

FOREWORD

April 13, 2010 started out like most other days. I woke up, lit a cigarette, fixed a cup of espresso, and took a seat on the living-room couch of my small, rented apartment on Singapore's east side. As I had done almost every morning since the middle of March, I logged on to my computer and opened up the internet page that carried the People Channel's live video stream, broadcasting from the site of the Red Shirt rallies at Saphan Phan Fa and the Rajprasong intersection. It was just three days earlier that the military had tried unsuccessfully to disperse the rallies, causing the death of more than two dozen people. I cannot remember what, if anything, would prompt it, but on that day I was overtaken by the impulse to be there and experience, first hand, what had already become a historic event. Having taught the semester's last class just the day before, it would not be difficult to find a flight and a hotel room, even on a couple hours' notice. By mid-afternoon, I had landed in Bangkok, emptied out by the annual exodus of locals for the Songkhran festivities and the defecation of foreign tourists kept away by the violence.

That was the last time I have traveled to Thailand, a country where I had spent a great deal of time over the previous several years. It will remain the last time for the foreseeable

future. The trip itself did not trigger any sudden epiphany. It was only weeks later, after the Red Shirts were definitively crushed, that I would begin to reconcile myself to the idea that I should never again return to Thailand — at least, not until it is no longer a crime to speak of the nation’s professed “father” in anything but the vaguest or most sycophantic terms.

I know for a fact that the people massacred by the military in April and May 2010 were none of the things the government said they were — not terrorists, not Maoists, not traitors, not drunken hooligans, not hired mobs, and not simpletons brainwashed by an exiled billionaire. The Red Shirts I met during that trip to Bangkok, and many trips before that, are just ordinary people. Not an especially ideological bunch, either — for the most part, these men and women are just sick of being told that choosing the country’s leaders is a task best left to those blessed with status, riches, or good karma. They say they are fighting for “democracy,” but for most of them democracy is perhaps less of an end than it is the means by which to affirm their dignity as equal citizens.

For the temerity of expressing aspirations every self-respecting human being harbors, and for having broken a few laws that are only invoked when it is convenient to do so, almost ninety of them were butchered on the streets of Bangkok, to the cheers of Thailand’s privileged classes and the indifference of the rest of the world. Presented with the courage exhibited by so many of those men and women in the face of brute military force, I could not help but feel a strong measure of shame for having failed to speak out publicly about the institution — Thailand’s monarchy — in whose name those ordinary people, like hundreds before them, had been murdered.

Like the overwhelming majority of the existing journalistic and scholarly work on Thailand, this book’s first edition, published in February 2010, was aggressively self-censored in its treatment of core members of the Thai royal family and

the role of the institution. In part, that was done to give the book a chance to reach the bulk of its potential readership in Thailand. For a variety of reasons, some not clear to me to this day, this never actually happened; to my knowledge, no copy of the book has ever seen the inside of a bookstore in Bangkok. More importantly, I self-censored because, like most people interested in Thai history, politics, or culture, I wanted to be able to continue traveling to Thailand without fear of being arrested and thrown in jail.

This new edition of *Thailand Unhinged* is not self-censored. At least with regard to the monarchy, it is the book I should have written last year — no coded language, no glossing over, no beating around the bush. Of course, there are certain trade-offs that the decision to refrain from visiting Thailand comports. These trade-offs vary according to one's individual circumstances and standards, so I do not begrudge anyone who has come to a different conclusion. For my decision to stay away is every bit as cowardly as theirs. Choosing to exercise freedom of speech over freedom of movement is, I suppose, the easy part. Somewhat more onerous are the limitations that telling a more complete story imposes on one's ability to actually *get* the complete story. Thankfully, from this standpoint at least, I am no anthropologist or ethnographer. And so while the ability to do my job is likely to suffer from the fact that I can no longer be there and talk to regular people to the same extent I did before, my research agenda can be easily adjusted on that basis. Whatever research I can no longer conduct in the field can be delegated to a research assistant hired for that purpose. Going forward, speaking my own mind will be delegated to no one.

One does not often get to do rewrites in this line of work. In fact, one of the best pieces of advice I ever received in graduate school was to never read my own work once it appears in print. This time, however, it was well worth putting myself through the invariably cringe-worthy experience, and take the opportunity to craft an all-around better product. From

a stylistic viewpoint, I re-organized the work somewhat and amended some of the phrasing I had, in retrospect, come to find a bit awkward, gratuitous, or overly simplistic. From a more substantive perspective, writing a new edition presented a chance to further elaborate on some issues, or flesh out some of my views more explicitly. These kinds of edits affect various parts of the book, but it might be worth highlighting the most significant.

In the first edition of *Thailand Unhinged*, one of the main points I sought to convey was that Thailand's political conflict has both an elite dimension — a power struggle that has very little to do with “democracy” — as well as elements of a fight for the future of Thailand as a more or less democratic nation, at the heart of which are serious political, social, and economic grievances. This stands in contrast to narratives of the Thai crisis that see the conflict as either one or the other — as “a tale of two democracies,” “a tale of two dictatorships,” or a simpler “tale of democracy against dictatorship.” On balance, the first edition's harsh treatment of Thaksin Shinawatra on the one hand, and the sympathetic treatment offered to the Red Shirts on the other, made the point clearly enough. But in retrospect I had come to find the articulation of the overall thesis to be exceedingly jumbled. This is perhaps the consequence of the fact that the book was assembled from text written at different times. And so the passages originally written before the Red Shirts had become the force that they are now emphasized the elite dimension to an extent with which I have become somewhat uncomfortable. The new edition, while making the same basic argument, seeks to do so in a more organic fashion.

While I was thankful for the opportunity to make these revisions, none are of such import to justify the release of a new version of *Thailand Unhinged*. The main reason behind this new release is rather the ambition to keep the work current in the face of the historic events, many of them tragic but some decidedly less so, that have taken place in Thailand over

the past year. The first edition was rushed to print because, like many others, I expected that something big was going to happen, and hoped the book might contribute to making sense of what was about to unfold. But nobody quite knew *what* was going to happen or what its import would be. As it turns out, what did transpire is not only significant enough to warrant a major update, reflected in the addition of some thirty pages of text, but also helps provide the entire account with a more definitive, less open-ended narrative — ideally, making the book’s conclusions less perishable over time (if still, quite possibly, dead wrong).

Even before giving any serious consideration to the possibility of working on a new edition, I had interpreted the 2010 demonstrations staged by the Red Shirts as marking the “death” of “Thai-Style Democracy.” This interpretation falls somewhere in between the one offered by Chris Baker, who spoke of “the death of deference” at about the same time, and that of David Streckfuss, whose newly released book speaks of the coming death of “Thainess” — an ideology he aptly describes as a rather odious form of nihilism. Either way, while the first edition sought to illustrate the workings of “Thai-Style Democracy” and evaluate the mounting threats to its continued existence, this new and improved version of *Thailand Unhinged* concludes with an account of its (presumed) death. The country’s political conflict, to be sure, remains far from over. But a sharp break with the past now seems inevitable, in light of the history the Red Shirts made in 2010. As John Kenneth Galbraith might have put it, the end has come but is not yet in sight.

—FEDERICO FERRARA
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