

Inferior to Non-humans, Lower than Animals, and Worse Than Demons: The Demonization of Red Shirts in Thailand

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Abstract

Attempts to demonize and dehumanize the Red Shirts, the largest pro-democracy group in Thailand, have been evident since the 2006 coup d'état that deposed Thaksin Shinawatra as prime minister. In this article, the author discusses the origins of the Red Shirts, and argues that the formation of the Red Shirts was in reaction to unbearable injustice in Thai society. Applying Giorgio Agamben's theory of bare life and qualified life, the author shows that the Red Shirts have been stripped of their political life and status in Thai society. The author discusses the hate speech and brutal tactics used against the Red Shirts both before and after the massacre of 2010 in which over 100 people died, which occurred during Red Shirt protests against the Democrat-backed Abhisit Vejjajiva government. The elite and middle classes, as well as the Army, incite hatred against the Red Shirts through the use of propaganda that depicts them as disgusting beings in order to justify their eradication. However, contrary to popular belief among the elite and middle class, the author argues that Red Shirts are rational in their thinking towards democracy, and are not primarily motivated or controlled by money as voters. Above all, the author concludes that the Red Shirts have been treated unjustly by the elected government they supported between 2011 and 2014.

Keywords: Red Shirts, Demonology, Conflict, Violence, Hate Speeches, Thailand

1. Introduction

On August 11, 2014, Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand's former prime minister (2011-2014) who was overthrown in the May 2014 coup, returned to Thailand from a holiday abroad. On this same day a building collapsed in Pathum Thani, a province bordering Bangkok, killing fourteen people. A group of Shinawatra opponents slandered her by inciting hatred in the social media, saying the building collapsed at the exact moment Yingluck returned and claiming she brought misfortune to Thai society. A few months later Thaksin Shinawatra, former Prime Minister (2001-2006) who was also overthrown, welcomed his daughter's new twins, social media filled with curses and senseless spiteful words directed toward the babies purely because they were two new members of the Shinawatra clan.

What do these two incidents show us about Thai society? First, it is not merely these two people who are the victims of hatred by elite and the middle class. Supporters of Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra and proponents of inclusive democracy, known also as Red Shirts are also subject to a lot of hatred. The Red Shirts are predominantly middle and lower-middle class Thais from the provinces in North and Northeast Thailand that are home to the majority of the Thai people. The hatred endured by the Red Shirts is not regular hatred toward a political or human enemy, but a distorted kind of hatred that manifests as if the Red Shirts were not human, but rather demons or beasts. The omnipresence of this hatred in Thai society leads to the perpetuation of physical, political, and psychological violence against the Red Shirts (Note 1).

2. Demonology: Inferior to Non-humans, Lower than Animals and Worse than Demons

In order to understand how the Red Shirts became so hated and regarded as so inferior, it is important to understand the processes by which the demonization of a group of people can occur, as well as the process by which an entire group of people can become politically excluded from their own society. Chaiwat Satha-Anand (2004), a peace scholar, said, "A condition for peaceful politics with compassion and care relies on the fight against demonology which depicts people who are different as non-people or even non-human." A variety of

conditions make the use of violence by citizens and by people in power towards people who are different possible and accepted in Thai society, especially the creation of distance between those who use violence and the victims of that violence. The result is that the people who use violence do not feel the effects of their actions on the victims. They make the victim anonymous or even non-human; victims are “the others” and not “good people” in society. Furthermore, the use of euphemistic language in reference to the use of violence minimizes the effects of that violence on its victims. These things make the use of violence accepted in society.

Additionally, “demonology” works through “distribution of the sensible.” As Jacques Ranciere explains, “distribution of the sensible” is the process by which sociopolitical perception is reproduced and determined. This process encompasses representations of certain people or ideas in the media, in the political realm, and in all aspects of society, because the sensible refers to those things which can be understood through the senses. If a certain groups consistently represented as outsiders, as bad, or as worthy of having violence perpetuated against them, then this notion is reproduced and may become accepted and go unchallenged. In the case of Thailand, demonology, combined with an established perception that those who are not people either can be killed or should die, has the potential to make issues including extreme violence toward some members of society, even killings, seem normal or acceptable. Demonology can also create within political society the sense that raising questions relating to the deaths of others is inappropriate, and that it is acceptable to hate someone without *a priori* cause or without personal experience or interaction with them.

In addition to the demonization of some members of society, which is perpetuated through the distribution of the sensible, demonology is also tied to the political order – and the exclusion of those who are demonized from that political realm. Giorgio Agamben’s theory of “bare life” helps to show how political society can destroy or eliminate people who are labeled as worthless. Agamben divides life into two categories: *zoé* or “physical life” and *bios* or “political life.” Agamben showed that *zoé* has the status of “bare life” in its relationship to the political state. Bare life refers to a person whose political and legal identity is stripped from them by the suspension of laws that protect their political status. Those who exist in a state of bare life are both outside of the sociopolitical order, and yet integrally connected to it, because they can only come to be defined in such a way by an act of the state or sovereign power, which, through the suspension of laws that would have protected their lives and liberties, turns them into expendable physical beings with no political recourse. *Zoé* has no relation with political forms. In Thailand, suspension of the law has often been achieved by the imposition of martial law, a legal system that in effect suspends the rights of all people, and allows the military to choose to selectively enforce its rules against those that threaten it. Martial law thus allows the military to determine whose lives are bare and unprotected, and who can still act political and expect protection from the state. This expendability makes those bare lives extremely vulnerable. Violence, even murder, can be perpetuated against those who have been excluded from the state, and those perpetrators have nothing to fear in terms of retribution from the state, because bare life has lost the legal protection of the sovereign.

On the other hand, *bios* is qualified life, and refers to those who “count” in the sociopolitical realm. Those with the status of *bios* are still under the protection of laws that protect both their political status and their personhood; they have not been excepted by the sovereign power’s suspension of such laws. Agamben argues, in contrast to social contract theory, that the sovereign power does not actually protect all lives within its domain, but can withdraw protection and leave bare lives, lives without the rights necessary to lead to a humane, qualified life. Those with the status of bare life, who have lost the protection of the state or sovereign are seen as disgusting and revolting, and have moved into a violent and insecure zone. Exterminating or killing these people—bare lives—is then not difficult, because the sovereign power structure is tied in with legal suspension of the political life and rights of these people. The historical and continued treatment of the Red Shirts exemplifies this demonization and qualification of people as *zoé*, as elaborated below.

3. History of the Red Shirt Movement Formation in Thai Society

The election of February 6, 2005 is regarded as a milestone in the history of Thai politics. This is because the Thai Rak Thai party led by Thaksin Shinawatra won the election in a landslide with 19 million votes, winning 377 representatives of the total 500 seats in parliament, and putting Thaksin into power as prime minister for a second term. During the four years prior to this election, there had been huge changes for villagers in rural areas, thanks to Thaksin’s policies, which for the first time were directed toward the rural poor. With populist policies and injections of money into a variety of projects, many villagers experienced higher incomes and better living circumstances. Thaksin’s management style was characterized by impatient, quick decision making, and the centralization of power.

In 2006, however, the Thaksin government had to dissolve parliament due to pressure from protests by the

People's Alliance for Democracy, also known as Yellow Shirts. These protests had begun in late November 2005, when the Democrat Party and Yellow Shirts demanded a royally appointed prime minister to replace Thaksin, an unconstitutional act which was therefore impossible. The protests had begun in response to allegations that Thaksin did not pay taxes over the monetary gains from selling his family company to Temasek Holdings (Government of Singapore Investment Corporation), despite the fact that it was not illegal. The majority of protestors were from the elite and middle classes in Bangkok and the South, which supported the opposition Democrat Party that did not agree with Thaksin's business-style management of the government. After the dissolution of the parliament, new elections were scheduled and held on April 2, 2006, but the Yellow Shirts protested, and Democrat Party members boycotted the election and refused to vote. The Thai Rak Thai party still received 17 million votes in the election, but the constitutional court later ruled that the election was invalid because the Election Commission had organized the election so that election booths were exposed and voting was visible to bystanders. After the protests that followed, the army carried out a coup d'état while Thaksin was attending a UN conference in New York on September 19, 2006.

After the 2006 coup, the political elite in concert with the military have been attempting to design a political system free from Thaksin and his supporters. Interventions like the abolishment of the Thai Rak Thai party and the drafting of the 2006 Constitution, which is a hollowed out democracy or democracy without *demos*—the people—give power to institutions which have no links with the people. This is especially true for the judicial court and independent organizations. The atmosphere at the constitution-drafting referendum was full of threats under martial law and all kinds of efforts were made to undermine and destroy the group that still supported Thaksin (McCargo, 2008). Yet, after the elections of December 23, 2007, the People Power Party, which had formed from the banned Thai Rak Thai Party, received the majority of votes, winning 223 seats versus 164 for the Democrat Party, the opposition. But the position as prime minister was not held long by Samak Sundornvej before the Constitutional Court ruled his appearance in a televised cooking show unlawful, and impeached him. Then, Deputy Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat became Prime Minister. His short career was abruptly ended when the Constitutional Court ruled that the People Power Party was to be dissolved immediately, on December 2, 2008, after the Yellow Shirt supporters seized control of the government house, Don Muang airport and Suvarnabhumi international airport on November 24, 2008 and held them through the dissolution until December 3, 2008.

The network of elites, who support and shore up the coup regime in the eyes of the middle class and media, overlook the grassroots people, who are the majority of voters of the country, regarding them as if they do not exist. This disregard for the will of the people extends to the army's interventions in politics. In 2008, the army intervened to support the Democrat Party of Abhisit Vejjajiva and make him prime minister. While the Democrat Party did not have the majority of votes, the army used threats to force a group of People Power Party members to form a coalition government with the Democrat Party (The Economist, 2008) and bring Abhisit to power.

Moves like this made the Red Shirt supporters feel that they were merely the "servants" under the control of a bureaucratic polity. This feeling is clearly reflected in a speech by Nattawut Saikua, leader of the Red Shirts, on December 30, 2008. He said: "We do not have many things, we have no chance of justice, we have no chance of being treated well by government organizations, we have no chance of a forum for presentation of information from the media, we have no chance to announce that our battle is a clear, honest, straight forward battle [...]. And most importantly, our brothers, please rest assured and remember that we do not have any connections..." (ModernThaiDemocracy, 2010).

During that time, the Red Shirts movement continually organized campaigns to pressure the government. However, the unrest, which started in April 2009 and is also called "the Bloody Songkran" (the Thai New Year, called Songkran, is in mid-April). The Red Shirt leaders demanded the resignation of number of privy counselors (advisors to the King) because they were not politically neutral. Similarly, they demanded that Abhisit dissolve the parliament because it was formed unconstitutionally. The situation escalated to the extent that violence was used to suppress and break up the protesters; seventy people were reported wounded and although Abhisit said this incident saw no casualties, the Red Shirts believe many people were killed and their bodies hidden by the army (Yimprasert, 2013). The following year the most violent political tragedy in the history of Thai politics broke out.

The Red Shirt group mobilized for a massive movement from March until May 2010 to demand that the government dissolve parliament. When the protests started, about 70,000 Red Shirts gathered at Phan Fah Lilat Bridge on Bangkok's Ratchadamnoen 2 Avenue to symbolically donate 300 liters of blood to call for democracy and justice as well as to challenge the inequality of power in Thai society. Although there were daily reports of violence on the side of the government and the protesters, large scale violence erupted on 10 April 2010 when

the army attempted to break up the protesters, resulting in the deaths of 27 people and injuries to over 1,400 (Khaosod Editors, 2010). The climax of the violence was from 13 to 19 May 2010 when a large number of Red Shirts were killed, including those six who died when the army randomly shot into the Pathumwanaram temple, despite the fact that the abbot had requested the temple be treated as neutral ground. Although a large number of photos show that soldiers shot randomly into the temple, Suthep Thaugsuban, Deputy Prime Minister and Head of Security Affairs, who was in charge of devising security strategy, lied and claimed that the shooters were not soldiers but criminals (Khaosod Editors, 2010).

The incidents took the lives of 94 people and caused a number of injuries which later brought the number of deaths to 99 people. Eighty-two people were killed by bullets, 32 of whom were shot in the head. The violence left thousands injured and many crippled. The government spent more than three billion baht (\$100 million US) to control and disperse the Red Shirts by mobilizing 67,000 soldiers. More than 700 million baht (\$23.3 million US) was spent on 25,000 police officers, and the actual total number of bullets used was 117,932 (People's Information Center, 2012). At the same time, 1,857 Red Shirt supporters were incarcerated and accused of violating the emergency law and burning city hall. The Missing Person Information Center of the Mirror Foundation reported that 50 people went missing from 19 May until 16 June 2010 and tens of people were arrested for *lèse-majesté* (Khaosod Editors, 2010).

According to history professor Nidhi Eoseewong (2010), the most important incidents were in April 2009 and April and May 2010. He said: "The overall picture of the two incidents during Bloody Songkran: the 'Thai state', in the eyes of the Red Shirts, was robbed because a select group of elite conspired with the government and the military to form the Abhisit government in a military barracks. Therefore, they had to fight against the elite in power. But during this uprising (2010) it seems that the vision of the Red Shirts became clearer; the elite who denied the people democracy is not merely a group of people but is imbedded in the superstructure which tightly dominates government and society." This superstructure consists of a variety of sectors from the conservative elite, the middle class in Bangkok and civil servants, especially the army which have coordinated and supported the killings of Red Shirts.

The violence of the protests cut important ties between Thais. It would be a fantasy to believe that the scars inflicted upon Thai society from these incidents will disappear. Going home empty handed on the last day of the protests, May 19, when the military cracked down and dispersed the last of them, left a number of Red Shirts feeling angry and scared at the same time. This disheartened feeling was caused not only by the killings of a large number of comrades with the same ideology, and the imprisonment of others, but also by the suspicious deaths of leaders and guards in Nakhon Ratchasima, Udon Thani, Sisaket, Pathum Thani, and Chiang Mai. Some were brutally assaulted and left handicapped; there were arrests and accounts of intimidation of academics and activists as well as a number of volunteers who witnessed the events; villagers received threats by post calling on them to stop the activists, and the Internal Security Operations Command sent soldiers to patrol villages of protestors in a thorough search for intelligence. In addition, the government announced arrest warrants for 50 Red Shirt protesters, 37 of whom were deemed terrorists; some were wanted on multiple arrest warrants; some were already incarcerated; and some were already dead but their names still remained on the black list (Matichon Weekly, 2010).

Usually, violent unrest in the capital leads to changes in government. This pattern was set in incidents in October 1973 and October 1976 as well as in May 1992. In contrast, following the incidents in April / May 2010, the government stayed in place for more than a year, perhaps because the deaths of the victims of these incidents were not given the same importance in the eyes of the elite and the middle class as the deaths of people with prestige (Mukdawijitra, 2010). Therefore, the elite and middle class expressed their support for the abuse or suppression of "worthless people" with both physical and verbal violence.

The image of the Red Shirt leaders created by the conservatives is diverse. People disgusted with the Red Shirts say they are dirty, disgusting, lowlife, mean, black, provincials, unrefined, and scary (Winichakul, 2010). The Abhisit government repeatedly said that the Red Shirts were terrorists; however, Chounporn Chaimongkol, a Red Shirt member from Chiang Mai asked, "How could the government think of the word terrorist? How can good villagers and fried banana vendors be terrorists? All we want is justice back" (Khaosod Editors, 2010). Especially after the intensification of protests and incidents of April 10, 2010, at the Raja-Prasong Intersection, an important economic center surrounded by department stores, luxury hotels, and high-end stores by protesters from the working class and provinces who do not have the elegant and well-dressed look of people in the capital, middle class Bangkokians became increasingly scared. Because of their fear, it was easy to stoke the belief among the middle class in Bangkok that the Red Shirts fit the profile of terrorists (Na Songkla, 2012). Above all, a large number of traditional elites believe that the Red Shirts are not Thais, as the Red Shirts do not accept the

unfair and the political inequalities which are at the heart of being Thai – embodied in the concept of “Thainess.” In a column on nationalism and ethnicity, columnist and retired professor of history Nidhi Eoseewong remarked on the 2010 massacre that the “Killings and injuries are remembered less than the remains of destroyed buildings” (Eoseewong, 2011).

The Red Shirts are seen as different and they are always portrayed in whatever disgusting ways opponents can conjure, most especially as the “people who overthrow the monarchy.” Under the Abhisit government, which promised to protect the monarchy against plots to overthrow it, a fabricated “Chart of the network to overthrow the monarchy” falsely implicated Red Shirt leaders in a plot to do away with the royals. Kraisaak Choonhavan, member of the parliament for the Democrat Party, once said, “The Red Shirts are Thaksin loyalists [as opposed to royalists]. They are a group of extremists, socialists, republicans, leftist academics, and somehow they are difficult to get through to” (Prachathai, 2010a). Kamnoon Sidhisamarn, an appointed senate member said, in a somewhat internally contradictory statement designed to insult the Red Shirts: “They are overconfident capitalists and bad tempered communists who join to reduce the role of the monarchy and create a new Thai state” (Manager Daily, April 10, 2007). There are metaphors relating Red Shirts to various animals as well as slaves who lack the capacity to think for themselves. When Red Shirts donated blood in order to make their demonstrations in the early phase of the protests, they were harshly criticized for being dirty and unhygienic. In addition, government leaders said the blood was mixed with water and that it was human blood mixed with pig blood, that the blood was infected with HIV and that the actions of the protestors were Khmer sorcery rituals and black magic. Each of these rumors can be seen to play on fears both of disease and difference, aligning the Red Shirts with symbols that are not part of Thainess. This can be summarized through the words of Pichet Punvichartkul, member of parliament for the Democrat Party who said the Red Shirts are “demonic animals that burn the city and burn city hall and pour human blood mixed with animal blood in front of the Democrat Party building and Government House. They shoot and assault soldiers and the royal institutions” (Thairath, April 6, 2012). Similarly, during the protests there were signs written by the people of Bangkok saying, “Country folk get out” (Winichakul, 2010), “Rags get out” (Prachathai, 2010a), and which called the protestors “door mats” (Ploygamphet, 2010).

In addition, the protestors were portrayed as having no ideology or sophisticated political aim or understanding, described as “hired mobs, mean barbarians drunk on liquor and ... not a group of people with ideologies like the Yellow Shirts” (Sunan Srijantra, 2010). On April 30, 2010, Red Shirts entered Chulalongkorn Hospital, one of the more expensive and well-known medical facilities in Bangkok, to look for snipers whom they thought were on the roof of the building. Newscasts showed the fearful reactions of the people of Bangkok; hospitals were normally off limits to the protests. As Thongchai Winichakul (2010), a professor of history at Wisconsin University, commented on the news reports emanating from Thailand, the Bangkokians regarded the protestors as “germs that spread throughout the Thai political body.” Even after the protests ended and the protestors had been broken up, Yellow Shirt representatives led by Tui Sittisomwong, a medical doctor, patrolled to oversee the exit of protestors from the protest sites in queues, to ensure they actually returned to their provinces and did not return to disrupt the daily lives of Bangkok citizens. Both before and during the 2010 protests, doctors at leading hospitals in Bangkok had refused to treat the wounded if they were Red Shirt protesters, meaning that the hospitals were off limits not only as sites of protest, but even as sites for needed medical attention.

In short, we can see that demanding democracy and insisting on the principle of person, one vote in determining their own political fate is really pricey for ordinary citizens. Furthermore, after the May 2010 massacre, Thai society fought an additional battle, this time against the protestors, demeaning their protests by perpetuating stereotypes in which the victims become the perpetrators, the betrayers, and the offenders, while at the same time imagining the government and army as righteous victims of the Red Shirts. The suffering and trauma of the Red Shirt victims therefore became nothing more than a laughing matter.

After the suppression of the Red Shirt protests, the Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand (TRCT) was established. The TRCT published its final report on the 2010 protests in 2012. Additional reports were written and released: on the protests, by the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (2013), on reconciliation, by King Prajadhipok’s Institute (2012), a research institute of the Thai parliament. King Prajadhipok’s Institute also lead a project called “Public Forums Nationwide for National Reconciliation,” with financial support to the tune of 168 million baht (\$5.6 million US) from the Yingluck government between June and July 2013. Nevertheless, none of the reports, which researched the events of the 2010 protests and violence, invited the Red Shirts victims to participate in the reports’ creation. They were ignored and overlooked, not interviewed or contacted for their input; therefore, Thai society disappointingly lacks knowledge of “the voice of the voiceless.” Prach Panchakunathorn (2013), a lecturer from Chulalongkorn University criticized the TRCT,

saying that Thailand “does not have a truth [and] reconciliation committee which is internationally recognized; [it] places importance on government officers (the main accused) and [it] does not place importance on the words of the victims and their family members, nor witnesses.”

Above all, the attitude of the people involved in the suppression of the Red Shirts is such that they pretend nothing ever happened. Especially the former prime minister, Abhisit, who has never apologized for the violence, in an interview with BBC reiterated that, “We have never even tried to break up the protests; we just set up checkpoints and street fights broke out. It was bad luck that people were killed.” The reporter further asked, “Do you accept partial responsibility for the deaths?” Abhisit answered, “No.” However, he did admit to being the person who ordered the use of live ammunition, saying that he does not regret the use of force because it was a way to deal with armed forces (the protestors). Abhisit also stressed, “Let me say that I have joined conferences all over the world and in the case of G20 summits, there are some people who get killed because officers try to carry out their work. And there have to be inquiries into the deaths to prove whether the deaths were lawful. But the prime minister does not take responsibility for what happens” (YouTube, 2012). Thus Abhisit does not deny that protestors died by the bullets of soldiers guns, but instead compares himself to other world leaders whom he considers “above the fray” of the political scuffles that take place in the streets.

The suppression of the Red Shirts protests of 2010 used more force than necessary and there have never been signs of accountability for those who were responsible for the killings, nor any justice for the dead. An important question is why the Abhisit government and the army broke up the Red Shirt protests so harshly. Even during the period of the Yingluck government’s compensation policy these questions were never really answered. Between 2011 and 2014, the Yingluck government had in place a policy to compensate victims of violence during the political protests that took place from 2006 through 2010. People from all sides were eligible to receive compensation, and the government paid 7.75 million baht (\$258,300 US) in financial aid to the families of those killed, and smaller amounts based on a compensation schedule to those who were injured, regardless of the color of their shirts. Nevertheless, there remained signs of distrust and many people said that the Red Shirts who had died were looking to get killed.

Specifically, many Yellow Shirt and Democrat Party leaders accused people of pretending to have been injured or hurt in order to receive government compensation. Furthermore, they insinuated that the promise of compensation would instigate more protests, thereby downplaying the idea that the original Red Shirt protestors were legitimately mobilized by their political grievances, and insinuating instead that they were looking for payouts. Chuan Leekpai, former prime minister and an advisor to the Democrat Party stressed that “Thaksin should pay his own money to remedy [the wrongs against the Red Shirts] because they are on the same side.” Vorakorn Chatikavanij, wife of Korn Chatikavanij, Deputy Head of the Democrat Party said, mocking the way in which people quickly received money that the Red Shirts had discovered “a new kind of business with good profits... the business of demanding democracy.” She claimed that, “Whomever did not die or get injured has another way: to pretend to be crazy and let relatives ask for money,” and furthermore that those who had dishonored the dead should pay compensation on their own: “If you feel bad that you stepped on dead bodies, just pay [your] own money to them.” Matichon, January 13, 2012). Similarly, Chai Chidchob, a member of the opposition from the Bhunjaithai Party looked down at the practice of paying victims, saying, “It will lead to even more protests and people will not be afraid because some people try all their lives and are not able to gather [even] a hundred thousand baht”—a mere fraction of the compensation payout (Bangkoknews, April 5, 2012). Equivalently, Somchai Sawangkarn, an appointed senate member, said, “If there are mobilized protests again to cause confrontations and conflicts to cause wounds and casualties, there is a strong motivation of 7.75 million baht” (Banmuang News, June 1, 2012). Additionally, objections were filed at the court to cancel this policy by both Tul Sittiomwong, leader of the Yellow Shirts, and Satit Pitutacha, member of the Democrat Party, who filed a complaint against the program at Thailand’s Office of National Anti-Corruption Commission. The media ridiculed the program, with lines like, “7.75 million baht breaks the heart of the Thai people, costing 2 billion baht in taxes which have been earned with blood, sweat, and tears to reward the Red Shirt terrorists” (Manager Daily, April 23, 2012) and “The parade that burned the city receives an award and protestors receive a bonus of 7.75 million baht each” (Seengern, 2012).

All above ideas can be summarized through the words of General Somjet Boonthanom, appointed senate member who said, “Just like the 7.75 million baht being regarded as compensation, from another perspective it is a life insurance because 7.75 million is a lot when some people cannot even accumulate 1 million. There are people who willingly cause people to get wounded or die. Some hired hit men to kill others for as little as thirty thousand baht and receive the death penalty. In this case people were hired to cause violent incidents and the life insurance is 7.75 million baht. This is a very interesting amount” (Thaipost, June 3, 2012).

The group of people who despise the Red Shirts, generally the middle class and those identified with the Democrat Party, or Yellow Shirts, used hateful language to describe the Red Shirts as not Thai, and as human. Their language helped to justify violence against the Red Shirts, and subsequently, a callous response to their deaths. Indeed, even the parties tasked with investigating the protests and mending society through reconciliation were indifferent to the hundreds of deaths among the Red Shirts as if the deaths were not the deaths of humans. Even the TRCT, National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, King Prajadhipok's Institute and reconciliation forums, never interviewed the protestors or their families, as if they have no voices of their own. In addition, the Red Shirts are further demonized with remarks that claim that the Red Shirts cannot think by themselves, that they are merely poor and stupid supporters of the Shinawatras, awaiting orders and money from the government.

4. The Red Shirts' Complicated Relationship to the Shinawatras

The formation of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, or Red Shirts, was done in a contentious political atmosphere, following the coup that deposed Thaksin. The group's creators were not happy with the coup and the judicial system's double standards. It is certain that a large number of Red Shirts love and support the Shinawatras, but there are also a large number who love something called democracy, and the principles of justice and equality, instead. From visits to seven provinces in the Upper Northern Thailand to interview Red Shirt supporters, the author found that, contrary to depictions in media, the Red Shirts are not merely ignorant supporters of their supposed idol, Thaksin. These interviews confirm arguments made in a number of academic works. For instance, these people are not indifferent to politics nor do they trade their votes for money. Also, they are not stupid, and do not lack education or information (Phatharathananunth, 2008). Although the middle class, especially in Bangkok, despises Red Shirts and complain that the Red Shirts are rural people who sell their votes, research by Pasuk Phongpaichit, a political economist, shows that while the distribution of money before elections is common, 95 percent of Red Shirts said this money does not affect their voting decision for political parties. This means that people who accept money feel no obligation to vote for the party they do not prefer (Voice TV, 2014). Similarly, Prinya Thaewanarumitkul, a law associate professor, found that vote buying does not have an effect on the election outcome (Prachatai, 2012).

Likewise, Yukti Mukdawijitra (2012) said that the 1997 constitution and policies of the Thai Rak Thai party had created a new independent middle class to select policies that they prefer. Mukdawijitra also stressed that their coherence was independent, that they came together over common political beliefs, that money was not involved in their organizing, and that vote buying did not influence their voting. Instead, they fit the pattern of what Andrew Walker (2012) calls "middle-income peasants." They are neither stupid, nor unable to think for themselves, nor poor in the way that society imagines them. Thai society should stop referring in public discourse to the rural, Red Shirt supporters as stupid, poor, and pained – a Thai saying that describes the pitiable and hateful position of the rural underclass (Manohan 2012).

The next crucial question is, given that they do not place the stereotypical importance on money that many segments of Thai society believe they do, what drives the movement called the Red Shirts? Although there is a segment of Red Shirts who love and support Shinawatras, another group looks further than the person. Their commitment to the Red Shirt movement stems from being confronted with injustice and double standards and being disadvantaged and excluded from economic prosperity by the elite and middle classes. This social exclusion led many to join the Red Shirts. As Somchai Preechasilpakul, a law scholar, argued, "A large number of people in society say it is a problem of poverty and economic inequality, but in reality the root of the problem is inequality in power" (Prachathai, 2010b). Indeed, this inequality is compounded by "the negative feelings from the treatment they received from "others," especially the insults, [which] are the main cause" for joining the Red Shirt movement (Satitniramai et al., 2013). Jim Taylor (2012) thus argues that the formation of the Red Shirts is driven by a shared sense of oppression, loss and marginalization.

While Red Shirt supporters' have true political grievances, and have banded together based upon them, Thai political society has regularly discounted the Red Shirts. As Chairat Charoensin-O-Larn (2009) argued, rural or grassroots voters are counted as eligible voters during the voting season, meaning that they can vote and are welcome at the poles; but after the election results come in and do not accord with the desires of the Thai aristocracy, these rural voters are counted as members of a different group—those that sold their votes in return for populist policies. Then, they become "uncounted," and their political desires, recorded by their votes, are held up as either unimportant or fraudulent. Therefore, Charoensin-O-Larn cited Jacques Rancière, calling these voters the "part which has no part" in society; these voters, who are both included and excluded by the political process, fit Agamben's definition of "bare life" as their political voices, even when expressed, are ignored or twisted to make them objects of hate, and not only by the middle and upper classes, but also by those, such as the

Shinawatras, who have relied on rural voters to bring them to power.

Although the Red Shirts helped the Pheu Thai party led by Yingluck Shinawatra win the general elections in 2011 with 265 out of 500 votes parliamentary votes, most of which came from Red Shirt members of parliament, the rural supporters of the Red Shirts were discounted and treated as worthless under the Yingluck government from 2011 until its toppling in 2014, as well.

5. Precarious Life under Yingluck Shinawatra Government (2011-2014)

During its tenure, the Yingluck government did mobilize compensation and assistance for political victims of all colors who had suffered during political violence between 2006 and 2012 by awarding large amounts of money to victims in accordance with the severity of the losses. However, the overall picture of the Yingluck government's administration of the country over the two and a half years it was in power, is captured in her government's attempts to push forward a reconciliation act which would have given amnesty to all of those involved in the 2010 violence, including Abhisit, Suthep, and the army. During its time in power, the Pheu Thai Party focused on the following objectives:

1. Helping Thaksin Shinawatra,
2. Negotiating with the army and the elite,
3. Refusing to reform some institutions that had been involved in many violent events, including the military and the judiciary,
4. Refusing to give amnesty to a large number of Red Shirt victims who were prosecuted, many of whom remain in custody to this day,
5. Rejecting truth-seeking efforts directed toward uncovering the story of the 2010 massacre of Red Shirts, and
6. Claiming that a "majority" of Thais were behind reconciliation and appealing to Red Shirt supporters and victims to give up their claims for the losses in the past and stop the harsh criticisms of the army and elites (Sripokangkul, 2013).

Thaksin Shinawatra, during his voluntary exile abroad, always echoed the calls of the Pheu Thai Party for a general amnesty on both sides, naming the need for reconciliation in Thai society. There is no way to tell victims to accept their fate like telling them to "sacrifice" themselves for the good of the whole society, and claiming that they should "forget history" in order to jointly create a beautiful Thai society. Thaksin himself weighed in on the issue from abroad. He appealed to the Red Shirts, saying, "Although the mother of Kamonked Akhad, a volunteer nurse who died during the crackdown at the Pathumwanaram temple, is still angry that her son was shot by soldiers, and she does not want amnesty—this is normal—but we have to regard the interests of the majority and let the minority sacrifice [their desires for justice]" (Khaosod, April 16, 2012) and, "The government is looking towards the future of the country and we ask for understanding and sacrifices by the Red Shirts" (Matichon, May 20, 2012). Sanoh Thienthong, senior advisor to the Pheu Thai Party recommended, "In order to create reconciliation, the best way is to talk like relatives and forget all old issues" (Matichon, April 9, 2012). Similarly, Yongyuth Tiyapairat, former chairman of the house of representatives and a close associate of Thaksin, when asked whether reconciliation results in mass losses because some Red Shirts still suffer great impact from the death of family members during the massacre, said, "Reconciliation in the long term will have good results for the country, but if someone thinks of it is as a loss, they are selfish" (Daily News, April 17, 2012).

In addition, many Red Shirt members were incarcerated with charges of violating Article 112, or *lèse-majesté*, resulting from the political conflict after the 2006 coup d'état; the number of people imprisoned under Article 112 increased under Abhisit, because his government used the *lèse-majesté* law as a tool to suppress political opposition. Regardless of the law's use as a political tool against the Red Shirts, the Pheu Thai party never regarded those jailed as victims, even though some received the maximum prison sentence of 20 years and are still serving their time. Although progressive academics and other Thai scholars, such as those in the Nitirat group, petitioned for the abolition of Article 112, the head of the Pheu Thai Party, Yongyuth Wichaidit, stressed that the Yingluck government had no intention of changing the law, saying, "The government has expressed its stance on this issue many times already, whatever you keep saying, we have said we will not do it" (Thaipost, May 17, 2012). Similarly, Prompong Nopparit, spokesman for the Pheu Thai Party said, "The standpoint of the Pheu Thai Party is not to change Article 112. If someone wants to change it, they will have to campaign by themselves. If the majority of the population agrees, the Pheu Thai Party might reconsider its position to not change Article 112. But if the Red Shirts want to change it now, collect petitions yourself" (Matichon, May 17,

2012). Yet even when many names and different groups were collected, Chalerm Yoobamrung, Deputy Prime Minister, reiterated: “It is their right, but if the majority of the government does not approve, the law is not passed.” Chalerm also said, “The government has no policy on this matter; we are royalists whatever happens” (Thaipost, May 18, 2012). The alignment of the Pheu Thai Party with the royalist position on Article 112 was a direct attempt to reach out to the elite and middle classes, which had long accused Thaksin and the Red Shirts of opposing, and wanting to overthrow and replace the monarchy. The government calculated that standing up for the political victims who had been jailed under Article 112 would have allowed the Democrat Party and Yellow Shirt supporters to make these claims even more strongly.

The alignment with the Democrat Party and Yellow Shirts was made in other ways, as well. The Yingluck government believed that by offering compensation to victims and their families that it could stop the calls for Abhisit, Suthep, and others responsible for the 2010 massacres to be prosecuted. In reality this was not so easy. Nattapat Akhad, younger brother of Kamonked Akhad, a volunteer nurse who was shot in the Pathumwanaram temple, said, “Although we received compensation, it does not mean our suffering has ended” (Post Today, April 24, 2012). In the same way, Nidhi Eoseewong, a professor of history, criticized the Yingluck government, saying, “The bodies you step on are all Red Shirts and you hit them on the head with seven to eight million baht. That is enough, right? But it appears that the Red Shirts themselves are shaken, too, because they have the feeling that they cannot stand stepping on bodies like this” (Daily World Today, June 14, 2012). Likewise, Professor Kasian Tejapira, a political scientist, criticized the Yingluck government with this poem: “You have a dispute and invite us to fight for you, but when we die you accuse us. You patch up and forget us in the end. You hit us on the head with money and tell us not to sue. You treat us like pests. After the reconciliation is done you step on us. You let me die for [the] tradition of Thainess” (Voice of Siam, 2013). In short, it appeared that the Pheu Thai Party under Yingluck was pushing for reconciliation not as a social good, but as a political expedient designed to secure their power and reduce conflict with other political rivals.

Aside from its compensation program, the ruling Pheu Thai Party under Yingluck decided to ignore the Red Shirt victims who are, even today, still waiting for a glimpse of justice. Instead, the Pheu Thai Party chose to reconcile with the elites in their own party and opposition parties, as well as with the army and all parties that had had a hand in the 2010 violence, even though that violence was mostly directed at their own supporters, the Red Shirts. Furthermore, the Pheu Thai Party was reluctant to help the hundreds of Red Shirt supporters who still remain in custody, and acted as if the violent suppression and punishment of Red Shirts never happened. For Pheu Thai and the Yingluck government, reconciliation was equated to official amnesty—absolution for those on both sides who committed crimes and violence in 2010. This stubbornness ultimately resulted in the dissolution of parliament in 2013, when the Pheu Thai Party pushed through its amnesty bill for all political sides, generating anger not only from elites who saw it as a vehicle for bringing Thaksin back, but also among Pheu Thai supporters, who felt abandoned and cut out of the political deal.

The amnesty bill led to protests to overthrow the Yingluck government. The protests were led by the leader of the Democrat Party, Suthep, and pushed forward by his People’s Committee for Absolute Democracy with the King as Head of State (PCAD). This group consisted of Yellow Shirts, including the elite and middle classes in Bangkok and the South. The protestors prolonged and obstructed new elections, and called for the army to step in and overthrow the government. Regrettably, Mainueng Kor Kuntee, a Red Shirt poet was shot and killed on April 23, 2014, during the protests, and the killers were not found.

In a sense, the Red Shirts suffered continued hardship many times over, watching the Yingluck government appease those from the Abhisit government, Suthep and the soldiers involved with the 2010 massacre. As if that is not enough, they had to watch as the Pheu Thai Party which they support, betrayed them with the introduction of the amnesty bill and the refusal to defend them as victims of overzealous use of Article 112. Furthermore, during the PCAD protests against the amnesty bill and against the Yingluck government, on protest stages throughout Bangkok—and magnified in the media through coverage of the protests—there were daily offensive expressions of disgust towards the Red Shirts. For example, Dr. Seri Wongmontha, leader of the PCAD, said, “Three hundred thousand votes in Bangkok are worth more than 15 million worthless votes upcountry” (YouTube, 2014). Chitpas Kridakorn, whose family owns the Singha Beer Company in Thailand and who was a PCAD leader, said during the protests that, “We have to fight and to reform until it is clear that not everyone should have an equal vote; evil people should not have the same vote as good people and stupid people should not have an equal vote as smart people” (Matichon, June 29, 2014). “Evil” and “stupid” were clearly epithets for the rural, Red Shirt voters. Furthermore, it often said that the Red Shirts are the slaves of Thaksin, and an oft-repeated phrase, “girl riding a red buffalo,” refers to Yingluck’s relationship to the Red Shirts (Seengern, 2014). Finally, the Red Shirts had to watch the military carry out a coup d’état and destroy the core principle of

democracy which they believe in. After the May 22, 2014, coup d'état that ejected Yingluck's government from power, the military summoned a large number of Red Shirts to change their attitude and forbid them from engaging in political speech or action. Similarly, a number of pro-democracy academics who refused to meet with the army, and requested asylum abroad had their Thai passports revoked. The Yellow Shirts and Democrat Party members who engaged in the protests were never rebuked for their role in disrupting elections or in the violence when the new military government came to power.

6. Conclusion

Since their formation, the Red Shirts have been left to their own fate, at once counted, and uncounted, abused and forgotten, treated as non-humans and bare life which has no rights and no protection, is easily killed and verbally abused. Until the Red Shirts are legitimized as political actors, they will continue to be a useful scapegoat for whatever ruling party needs to consolidate and legitimize its power. The Red Shirts will continue to be seen and portrayed as inferior to humans, lower than animals, and worse than demons, make their exclusion from the political realm easier and more commonplace.

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Note

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