

Agenda or Accident? Unraveling the 2014 Mass Exodus of Cambodian Migrant Workers from Thailand

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In May 2014, Thailand saw its latest military coup d'état overthrow an elected government. Shortly after, approximately 250,000 Cambodian migrant workers fled from Thailand into their home country. In this essay, I examine possible rationales for the Thai military junta's apparent cause of the mass exodus, by reviewing academic and media accounts and discussing them in light of actual Thai and Cambodian state behavior. I argue that the Thai junta attempted to consolidate its power among the Thai security forces themselves, on the one hand, and to fight human trafficking in order to improve Thailand's fading international reputation on the other. The military junta had not foreseen the dramatic consequences of the announcement to arrest any illegal migrant workers and the few raids conducted by military personnel. However, in retrospect, the exodus proved very useful for the junta as it was able to turn previously irregular Cambodian migrant workers into a vast cheap *legal* workforce. As such, the military junta weakened the rivaling police force that had benefitted from the trafficking business and threatened the military's power. The political divide in Thai society underlying this rivalry remains, nonetheless, unresolved.

Keywords: Thailand, Cambodia, labor migration, military coup d'état, politics of migration, Thaksin Shinawatra

Largely unnoticed by the global public, 7 June 2014 marked the beginning of a rapid mass exodus of Cambodians from Thailand back to their home country: within three weeks, approximately 250,000 Cambodian migrant workers returned to Cambodia (Finch, 2014). Taking all actors involved by surprise, the Cambodian government sent numerous army trucks and other vehicles to transport the returnees back to their homes while NGOs provided humanitarian assistance at the chaotic border crossings (The Cambodia Herald, 2014; The Economist, 2014, para. 2).

Although a major event in Thai-Cambodian bilateral relations in 2014, until now academics have abstained from exploring the background of the exodus. Therefore, this essay seeks to examine to what extent the Thai military junta might have caused the exodus. Specifically, causing the exodus may have been grounded in the larger political goals of the junta – possibly both national and in-

ternational ones.

In this paper, I first briefly analyze Thai internal politics and the 2014 coup. I then explicate the situation of Cambodian migrant workers in Thailand. Lastly, I review several potential rationales for the Thai junta's behavior in order to pinpoint the exodus inside a broader picture.

Thai politics in the 2000s

The exodus began roughly three weeks after the Thai military had staged their latest coup d'état in a country “polarized between [former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's] supporters and opponents” (Liow & Gamage, 2014, p. 13). The traditional elite in Bangkok, which consists of “the military, the monarchy, and the bureaucracy” (Chachavalpongpun, 2010, p. 335), had perceived their interests and power as threatened and took down Thaksin by military coup in 2006 (Chachavalpongpun,

2010, p. 339; Stout, 2014). However, this hardly contributed to the reconciliation of the “mostly rural, often poor, supporters of Mr Thaksin, and [the] urban middle class” (BBC News, 2014) on the ground, also known as the Red Shirts and Yellow Shirts. On the contrary, the coup plotters could not “prevent the re-emergence of a powerful and threatening government” (Pathmanand, 2008, p. 139) for in 2011, Thaksins’s sister Yingluck Shinawatra was elected Prime Minister in an “overwhelming victory” (Farrelly, 2013, p. 289).

The Yellow Shirts finally saw self-exiled Thaksin’s continuing influence on Thai politics proven when the House of Representatives supported a bill in late 2013 that “would among other things, absolve [...] Thaksin [...] of corruption charges against him” (Liow & Gamage, 2014, p. 12) and allow him to return to Thailand without fearing arrest. Although the bill was eventually refused by the Senate unanimously (BBC News, 2013), at times fatal mass demonstrations by both Yellow and Red Shirts continued and quickly focused on the legitimacy of the government itself (Liow & Gamage, 2014, p. 13). After months of political deadlock, street protests and the prospects of snap elections in July 2014 which were expected to keep her in power (Wade, 2014, para. 12), on May 7th a “court ruling removed [...] Yingluck from her position as prime minister” (BBC News, 2014). On May 22nd, the military seized control of government functions, declared martial law and suspended the constitution (BBC News, 2014; Wade, 2014), officially “in the interest of rule and order” (Campbell, 2014) but supposedly “to reverse the political trend towards democracy in Thailand back to royal political dominance” (Chachavalpongpun, 2014, p. 171).

On June 6th then, Thai army spokeswoman Sirichan Ngathong announced that “any illegal migrant workers found in Thailand ‘will be arrested and deported’” and added that Thai authorities “see illegal workers as a threat because there were a lot of them and no clear measures to han-

dle them, which could lead to social problems” (The Standard, 2014). Although the junta repeatedly denied crackdowns on migrant workers and called them rumors, reports of violent arrests quickly spread among Cambodians inside and outside of Thailand (Kijchalong, 2014; Wallace & Saing, 2014, para. 16). By June 25th, an estimated 250,000 Cambodian migrant workers had returned to their home country, mainly through official border crossings (Finch, 2014).

Labor migration between Thailand and Cambodia

In early 2014, an estimated 180,000 Cambodians were working in Thailand illegally (Promyamyai, 2014, para. 3). Additionally, after the Thai government “opened a registration window for irregular migrants” (Tunon & Rim, 2013, pp. 4-5), approximately 250,000 Cambodians had acquired legal status by 2012, which is consistent with an International Labour Organization (ILO) estimate of around 438,000 Cambodians in Thailand in total (Park, 2014, Chatter sparks fear, para. 5). Cambodian migrant workers are most often employed in construction, agriculture and fisheries (Hing & Lun, 2011, p. 2) with working conditions being “dirty, difficult and dangerous” (Chan, 2008, p. 2), and even though their wages are often below the Thai minimum wage, they are still considerably higher than in Cambodia (Tunon & Rim, 2013, p. 7; see Tolson, 2014, for interview reports). Both Pongsudhirak (2014, Follow the River, para. 4) and Human Rights Watch (2010, p. 20) agree that the absence of migrant workers from neighboring countries on Thai soil would create significant troubles for its economy.

Several studies revealed how prone Cambodian migrant workers, both legal and illegal, were to exploitation (Hing & Lun, 2011, p. 4; Human Rights Watch, 2010, p. 1). Given this situation, policy advice by the ILO (Pearson, 2006), Human Rights Watch (2010) and the International

Organization for Migration (Huguet & Chamrathirong, 2011) was readily available to Thai authorities. Moreover, ever since 1997 a broad civil society coalition “ha[d] focused on the personal legal status and rights of marginalized groups such as [...] migrant workers” (Archavanitkul, 2014, pp. 192-193). Hence, the apparent helplessness in dealing with illegal migrant workers expressed Ngathong’s announcement is not convincing, especially when recalling the importance of migrant workers for the Thai businesses. With this in mind, I will now examine several academic and media accounts on whether the Thai military junta has indeed caused the exodus and if so, why.

Power Politics

Given the dispute about Preah Vihear temple and the refusal of Thai military forces to withdraw from this particular border area (Pou, 2013, p. 90), one might think that the junta’s “crackdown” on and expulsion of Cambodian workers was a show of force towards the Cambodian leadership. It might even be an attempt at intimidation not to interfere with Thai interior politics (The Economist, 2014, para. 4). For instance, Yingluck as well as Thaksin Shinawatra had very good relations with Phnom Penh (Sok, 2014, p. 268-270), and several political figures apparently considered fleeing to Cambodia after the coup (Finch, 2014, para. 9-16). Thailand’s elite could have perceived a Cambodian preference for the Red Shirts. Hence, causing a mass reflux of people that poses significant challenges could have been a warning signal to Cambodian authorities to mind their own business. However, rumors about a Phnom Penh based Thai government in exile were ruled out by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen just days after the coup, long before Ngathong’s announcement. In fact, he clarified that his government would “work hard to keep a normal relationship with the Thais whether there is a civilian government or military government” (Khy, 2014, para. 6). And indeed, “on 31 May 2014, Cam-

bodia’s Deputy Prime Minister [...] turned up in Thailand to offer his government’s support for the Thai coup” (Chachavalpongpun, 2014, p. 181) and a high level Cambodian military delegation visited Thailand in July (Chongkittavorn, 2014, para. 9). Similarly, only five months later Hun Sen welcomed coup leader and new Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha in Phnom Penh, upon which they signed three memoranda of understanding (Khuon, 2014a). These events certainly do not reflect a pro-Thaksin bias in Cambodia. Instead, as Chongkittavorn (2014, para 3) observes, “the state of Thai-Cambodian ties has largely depended on the rapport between leaderships”. Hun Sen did not need any reminder from the Thai junta that the tables had turned. Rather, he sensed it himself and changed his affiliations accordingly for the sake of good bilateral relations (see also Ganjanakhundee, 2014). Thus, the Thai junta did not need to launch a severe bilateral crisis in the midst of internal turmoil at all – unless they had aimed for “unity.”

Unity

Chachavalpongpun (2010, p. 333) describes how the traditional elite in Bangkok are regularly evoking “unity” in apparent attempts to calm occurrences of serious unrest. In this regard, the severe divide between pro-Thaksin Red Shirts and elite-aligned Yellow Shirts during the last decade can obviously be seen as a situation where “national unity” might be called for. However, such discourse only serves the elite themselves as unity is usually synonymous with their interests (Chachavalpongpun, 2010, p. 339; Pathmanand, 2008, p. 133). It should not come as a surprise then that the Red Shirts are not expected to give up their demands for more participation on Thailand’s political stage after Thaksin had significantly improved their economic situation (Chambers, 2013, p. 70; see also Walker, 2012; p. 222). A call for unity therefore would easily dissipate. Thus, it is possible that the junta had decided to utilize

Thai resentments and feelings of superiority towards Cambodians (French, 2002, p. 462), based on the Preah Vihear temple and border dispute, or towards Burmese, representing the vast majority of migrant workers (Park, 2014, Chatter sparks fear, para. 5), to create an external “Other” threatening Thai society. As Derks (2013, p.225) states, “while constituting the backbone of Thailand’s low-cost, labour-intensive industries, the [...] migrant workers in the country are seen at the same time as a threat to its social order, national security and even to the health of its people”. This is consistent with a controversial public claim of a Yellow Shirt leader “that Cambodians were among Red Shirt ranks” (Finch, 2014, para. 23). Yet neither did Ngathong’s announcement constitute an inflammatory hate speech, nor was there abundant news on violent crackdowns on migrant workers. In fact, since the exodus predictably impaired business interests in Thailand (The Economist, 2014, para. 5; THE NATION, 2014a), it rather created conflict within the Thai elite – probably not one of the junta’s goals unless migrant-employing businesses were for some reason more aligned with the Red Shirts. Additionally, there was hardly any news on crackdowns on Burmese migrant workers, let alone a similar exodus (Finch, 2014, para. 17-20). This inconsistency is further evidence against the hypothesis of creating unity among Thais at the expense of Cambodian migrant workers. If anything, the junta’s violent operations “to annihilate [Red Shirt] networks” (Chachavalpongpon, 2014, p. 173) in Thailand’s north brought the society further apart (see also Fenn, 2014).

Internal power struggle

Though no accounts on political affiliations of Thai business owners could be found, evidence suggests that Thai *police* were indeed sympathetic towards the Red Shirts. Chambers (2013) recalls that “at times, Thaksin had given the Royal Thai Police more authority in areas traditionally re-

served for the military” (p. 72), while Yingluck, too, “has increasingly used police (considered to be more pro-Thaksin), rather than the military, for security objectives” (p. 76). In fact, Thaksin had tried to establish a network of well-disposed army leaders too, but was unsuccessful (Pathmanand, 2008, p. 127-129). Instead, “the armed forces have remained more or less autonomous” (Chambers, 2014, p. 113) and the divide of Thai society had manifested itself in the security forces. McCargo (2006, p. 53) for instance notes “bitter turf wars over the control of smuggling and other illegal activities” between police and the army. Furthermore, Hunt (2014, para. 5) reports “the Thai military was using [the exodus] to dismantle a powerbase that was forged around cheap and illegal labor, established and run by a rival institution (the Thai police)”. If this holds true, then the limited crackdowns can be seen as an effort by the traditional elite to re-establish its old powers and undermine those of competitors from inside the state. Moreover, powerful armed forces in favor of Thaksin who are opposed to the largely Yellow Shirt-aligned military could increase the risk of a civil war in the future (cf. International Crisis Group, 2014). In contrast, with so many migrant workers having fled the country, the Thai junta could then establish its control over the returning migration flows: “they will be allowed to return (to Thailand) but only after the paperwork has been completed and their direction will be facilitated by the Thai military” (Hunt, 2014, para. 7). In this sense, the exodus decisively helped the military junta in weakening the rivaling police and stabilizing their rule.

Thailand’s international relations

The United States has been a major partner of Thailand ever since WWII, reflected especially in profound military cooperation and development assistance (Zeboli, 2009, pp. 8-9). Furthermore, “the USA and other foreign governments have played key roles in the legitimization [*sic*] and

fortification of the royal family and its military backers” (Farrelly, 2013, p. 291). Thus, it certainly did not escape the junta’s attention that U.S. Secretary of State Kerry maintained there was “no justification for this military coup” (Wade, 2014, para. 3). Then came the “decision by the U.S. to downgrade Thailand to the lowest tier on human-trafficking – *which had been expected* [emphasis added]” (Finch, 2014, para. 29) during the exodus. Although this event might seem negligible, the consequences could be very costly: cuts in development aid, less foreign direct investment, diplomatic pressure, and even economic sanctions were under discussion (Hodal, Kelly & Roberts, 2014, para. 14). In fact, Australia had postponed “bilateral military operations with Thailand” (Chachavalpongpun, 2014, p. 175) already on May 31st. Given these prospects, the Thai junta could have decided to end illegal migration in a broader attempt to curb human trafficking (Tolson, 2014, Rumours, para. 5). In fact, numerous so-called one-stop services have been opened throughout Thailand under the auspices of the military to allow registration in only half an hour (Preutiwarodom & Saengpassa, 2014, para. 3). Similarly, a couple of one-stop services at border crossings have been set up to facilitate labor migration and allow for subsequent registration at the service points inside Thailand (Hul, 2014; Phorn, 2014). The junta has also called upon businesses to “follow labour laws protecting migrant workers and treat them the same way Thai workers are treated” (THE NATION, 2014b, para. 1) and threatened employers with substantial fines if they failed to register their migrant workers (THE NATION, 2014c, para. 2). This clearly marks a shift from former times when authorities “tolerate[d] the presence (and, in fact, the targeted recruitment) of extra-legal Cambodian migrant workers as long as they [did] not compete with Thais for jobs” (French, 2002, p. 434). Thus, it appears that “the coup makers have reacted with a great sense of nervousness” (Chachavalpongpun, 2014, p. 176) to the threat of international sanc-

tions. The exodus then provided a first opportunity to redeem themselves, at least with regard to human rights violations in Thailand. It should be noted that the United States and European Union indeed imposed sanctions on the junta *during the exodus* (see Chachavalpongpun, 2014, p. 173-175), which is further evidence against the claim that the Thai junta caused the exodus deliberately.

Conclusion

In this essay, I was seeking to provide an examination of different possible rationales for the Thai junta’s apparent crackdown on Cambodian migrant workers in June 2014, which caused a mass exodus of roughly 250,000 Cambodians within weeks. To this aim, I reviewed the academic literature on contemporary Thai politics as well as analysts’ explanations in the media and discussed them in light of actual Thai and Cambodian state behavior. The four “hypotheses” examined were the show of force towards supposedly pro-Thaksin Cambodian leaders; an attempt to unify the confronting Thai factions by creating an external “Other” threat; a power struggle among the Thai security forces themselves; and a new endeavor to fight human trafficking in order to improve Thailand’s fading international reputation.

In light of the relevant accounts, it seems the Thai military junta did not foresee the dramatic consequences of spokeswoman Ngathong’s announcement to arrest any illegal migrant workers, coupled with the few raids conducted by security personnel. Although the Thai authorities were known for frequent violent crackdowns on irregular migrants (Derks, 2013, p. 219), “most countries must balance their security concerns with their need for large numbers of labour migrants” (Mitchell, 2012, p. 7) and Thailand is no exception. Hence, the proposition that the junta intentionally impaired Thailand’s economy and international reputation (even further) appears unlikely. Instead, the exodus might have partly been the result of low opportunity costs associat-

ed with leaving Thailand for Cambodian migrant workers (compared to Burmese) and fast-spreading, exaggerated rumors among Cambodian migrant networks (Finch, 2014, para. 21-27).

Yet, in retrospect, the exodus proved very useful for the Thai military as they were able to kill two birds with one stone. On the one hand, they turned irregular Cambodian migrant workers into a massive cheap *legal* workforce, something former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva had envisioned back in 2009 (Derks, 2013, p. 219); Khuon (2014b) reports over 650,000 legal Cambodian migrant workers on Thai soil today. In so doing, Thai authorities could finally prove their commitment to fighting human trafficking and to promoting human rights to the international community – albeit unsuccessfully (cf. U.S. Department of State, 2015, p. 54). On the other hand, they potentially weakened the rivaling police force that had benefitted from the trafficking business and threatened the military’s power, as suggested by Hunt (2014, para. 5). Additionally, it is important to emphasize that the Thai junta did not intend to intimidate or punish the Cambodian leadership. Instead, the two governments managed to preserve positive bilateral relations, peace and security in the region, and thereby their own national security as well (Adamson, 2006, p. 180). Cambodians themselves have taken advantage of the chance of entering Thailand legally and making a good living for themselves and their families although it remains to be seen how sustainable the improvements will be (for contrasting views see Archavanitkul, 2014, p. 195, and Derks, 2013, p. 219). At the very least, the new Thai policies show that where there is a will, there is a way to solve pressing migration questions.

While the exodus can be regarded as a foreign policy success in hindsight, the political deadlock in Thailand is a lot more difficult to resolve. Although they might have diminished Thaksin’s influence significantly and made his return unlikelier, it is highly questionable whether the traditional Thai elite are ready to endorse

democracy, as it threatens their societal predominance (see for example Hewison, 2014; Kuhonta & Sinpeng, 2014). Rather, it is likely that the divide between Yellow Shirts and Red Shirts will continue to linger underneath the regime’s surface.

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