for struggles over people's consent and the government's legitimacy, which are key elements of Sharp's (1973) theory of politics of nonviolent action.

Technological dynamics of nonviolent action

Apart from the struggle over consent and legitimacy there were also struggles directly involving the technological structure of Thai internet. The nonviolent struggle was against the government but internet structure in Thailand was operated and regulated by various Thai government agencies. Some agencies tried to obstruct lines of communication by and within the anti-Thaksin movement.

The sophisticated technical system used by ASTV can be described as follows. ASTV broadcast anti-Thaksin activities from many places using a satellite up-link mobile car to transmit the video and voice stream to a 'Thaicom 1' satellite operated by THAICOM Public

Company Ltd. (a subsidiary of Shin Corporation). 'Thaicom 1' retransmits the signal stream to ASTV studio and MMG base Thaiday Dot Com Co. Ltd. in Bangkok using the GLOBESAT service operated by CAT Telecom (the former state enterprise and largest internet service agency in Thailand). The ASTV studio then sends the stream using hi-speed broadband internet serviced by Internet Service and Solution Provider Co. Ltd. (ISSP which is under CAT Telecom regulation). The signal then goes through an international internet gateway owned also by CAT Telecom to a satellite up-link station in Hong Kong (CAC 2006). The signal stream is retransmitted up to a NSS-6 satellite operated by NewSkies Satellite of the Netherlands which broadcasts to satellite disk subscribers in Southeast Asian countries (ASTV n.d. [a]; SES NEW SKIES n.d.). ASTV also broadcasts to the USA and Canada using the service of Pittsburgh International Telecommunication Satellite (ASTV n.d. [b]). For internet audiences, ASTV was webcasted using the service of ISSP.

Within this long broadcasting chain there can be many points of intervention using various methods. ASTV has tried to avoid interruption by sending the signal to Hong Kong which operates outside Thailand but the process within the country can still be interrupted. On 20 January 2006, the Public Relation Department (PRD) ordered CAT Telecom to stop the GLOBESAT service for ASTV claiming that ASTV had no broadcasting licence. ISSP was also ordered by CAT Telecom to stop providing webcasting service for ASTV according to PRD's order. However, before the company stopped its service, MMG responded by bringing a law suit to the Administrative Court. The court later ruled that ASTV had no licence but was temporarily allowed to broadcast for the sake of the right of expression by people and mass media according to Article 39 of the Thai Constitution 1997. CAT Telecom was ordered by the court not to stop GLOBESAT service to ASTV (CAC 2006). Therefore ASTV webcasting could continue to operate.

On the other hand, local cable TV broadcasters in every province were occasionally ordered to stop rebroadcasting ASTV. For example in November 2005 (Siddhisamarn 2006) and on 23 February 2006, three days before the second demonstration of PAD (Kom Chad Luek, 2006). In addition to these legal interventions technical attacks were employed. Noise was occasionally broadcast to annoy ASTV, as on 22 March 2006 (Manager Daily 2006).

Diverse types of interference with Manager Online can be categorized into three methods (Angkhasuwan 2006). The first method is legal measures. In November 2005 there was a verbal order giving legal reasons why the company providing a web-hosting network service to

Manager Online should cut off signals of the website. By law the rationale was valid only for such clear-cut illegal behaviour as pornographic or illegal trading websites, it had to be proven and not just claimed that the website was illegal and had to be written and not verbal. Therefore this verbal order could not be implemented (Angkhasuwan 2006).

The second method was described by Angkhasuwan, an IT technical manager of Manager Online, as a 'mafia-style method'. On 25 January 2006 CAT Telecom (the only owner of a commercial domestic internet exchange centre and international gateway of the Thai internet system) was secretly ordered to block users of other ISPs in accessing Manager Online. This was designed to isolate the website from the Thai internet system. The website was quickly duplicated at other addresses (www2.manager.co.th) (Manager Online 2006a). The next day, because Thai users living abroad could not access the Manager Online, the webmaster published an article suggesting the way to get around the web blockade (if they could not access the temporary website) was to change the IP address of their 'proxy server' to one of nine addresses which are still today in operation for people in the country (Manager Online 2006b). A week later on 3 February another article on the same topic was also published on the website suggesting a change to the proxy server to other countries' addresses (according to 'Public Proxy Servers' website publicproxyservers.com) if access to Manager Online from Thailand was blocked (Manager Online 2006c).

The third method was by technical attack. In July 2006 after the 60-year anniversary of the royal throne of King Bhumipol, Manager Online was attacked by malware which attached itself to the ceremonial photo and flooding throughout its webboard. The aim was to put a higher load to the website to slow down its response to user access (Siddhisamarn 2006, 273). One month later Manager Online again announced it had been attacked by another higher-risk malware which self-executed to establish a constant connection to the website again resulting in reducing the website response speed for other users (Manager Online 2006d). To solve this problem, the webmaster suggested users to install anti-malware software from the 'Ad-aware' website lavasoftusa.com.

Along with MMG, other anti-Thaksin websites were also blocked. An example of this is two anti-Thaksin websites which were shut down during a very early phase of the anti-Thaksin campaign. Thai-Insider (thai-insider.com) was established to provide inside news and criticism of government policy. On 18 June 2005, one week after starting operations, it was ordered by the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology

(MICT) to shut down on the grounds of providing 'incorrect' information and affecting national security (Chookiatsirichai 2005).

Three days later offline and online radio station 'fm9225.net' received an e-mail from the Internet Police of MICT ordering the website to be shut down. 'fm9225.net' was a provider of news and discussion on government corruption. The rationale given for the shutdown involved three allegations; (1). Invalid licensing, (2) Broadcasting fairly violent messages and information and (3) in order to check its operational classification since it broadcast worldwide by internet (Chookiatsirichai 2005).

Some Events of Violence in 2008

My focus in this article is on the role of the Internet in the Thai anti-government movement during 2005-06; a time in which I argue most people would agree the PAD were nonviolent. In contrast, in 2008, the PAD was implicated in some violent events that should be discussed here.

At the peak of near-bloody clashes between anti and pro-government groups the Thaksin government was overthrown by a coup d'état on 19 September 2006. After the coup Thaksin was exiled to London. The PAD left many doubts about its links with the coup after declaring it would halt its activities temporarily by claiming it was under martial law from the junta which had set up the Constitutional Tribunal. This Tribunal later in May 2007 ordered the TRT party to dissolve for violation of election law.

Under domestic and international pressure the junta was forced to hold a new election in December 2007 and stepped down. The People Power Party (PPP), a new party involving many politicians from TRT, won the election and formed a coalition government with Samak Sundaravej as PM. Samak was Thaksin's nominee prior to the election.

The Samak government moved to intervene in many Thaksin-related legal cases and managed to help in his return to Thailand. The PAD regrouped on 28 March 2008 and restarted demonstrations to force Samak to resign. After many months of demonstrations the PAD finally became involved in three violent events.

Firstly, on 26 August 2008, the PAD increased its action to drive out the whole government by invading Government House and other ministries. Early that day a group of armed men claiming to represent PAD seized the station of the National Broadcasting Service of Thailand (NBT) and used force to suspend its broadcasting (The Nation 2008a). This was the first time PAD had turned to physical violence. Secondly, on 2

September 2008, the PAD was involved in a bloody clash with the pro-government protest group named 'United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship in Thailand' (UDDT) which resulted in one death and a dozen injuries (The Nation 2008b). Samak's premiership was then terminated by the Constitutional Court for conflict of interest. Thirdly, on 7 October 2008, the biggest day of violence occurred. PAD protesters had been blocking Somchai Wongsawat (Thaksin's brother-in-law and succeeding PM) and all representatives and senators entering the parliament. Police fired tear gas directly at the protestors resulting in hundreds of protestors injured and some dead (Wipatayotin 2008). In response one protestor stabbed a member of the police and another drove into the other police followed by physical attacks from both sides.

The end of this conflict came by judicial action without any obvious connection to the PAD except for some claiming the PAD-led political conflict might influence the court to speed up its bureaucrat judicial procedure.

Another tense situation arose on 2 December 2008 after the PAD seized Suvarnabhumi International Airport (Bangkok's main airport and regional hub) in order to prevent the landing of the PM's flight. The Constitutional Court dissolved the PPP and two coalition member parties. The Court also banned leaders (including the PM) from politics for five years and held leaders of all three parties for accountability on electoral fraud. The PM promptly resigned. The PAD then announced it would cease all protests claiming that they had won over "Thaksin's nominees".

Although claiming to win the conflict, the PAD lost much of its legitimacy by shifting away from nonviolence in the three previously mentioned violent events. It was criticised as not being truly nonviolent (e.g. Mann 2008; Navanant 2008; Lawansiri 2008a and 2008b). However, as discussed in Chaisukkosol (2008), the PAD movement is not committed to 'principled nonviolence' but is rather using 'pragmatic nonviolence' which is not as clearly nonviolent as Gandhi's ahimsa. They may exhibit some aggressive behaviour but the PAD tried, especially during 2005-06, to avoid physical violence that might reduce its legitimacy. As Sharp emphasises (1973, 475-9, 615-33), a pragmatist movement should maintain its quality and nonviolence discipline when confronting possible repression. Therefore it could be said by involvement in some violence in 2008 the movement had lost some quality and was trapped to violence. This should not be considered as an invalidation of the PAD's claim to nonviolence during 2005-06. From these incidents, it can be said the internet and other media can be used to involve violence by the so-called 'nonviolent' movement.

Conclusion

This article studies how the internet can contribute to contemporary nonviolent action by examining the case of the anti-government movement in Thailand during 2005-06. The technological dynamics of nonviolent action using the internet as described above implies that the internet employed for nonviolent struggle did not operate unconditionally but via a technological structure involving legal, technical and even dark power controlled by various agencies. This structure can enhance or discourage the capability of nonviolent action.

The resultant meaning for the theory of nonviolent action is that a nonviolent movement not only struggles with the repressive regime but also with elements of the technological structure. This is because technological systems of each society always have politics; just as technology in general has its 'political inheritance' (Winner 1986).

My analysis is in line with Martin's (1989) criticism that Sharp's consent theory of power (1973) lacks a detailed discussion of structural dimensions of the internet in the Thai case. My analysis argues that both political usage and the often overlooked politics within technological structure are very important issues for nonviolent action today.

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Endnotes

1. Ee Taen is a slow-moving diesel-engine powered farming vehicles.
2. 'Pan Fa' is a politically symbolic bridge in the 'May-1992' event; the group's name means 'Pan Fa people to conserve democracy'
3. Rajdumnern web board was formerly a public forum with a variety of political opinions later dominated and intervened in by a pro-government group so completely that anti-government groups eventually left this space to set up their own online forum named 'Se Ri Thai Nai Webboard' (Free Thai Movement in Webboard) (forum.serithai.net).
4. 'Proxy server' was firstly developed as a technical service of internet to improve access speed to popular webpages (or files, etc.) by storing them in a local server which acted as 'proxy server'. Therefore there is no need to access the real and remote web server every time each user makes a request. However, the proxy server can also be set to block or censor some 'inappropriate' webpages or websites.
5. According to 'Alive Proxy' website aliveproxy.com
6. According to Burrowes's classification of nonviolence (1996, 98-101)

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