Red Shirt and Political Reform Talk: The De-securitisation of Thai politics within official media?

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Abstract:

The Copenhagen School and the theory of Securitization has mainly been applied or linked to western driven security issues within International Relations such as immigration, drug trafficking, global warming, global war on terror amongst others. As such, much criticism has been directed towards its Eurocentric upbringings. However, despite these comments, securitization has also started to gain its presence outside of western Europe. This paper attempts to gauge as to how might the theory be applied in the context of Thailand. Political movements (Yellow, Red, Multicolour) in Thailand have remained a fixture in public debate and on the political agenda since 2005. The paper investigates if there has been a Desecuritization of the Red Shirt movement within official media between the end of the violent demonstrations of May 2010 to the end of September 2011. As such, it focuses on how securitization/desecuritization has affected human rights, specifically vis-a-vis Thailand’s adherence to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) during the post protest period. Given the specific time period of the study, the paper aims to draw comparisons as well as contrasts between the Abhisit and Yingluck administration. As such, the case remains both a test case to the Securitization theory’s underlining assumptions on political and security dynamics and logics as well as to provide a different angle to Thailand’s ongoing political conflict and its development.

Key word: SECIURITIZATION / DESECURITIZATION / UDD / HUMAN RIGHTS / SPEECH ACT / THAINESS / UNITY

1 Background:

From the 12th of March to 19th of May 2010, United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) supporters led large-scale protests in the center of Bangkok against the Abhisit government demanding snap elections. These protests turned violent during early April following the Phan Fah incident where the Thai government sent in troops to evict the
protesters from the government quarters. During the rest of April, negotiations and clashes continued. The military became reluctant to use the necessary force to suppress the protests given the presence of Black Shirts and armed Red Shirt guards (Ockey 2010). Because the consolidations of the protests were centered in the main business/shopping district of Bangkok, pressure was also mounting on the government. In the start of May, the government offered the protesters a compromise. This included the dissolution of parliament in four months and early elections in November. This would also allow the government enough time to issue the promotion list within the military. However, disunity was also setting in among the ranks of the UDD/Red Shirts hindering prospects of possibly negotiating a compromise. The final crack down on the protest around the Rajaprasong area was sparked by the assassination of General Khattiya on the 17th of May. On the 19th of May, the military moved in. By the end of the operation, some 80 civilians were dead, over 2100 persons were injured, and buildings were set ablaze by militant elements within the protesters (Ockey 2010).

The two conflicting sides in Thailand’s Red and Yellow shirt dispute can generally be considered as representing two fronts. At best, it seems that the former Abhisit government and its supporters represented the keepers of the status quo, the conservatives, royalist, and the established elites. The UDD however consists of not only pro-Thaksin supporter groups, most of whom are from the rural areas of Thailand’s North and Northeastern regions but also of anti-coup supporters and reformists. Yet considering the demographics of the two sides, which was also made apparent in the general election in July 2011, the conflict also metastasized into an issue of class. In this regard, discourses concerning the conflict could be categorized into two debates where the conflict is both an intra-elite dispute and a social division conflict.

As Pye and Schaffar (2008) highlighted in an initial review, the coup in 2006 started with an intra-elite dispute. Pye and Schaffar (2008) furthermore noted that this was particularly encapsulated in the characterization of the personal feuds between Sonthi Limthongkul and Thaksin. McCargo, who has coined the term “Network Monarchy” also provide a detailed description of this dispute between Thaksin and Sonthi (2005, p. 499).

Sonthi was a former friend of Thaksin who ultimately fell out of favor with Thaksin. McCargo characterized Sonthi Limthongkul as a “professional self-promoter” media mogul (2008: p. 8). According to McCargo (2009), the feud was caused by Thaksin denying Sonthi his wish to control a major television station. This personal dispute came to a head when
Sonthi was fired from *Muangthai raisapda* (Thailand Weekly), a popular political talk show (McCargo 2009; Nelson 2007). As such, the issue between Thaksin and Sonthi had initially to do with media access, yet escalated into mobilizing movements (McCargo 2009). As Ukrist (2008) notes, the transition from individual feud to movement came in the form of slogans such as “We will fight for the King” (2008, p. 131). This also transformed the dispute into a broader ideological one. Yet in linking the Thaksin and Sonthi dispute to a wider intra-elite dispute, Pavin elaborates that Thailand’s established elites have had a tradition for using the “unity” discourse to quash what they saw as disunity or political dissidence (2010, p. 333). Pavin notes that the use of “unity ... signals the quality of oneness, sameness, and agreement” (2010, p. 333). With the monopolization of the electoral system, Thaksin and his supporters were beginning to erode this status quo. This has also resonated with Connors and Hewison (2008), who points out that the arrangements for the coup were made by a network close to the monarchy. Also McCargo (2005) has termed this as a royalist network or “network monarchy” (2005, p. 499). As such, the main focus of these analyses has been on the key power holders close to the palace against Thaksin and his supporters, who represent the new Sino-Thai globalists. Arguably, this has to do with an underlying account of Thai politics that ultimately, political clout rests with key movers within the royalist network and the new business elites.

Running parallel to the above-mentioned discourse are the more general issues of social and class divisions within Thai society. As noted by McCargo (2010), Thailand has been living with contradictions, which have been brought up to a boil with the protests. As an initial reference point, in 2001, Thaksin Shinawatra and the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party initiated some of Thailand’s most progressive redistributive policies. These included the universal health care scheme, the village development fund, and the micro credit loans for farmers, among others. According to Thitinan, these policies and the political activism garnered by his party captured the “hearts and minds of Thailand’s rural majority” and led the TRT party to win two election victories making the TRT party into the political party juggernaut compared to the second largest party, the opposition Democrat Party (Prachathipat) (2008, p. 142). As such, the victory of Thaksin and the TRT party does not only represent a victory of a political party, but also represents a particular departure from previous parties/government policies, which have traditionally been Bangkok-centered. Yet Ockey (2010) has mentioned as well that the divisions run much deeper and even divide communities and families. Ockey however also concede that the broader divisions between
urban/middle classes against the rural/poor are an “accurate” characterization (2010, p. 8). He further points out the distinction that it is not only a class issue (middle classes vs. poor based on income) but a social/geographical (urban vs. rural) one as well (Ockey 2010). Furthermore, according to Funatsu and Kagoya (2003), for example the analyses of the Thai middle classes have traditionally been stereotyped and tended to focus on a particular group within the middle classes. This middle class, which Funatsu and Kagoya note, has in the past maintained great political clout as it is characterized as an “extra-parliamentary” entity and consists “of homogeneous urban-based elites” with high educational backgrounds from Bangkok (2003, p. 260). This is also noted in Thitinán’s article where as he characterizes Thaksin’s critics as among others “the Bangkok based urban elites (comprising the car- and home-owning middle classes in and around the city of ten million)” (2008, p. 143). Thitinán (2008) further notes that the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protests contain the same elements as the protests back in 1992 during the Bloody May Massacre which was staged by the middle classes, linking it to Funatsu and Kagoya’s (2003) interpretations as well. As Pye and Schaffar noted, the anti-Thaksin movement has been “loosely lumped together with “the urban elite’”’ (2008, p. 39). Although it would be incorrect to claim that the anti-Thaksin PAD movement represents only the Bangkok-based upper middle class, yet this generalization has been dotted across the academic literature in describing the opposition to Thaksin.

As such, Thaksin may best be described as a catalyst to the conflict. By tapping into the rural masses, he found political support from the rural masses and the political legitimacy that came with it. However, what made the coup acceptable for the middle classes was that during the Thaksin administration, the middle classes began to resist Thaksin’s economic policies, as well as his policies in dealing with the Southern insurgency and his war on drugs, due to the allegations of corruption and human rights violations. According to Ockey the resistance was capped until the economy slowed in 2005, after which “policy corruption” emerged (2010, p. 12).

When Thaksin began to censor the media for being critical of the government, this produced a backlash among the middle classes (Ockey 2010). Furthermore, the populist policies, which had garnered massive support for Thaksin among the poor, were increasingly seen as irresponsible among the middle classes (Ockey 2010). As such, the middle classes saw the poor as being bought off through populist policies and vote buying, which left them with little option but to overthrow the government (Ockey 2010). This has also given raise to
a particular condescending notion of the poor and the rural population. As Ockey (2010) notes, for the Yellow Shirts, who consisted mostly of the middle classes, the poor were being deceived and bought off by Thaksin. In Anek Laothamatats’s (1996) *A Tale of Two Democracies*, Anek describes the scenario of the rural population electing corrupt prime ministers, while the urban population ousts them in return. As such, Thailand’s class analyses seem increasingly mixed between social/geographical divisions (urban and rural) and class division (elites, middle classes vs. poor).

**Thainess and Otherness:**

However, the politicization of class, which started during the Thaksin administration and the social division as described in the above section is not the only tool being used by academics as well as by political leaders in describing the social/political divisions or ‘double standards’. Preceding the violent street protests of May 2010, changes to the national Thai identity/Thai nationhood and the concept of national unity has also been raised by academics as an important element in the discussion.

As mentioned in the above section, “unity” in the Thai sense denotes several things such as “sameness” “oneness” (Pavin 2010, p. 333). According to Pavin (2010), it is antithetical to such concepts as diversity and pluralism. Yet unity has in the past promoted the political status quo and has remained a staple political discourse used by the traditional elites to stabilize the political climate. In instances such as during the Cold War of the 1970s and 1980s, it provided political stability and consolidated political power in an era where Thai leaders found themselves surrounded by an upsurge of communist states in the region (Pavin 2010). However, the question remains as to how has the call for national unity been linked to being “Un-thai” or “Un-thainess” in the case of the Red Shirts? According to Poowin (2010) and Pavin (2010), there have been attempts during the previous Abhisit government to merge the two concepts together i.e. unity and Thainess. Poowin (2010) and Pavin (2010) further explains that by merging the two, those who were found to be creating disunity were also considered as being unthai. As such, being unthai is also an expression of otherness, an outsider. Arguably, considering individuals as unthai becomes problematic for the reason that they are also perceived to not follow the triad national ideology of nation, religion and monarchy (Poowin 2010; Connor 2008).

However “Thainess” remains also a problematic concept to define (Poowin 2010, p. 245). According to Thongchai Winichakul (2004), a leading Thai historian, who noted that
“Thainess” has never been clearly defined, it is through “negative identification” or by defining the others, that Thainess has been defined (p. 5-6).

In linking this debate to the theory of securitization, a call for national unity represents a powerful political tool for Thai politicians to use in silencing political opponents. By merging unity with Thainess, it seems that this also has the potential to be taken as a threat against the prevailing national ideology. As such, it could be considered as an act of securitizing the debate as it elevates to an issue outside the realms of normal politics.

2 Theory:

Arguably, one of the more successful redefinitions and conceptualizations of security is the Copenhagen School’s (CoS) Securitization theory. As proponents of constructivism IR CoS considers that any emerging security issue might not necessarily be “because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such” (Buzan et. al. 1998, p. 24). As such, the interest of the study is not in considering the real threat, but the construct of the threat. Furthermore, securitization or the process of successfully securitising an issue can be considered to exist on the extreme end of a political act spectrum. The process of successfully securitizing an issue elevates it above politics. The question is as such “When does an argument with this particular rhetorical and semiotic structure achieve sufficient effect to make an audience tolerate violations of rules that would otherwise have to be obeyed?” (p. 25). Securitising an issue brings immediacy to an issue by presenting it as an existential threat which requires emergency measures and justifies actions that are outside the rules of normal political procedures (Buzan et. al. 1998, p. 24). The dynamics of it is that there are referent objects, which are “things that are seen to be existentially threatened and that have a legitimate claim to survival” which are securitized (Buzan et. al. 1998, p. 36). When considering referent objects, mostly it refers to the state, however it could also be society, communities, identities, or even ideologies. However, the question remains as to how are issues dramatized to such an extent that they become securitised? Since the theory is not concerned with real threats but only in the construct of the threat, the process involves the “speech act” (Buzan et. al. 1998, p. 26). First proposed by John Austin (1975), the concept of a speech act suggests that by uttering, it shapes actions. By saying something is of a security concern, it is considered that something is getting done (Buzan et. al. 1998). As such, the speech act has a performative function. However, securitization, as a specific kind of speech act, does not mean that by saying ‘security’, we have successfully securitized an issue. This
depends on the context and may implicitly rather than explicitly be expressed. Furthermore, presenting a discourse, which identifies an existential threat against a referent object, does not mean that it will be considered as such. Part of this process is utterance, the other is in the acceptance of that statement by its audience.

There are three components to successful securitization: “existential threats, emergency actions, and effects on interunit relations by breaking free of rules” (Buzan et al. 1998, p. 26). As such, the construct of the threat, the immediate actions taken and the acceptance of the action by the audience.

However, the issue of desecuritization as opposed to securitization happens when an issue is moved out of the security agenda and is not defined in security terms (explicitly or implicitly). As such, it is a normalisation process where the legitimizing and enacting or evoking of special provisions/actions is discontinued. According to Wæver (1998, p. 81), the aim of desecuritization is “asecurity”, where neither security language nor its logic applies (Wæver 1998, p. 81). As such there are three characteristics/options for this to take place. According to Wæver (2000), one is that issues are no longer mentioned in security terms. Secondly, issues, which are already securitized, are managed and avoid security dilemmas or other vicious cycles. Lastly, the issue is brought “back to normal politics” (Wæver 2000, p. 253). As such, desecuritization takes away the transformative function which securitization has.

3 Research Question:

The study plans to investigate into what followed after the end of the violent protests in terms of security and the creation of the existential threat. As such, the research question is

To what extent has there been a de-securitization since the end of the Red Shirt movement demonstrations in May 2010?

4 Objectives:

- To address and discuss the appropriateness of the securitization theory in the context of Thailand and its ongoing political conflict.
- To highlight and provide a detailed description of the conflicting sides.
- To demonstrate how the theory of securitization and desecuritization can be used in the context of Thailand’s political conflict.
5 Research Methodology/Methods:

The main focus of this non-experimental study is to initially conduct a content analysis of the articles gathered from the Public Relations Department homepage. According to Berg, content analysis is a “careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings” (2007, p. 338). By initially conducting a quantitative content analysis, it is considered the simplest way to reduce and quantify the material into more manageable information. This information can then be analyzed more easily. Furthermore, this method does not depart from other previous related studies in the field. The content analysis was conduct by initially constructing and using a coding scheme in order to extract the information relevant to the hypotheses in answering the research question. The questions in the coding scheme, were formulated based on previous research papers on the theory as well as using existing literature on the Thai political context.

Concerning the selection of sources for the study, in performing their speech acts securitizing actors can include politicians, media journalists, spokespersons, etc... Since the question relates to the desecuritization of the Red Shirts movement as well as other political movements by the government, a government media source was selected. In this case, the Public Relations Department website, which is under the control of the Office of the Prime Minister, was used as a source as it was both accessible and did not require text translations, thereby forgoing reliability issues. In its Inside site which focuses on political and economic issues on the government agenda, the researcher found 825 articles within the time period between the 19th of May 2010 to 29th of September 2011. These were subsequently purged of duplicates and irrelevant articles. Articles were considered relevant based on whether their primary discussion included issues of political reform, Red Shirt/UDD movement or, government political policies pertaining to domestic issues. Articles that were omitted included announcements of awards, announcements of diplomatic appointments, announcements of ceremonies/festivals, announcements on public health issues, announcements of issues pertaining to the Southern insurgency, announcements on issues pertaining external relations, announcements concerning issues of industry, production, economic forecasts, governments economic policies. This resulted in 129 articles being codeable. The data was subsequently inputted onto an Excel spreadsheet, which enabled the analysis to be carried out.
6 Findings:

Chart 6.1

Preliminary findings suggest that overall there exists a higher mean of desecuritization statements throughout the duration of the study (14.35 per month) when compared to securitization statements (5.82 per month). Out of the 317 statements found in the 129 articles, which were coded, 66.56% of these statements were either recorded as medium or strong desecuritization statements as opposed to 31.23%, which were either recorded as strong or medium securitization statements. Furthermore, approximately 2.21% were recorded as neutral statements. Consequently, from the 19th of May to 31st of May 2010, represents a specific outlier in the data set in terms of a higher number of securitization statements when compared to the average occurrence within the rest of the studied period.

Given that the Abhisit government needed to outright suppress the protesters as well as justify their military actions, this result was not surprising. Furthermore, there existed a high number of desecuritization statements during the months of June 2010 and March 2011. During the month of June 2010, it seems that the government mainly published proposals for political reforms and called on national reconciliation. As such, this included issues of media reforms, constitutional amendments, and general national reconciliation plans. This increased the number of descuritization statements within that month. Furthermore, during the month of March 2011, a total of nine articles were found where desecuritizing statements occurred. The reason for the high number of desecuritizing statements and the high number of articles, which were captured during the month, was due to that the government outlined their reconciliatory efforts up until then. Furthermore, this also coincided with its announcement of the general election in the proceeding month.
When considering the differences between the statements issued during the Abhisit and the Yingluck administration, then preliminary findings suggest that changes in the number of securitization/desecuritization statements did occur. However, the month of May 2010 does particularly skew the data. With the month of May included, there was a higher mean of 1.84 securitization statements per article during the Abhisit administration when compared to the mean of 1.50 securitization statements during the Yingluck Administration. Without the month of May, the mean of securitization statements issued by the Abhisit administration was at 1.48 per article. In terms of the number of desecuritization statements that were recorded, there was a higher mean value during the Abhisit administration when compared to the Yingluck administration. If the month of May 2010 was included, the mean value for desecuritization statements during the Abhisit administration would be at 2.03. However excluding the month of May, recorded descuritization statements during the Abhisit administration was higher with a mean of 2.12. Compared to the Yingluck administration, the mean value for desecuritization statement per article was at 1.82.

7 Discussions

- This initial study indicates the normalization of the issue of the Red Shirts/UDD movement. However the question remains if this truly captures the situation?
- Is securitization/desecuritization an appropriate theory to use in the context of Thailand?
- Are Thai politicians really that conscious about their rhetoric concerning turning issues into security issues or turning security issues into normal political issues?
- What other factors might be considered to have descuritized the Red Shirts?

Further elaboration:

As mentioned in the description section, Thailand’s political crisis has taken a turn towards progressing into an issue of class. As such, the class discourse, which the UDD movement leaders have used, represents a process of politicization of class. Equally important is the issue of the “Unity” and development of the Thai identity.

Whereas class represents a divisive discourse used by the UDD leadership to point out the social and political disparities, “Unity” and “Thainess” represents an opportunity for the established elites to further consolidate their political clout. With regards to the Theory of Securitization, a desecuritization of the UDD movement represents statements, which further
promote an egalitarian society and respect for human rights, while a securitization of the
UDD movement represents the return to the status quo where human rights are curtailed.

Furthermore, securitization represents the extreme end of the political acts spectrum.
Issues, which are not part of the public agenda, fall under issues that are depoliticized. Issues
that do appear on the public agenda and are part of the political debate are politicized. Issues,
which are framed in security terms within the public agenda fall under the securitization
process.

**Further elaboration on the Discussion section:**

- This initial study indicates the normalization of the issue of the Red Shirts/UDD
  movement. However the question remains if this truly captures the situation?

As can be observed, this study particularly has for now only presented a preliminary
quantitative content analysis. As noted by numerous other scholars, the problem with
conducting a quantitative analysis is that it falls short in terms of validity. As such, it is
particularly simpler to reproduce a quantitative content analysis. Furthermore, content
analysis also remains particularly strong in terms of analyzing and finding out where
emphasis is in a documented/recorded conversation. However it falls short of analyzing the
meanings behind as well as establishing the socio-political context. In order to provide a more
detailed analysis, a discourse analysis would particularly be forthcoming. This would help
strengthen the validity of the study.

- Is securitization/desecuritization an appropriate theory to use in the context of
  Thailand?

Like its opposite, there are also similar issues which desecuritization suffers from
since it is part of the overall Securitization Theory. With respect to Wilkinson’s (2007)
arguments the limitations of the Securitization Theory can be placed into two concerns.
Namely, the general concern that theories, which are developed within the Euro-American
academic sphere, do not reflect the conditions in the non-Western world, given its specific
socio-historical context. Because of that certain logics and predetermined assumptions are
made in order for securitization to take place. These logics also depend on Western
prescribed notions on society and political systems. For example, from a societal aspect, in a
Western context, society is considered as a unitary actor, strong and robust, while in non-Western states, this notion of society may not fall true. Secondly, it is argued that the theory excessively depends on a speech act taking place. In order for there to be a securitization, politicians or the ones who are securitizing an issue need to be able to state what they are thinking and that these statements are available to be disseminated. However, as Buzan et. al (1998) also mentions then “places do exist where secrecy or violation of rights is the rule and where security arguments are not needed to legitimize such acts.... “(p. 24-25). While securitization and desecuritization is able to deal with the official line, such as speeches and official press releases, it is however unable to provide an analysis of the informal politics and their specific dynamics in a society. With reference to Thailand, securitization or desecuritization is not able to investigate into issues of patronage(ism) or cronyism which is prevalent within such political communities as focused on in this study. As such, informal regime behaviour is not part of the securitization/desecuritization story plot and needs to be included some other way.

Given the shortcomings of the theory, the Theory of Securitization still presents an opportunity for researchers to further investigate into specific dynamics of issues, which concern the public debate within the Thai context. As such, the Theory should be considered as an analytical tool, one which furthers the explanatory power of a researcher’s analysis. One of the strengths of the Theory of Securitization is its framework for pointing out specific rhetorical elements within a particularly public debate. Another is that the Theory of Securitization provides an extra level from the depoliticization to politicization of an issue. Because the issue of the UDD movement has been considered in security terms, the theory remains relevant in this aspect.

- Are Thai politicians really that conscious about their rhetoric concerning turning issues into security issues or turning security issues into normal political issues?

Thailand still retains characteristics of a democratic society, even if freedom of expression has in recent years been curtailed. Yet arguably a pseudo-democratic society, Thailand still elects politicians into office and Thai politicians and governments still remain accountable to the public. As such, arguably politicians need to be mindful of what they say and speak. However, in order to determine how conscious Thai politicians are concerning
their language in speeches, other methods of research will need to be used such as interviews with political spin-doctors and politicians in order to gauge the extent of this phenomenon.

- What other factors might be considered to have desecuritized the UDD movement?

Firstly, the question remains if there was a successful desecuritization of the UDD movement? According to a qualitative analysis, the high mean of desecuritizing statements might not mean that the UDD movement has been desecuritized. For example an analysis of the National Reconciliation Five point plan would be needed to see if it represents a desecuritizing process of the UDD movement in official statements issued by the Public Relations Department.

8 Recommendations

- There is a further need to diversify the sources. It would have been interesting to know whether other media, such as news media were also framing the issue within the securitization/desecuritization theory.
- Further qualitative research is needed.
- There is a need to expand the period within the Yingluck era in order to compare the two administrations more thoroughly.
- Further research is need in conducting interviews with the various sides in order to investigate if these where conscious moves by the two governments.
- Further research is also needed in conducting content analysis in the months of March to May 2010. However data may be difficult to come by as public relations department has prohibited access to these articles to the public.
9 References/Bibliography


