



An anti-coup protester (centre) holds a placard as protesters are blocked by soldiers during a protest in Bangkok on Saturday. Critics say the military takeover is an attempt by the status quo powers to hold back the tide of populist expectations and rising demands that were let loose during the time of Thaksin Shinawatra. AFP pic

Populism gone bad in Thailand?

DOUBLE-EDGED: It's politics that seems devoid of ideological moorings and trajectory but which has mass appeal to a large group of voters

THE news of the military takeover in Thailand has caught some observers by surprise, though it should not. For those who reside in Bangkok and who have been observing the escalation of violence on both sides of the political fence there, it was just a matter of time before a higher authority steps in and arrests the cycle of violence and confrontation that has taken the country to the brink.

However it should be noted that despite the particularities of the Thai case, there are also some underlying structural similarities between what has been happening in Thailand and

what is happening in other parts of the Asean region as well. It can be summed up by one word, namely "populism".

The anti-Chinese demonstrations that have erupted in parts of Vietnam, the anti-Chinese sentiments in the Philippines, the growing call for economic nationalism and the threat to nationalise all foreign capital assets in Indonesia, etc, are all symptoms of the same thing, namely a form of populist politics that seems devoid of ideological moorings and trajectory, but which has mass appeal to an undefined mass base of voters.

That such populism can be used as a vehicle for political mobilisation and as political capital by politicians is self-evident; but it can also lead to unfortunate outcomes such as the violence and killings we have seen in Bangkok and parts of Vietnam recently.

In the case of Thailand, the military takeover is basically an attempt by the status quo powers to hold back the tide of populist expectations and rising demands that were let loose during the time of Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thaksin's opponents who are equally opposed to his sister Yingluck — whom they regard as little more than a proxy-puppet of Thaksin — seem worried that the rising expectations of the poor and disenfranchised may eventually threaten their own safe comfort zones and jeopardise their own standards of living. Yet notwithstanding their enmity towards Thaksin, the question remains: Why hasn't the Thai middle-class elite emulated Thaksin's ways and policies, in order to dent his own advance and win back the support of the people?

Thaksin was a divisive figure to many, but he did get some things right: His populist policies included healthcare to the poor, communicating with the masses and explaining his policies, introducing a "mobile government" where government meetings were held in other parts of Thailand outside Bangkok — and thus bridging the rural-metropole divide, etc.



Farish A. Noor is senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

It has to be said that many of these policies were indeed smart, and perhaps needed too. So why didn't the middle-class elites learn a lesson from Thaksin's rise?

My own concern is that among a number of middle-class urbanites, the fear of populism has less to do with the fear of crass nationalist politics intoxicating emotional people, but rather the fear of the unwashed masses who are seen as reminders of the earlier under-developed past.

This is something I have seen so many times, in the capitals of Asia where the globally-connected elite have the tendency to look down upon the poor and the rural folk whom they are happy to exploit in their sweatshops or employ as lowly-paid domestic help, but who show no empathy whatsoever with their fellow citizens.

In such a case, the gap between the urban centre and the rural periphery is no longer simply a geographical one, but a moral one as well. It would be only a matter of time before a charismatic leader comes along, and mobilises the masses in the name of a new nationhood that is more inclusive and representative, and from that starting point social revolutions may well follow.

Bangkok's elite may stand aghast at Thaksin's rise, but they need to also ask themselves how a man like him managed to bring together so many of the rural poor and working classes, and also why they failed to do the same.

As populism manifests itself across the Southeast Asian region, and increasingly becomes the norm in the conduct of domestic politics, it is imperative that politicians and policymakers take a less machiavelian attitude towards the masses, and recognise that in this age of global communication and connectivity, societies can be mobilised faster and easier, and have higher demands, too.

Thaksin's success was due to his uncanny ability to anticipate these changes and turn them to his advantage, but any politician who has the public's interest in mind can do so, too.

The worry at the moment is that with Thailand's politics now being put in a "pause" phase, these populist demands will not go away, but will simply be silenced momentarily. That still leaves Thai policymakers — whoever they may be — with the challenge of developing an inclusive national narrative that does not alienate the masses, or worse still keep things on the boil.