

## **Asia Rising – Thailand Coup**

**Professor Nick Bisley, Executive Director - La Trobe Asia**

**Matt Smith**

Hello and welcome to Asia Rising, a podcast in which we look at the news events and general happenings of Asia's states and societies. I'm your host Matt Smith and today I'm joined by Professor Nick Bisley, Director of La Trobe Asia.

**Matt Smith**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2014 the Royal Thai Armed Forces led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha launched a coup against the democratically elected government, dissolved the senate and established a Junta to govern the nation. Here to discuss these tumultuous happenings in Thailand is the Director of La Trobe Asia Professor Nick Bisley, thanks for joining me Nick.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

Thanks Matt.

**Matt Smith**

It would be good to start this podcast with a bit of background so, can you breakdown what the current status is in Thailand and what happened to get it to the point it is now?

**Professor Nick Bisley**

The Thai political system has had real challenges since 1932 really because they've never been able to find the balance that's necessary between the electoral system, the monarchy and the military in which everyone is kind of happy with the way in which the political outcomes that balance produces. And so in general, what we've got in recent times has been a democratic system that yields political outcomes with which the military and the royalists are unhappy, and that's something that's always bedevilled democracies which is, will you get or what some political theorists have said, the tyranny of the majority, ie: you get the multitude support, an outcome which the ruling elite don't like and in essence what you've got in Thailand. Really over the last eighty or ninety years, has been a situation in which tensions between what political system delivers and vested interests of the ruling elites are, has produced the military weighing in on a pretty regular basis.

**Matt Smith**

So at the moment we've got a military coup and the real stimulus for that, was the disconnect between the ruling class and the general population hasn't it, so that caused a lot of discontent in Bangkok in particular?

**Professor Nick Bisley**

Well, what it really derives from is from 2001, this is the election of Thaksin Shinawatra. So Thaksin was often referred to as Thailand's Berlusconi, in the sense that he is this self-made, extraordinarily rich man, Thailand's richest man by an enormous margin, media mogul, huge range of interests, and all the challenges that you get with that. So if you're the Prime Minister and the country's richest man there are some big conflicts of interests, so right there was always going to be some challenges. But more than that, what Thaksin brought was a style of politics that the old ruling elite of Bangkok weren't happy with. It was conspicuous consumption, it was a sense that he was, not just nouveau riche, but was challenging the kind of norms that have been around, there are particularly the royalist norms that accompanied the king, and the king is a hugely revered figure in Thailand, and then what he did most importantly, was a series of very

populist policies to try to redistribute wealth and to shore up his political support, so the impoverished parts of Northern Thailand.

Thailand's one of these countries in which you have a capital city that dominates all the other cities, in fact there are no other meaningful cities as we would imagine them. There's Bangkok and no-one else, all the others are relatively small towns in comparison, so the rural population is quite distributed but what Thaksin realised was the numbers, if he could get them, would always play in his favour. So he created a situation that was quite unusual, which was a kind of nouveau riche, populist but also demagogic redistributor of wealth, outside observers were often quite conflicted in what they thought, you had sort of liberals who would look at it and go "we don't like these conflicts of interests", and all of this sort of stuff, but he is redistributing wealth and the poor like him the be-knighted classes of Northern Thailand like him, so there has got to be something good there.

That political story that he did, that combination of factors really undermined and threatened a lot of the interests of the Bangkok ruling elite, that's the military, the royalists, intelligentsia and key figures in business, and they saw Thaksin as a real challenge. He precipitated the 2006 coup, it was a relatively short coup, that's to say the military junta in place and they remained in place for a relatively short period of time. They charged him with a range of crimes; corruption, abusing office and the like and so he has had to flee and the thinking now amongst that group was that they didn't stay in power long enough.

So when they relinquished military rule and brought back democracy, not surprisingly the Shinawatra group, now headed by his sister, Yingluck, has sort of taken on the mantle and was able to clean up the ballot boxes in the election of 2010 from memory, and essentially he'd been ruling, but the thinking is, by proxy from Dubai. And we saw in the past few years those popular protests between the red shirts and the yellow shirts and the colours relate to the factions, so yellow is the royalists, yellow being the kings colour supporting the military vested interests and the interests of the status quo and red supporting the north Thailand Thaksin Shinawatra supporters and that has been playing out and frankly, it looked as if at some point the military was going to intervene.

### **Matt Smith**

So it's clear that from their perspective, from the ruling class, so to speak perspective, that they didn't get the job done back in 2006, ok we're going to do a proper go of it now, so the military coup is being led by General Chan-ocha and they're doing it under the guise of restoring democracy, so is that a sincere claim that, that is the intention behind it?

### **Professor Nick Bisley**

No one buys the idea that they're going to restore democracy in the sense that you and I would think of it, that is to say, open fair elections in which one person – one vote, leads to a consensus accepted outcome. I think it's very hard to imagine the military giving up power to return to a system in which the numbers favour Shinawatra, but don't forget in East Asia, democracy is still a relatively new thing in the different ways in which democracy is understood.

What I think lies behind the aim of the military right now in particular, is to establish a political system that's generally democratic in the broad sense of the word; free expression, free assembly, free association, rule of law, with probably some tweaking around the electoral side of things, but what's really making this coup and the period of rule, military rule, I think particularly uncertain is the life of the king. The fact that he is very unwell, he is in his eighties and he hasn't been seen in public for quite a long time. In fact what was interesting, was when the coup first occurred, it was pretty clear they didn't get royal permission for it in the first instance, then it became clear within a week or so that the palace approved of it, but that was unusual, in the past when the military have stepped in, they have almost always done so with royal blessing and that has been an important part of the broader political stabilising force.

What we've got now is a period in which there is a real uncertainty about what the Thai political

system in the long run is going to look like. The king's been around for sixty plus years, on the throne and no-one can imagine what the Thai political system would look like without him there.

**Matt Smith**

Well his heir is widely unpopular.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

His heir is a good friend of Thaksin Shinawatra, so that's where there is a real puzzle. Also in Thailand, the thing to remember is the military began life as the king's bodyguard, military officers in Thailand swear allegiance to the king every year on his birthday, it is not just a question that we serve king and country and we say these nice general things, there is a genuine affinity between the monarchy and the military. But that has always been about King Adulyadej and quite what the relationship is to the heir, no-one really knows, except for the fact, I mean there's a lot of skuttlebut about them being uneasy about this guy. He's seen as a layabout, he's a kind of playboy figure, not the sort of austere hard working figure that his father is and certainly is regarded as.

So there is a sense that what this coup is about is not only the unfinished business of 2006 and keep the Shinawatra movement at bay, but it's also about trying to resolve the succession problem and to establish a Thai political order with which the military are going to be comfortable and which the values of king, country, nation can be sustained. The question a lot of us have is, when you look at Thailand the one constant has been the king and whatever you think of it, the king's ability to stabilise political unrest to bring the population with him has been quite considerable and an important part of the success of Thailand, without him and with uncertainty around monarchy more generally, it's difficult to see quite where Thailand goes, not to say it's all downhill and it's a catastrophe, the king dies, the whole system is going to collapse. But he and the institution is absolutely crucial to the stability of Thailand and what it has been, and so what the military I think is really interested in is stabilising the broad forces, keeping those popular street protests out of the way whilst some sort of settlement is reached to work out what is going to happen when the old man goes.

The problem is, we don't know how long the old man is going to hang on for, I mean he could be unwell, but you can be unwell for five or six years, do we have a regent and more importantly, can you get a different heir. Now in absolute monarchies and to some degree, whilst Thailand is a Constitutional Monarchy formally, if the king were to say it's no longer the layabout, it's now my more hardworking daughter or whoever he could choose, then there would be a way around it, so it's not impossible, but there are a lot of uncertainties around all of this. And that's why I think when you're looking out to see how long is military rule going to last and what are we going to get in its place, it's very difficult to see this ending soon and it's also very difficult to work out just quite what's going to come.

**Matt Smith**

So with the military coup clamping down on Thailand democracy so much, ostensibly in the name of restoring democracy, do you think they're going about it sincerely, I suppose is the way to do it, with the arrest of politicians with the curbing of freedom of speech, with a 10pm curfew in place in the city?

**Professor Nick Bisley**

Yeah, the only time they've allowed non propaganda TV is for the World Cup.

**Matt Smith**

All World Cup Games free, free to air, that's not very hard.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

In the circumstances I guess. But it's pretty worrying what they've done, in fact I think the clampdown has been more forceful this time around than it was in the past and I think that reflects these bigger concerns around the longer term story that they're trying to work out. Are they sincere?

**Matt Smith**

They said an election late last year, that's a long way...

**Professor Nick Bisley**

Yeah, you wouldn't put your house on it happening. What a lot of liberal observers are hoping is that the current, pretty nasty clampdown comes to an end pretty quickly and that some kind of interim government can be established in which, ok we don't have elections and we don't have the kind of gold standard democracy that you'd like, but in which you can get on with markets operating and in which people can go about their daily life. In which people can express criticisms of governments and the like without winding up in gaol. The problem is this guy, the general, Chan-ocha is a fairly hard line guy, he's almost a bit of a cliché of a military dictatorship, you know he never smiles, and is very famous for having a hot temper and berating people and the like and classic military guise, a disdain for civilians and democratic life, so I think on balance, most observers are pretty pessimistic about the short term, certainly the rest of this year I think the likelihood of things being wound back and some return to normal democratic life. Thailand has produced a political culture that seems unable to compromise, this year has shown there's a line beyond which the military is not prepared to go. Unless there's some shift in attitudes from the military, it is very difficult to see a situation which a political order can be established in which everyone feels they have, at least some stake, the cycle is going to continue.

**Matt Smith**

From all reports on the street though, from the general Thai, things are a lot quieter now, General Chan-ocha has been running his happiness campaigns to make things happier and there has been concerts and free movie tickets and horses have been led down the street for people to pat. The curfew and the crackdown has been making things a lot quieter and more peaceful on the surface so is this, I know it's a strange question to ask in some ways, but is this a good thing for the Thai people?

**Professor Nick Bisley**

The immediate impetus for this is to try to break the circuits of these huge demonstrations and the street battle that was disrupting life pretty significantly and they wanted to break that circuit and break that cycle, and in that I think a lot of people have some sympathy. The problem I think is that in these efforts they are undertaking at the moment, whether it's the football and whether it's happy campaigns and free movie tickets, as an effort to kind of pacify people, that's fine and it makes some sense in the short term, but in the longer run you're not really addressing the underlying sources of those street battles. That people are out on the street whether it's the red shirts are out because they feel not just that their man has been dealt with unfairly, but that the economic policies that he been put in place that benefited them are going to be taken away and they will basically go backwards in terms of where they're at. I still think no amount of efforts to try to calm people down, unless they address these underlying issues are going to really provide a long term solution to the Thai political problem.

**Matt Smith**

Alright, so thanks for your time today.

**Professor Nick Bisley**

Thanks Matt.

**Matt Smith**

That's Professor Nick Bisley, Director of La Trobe Asia and you can follow him on twitter he's (@nickbisley). You've been listening to Asia Rising, a podcast looking at the news, events and general happenings of Asia States and societies. If you like this podcast you can subscribe on itunes or soundcloud, share the podcast with your friends, or leave us a review. If you want more news on La Trobe Asia why not check out their website, it's at: [www.latrobe.edu.au/asia](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/asia). Thanks for listening.