



# Bangkok uprising redux

BY ORATHAI SRIRING, ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL, AUBREY BELFORD,  
AMY SAWITTA LEFEVRE AND JASON SZEP

November 26 – December 13, 2013 Bangkok and Hua Khua, Thailand

# Besieged but running: Thailand's Finance Ministry

BY ORATHAISRIRING AND ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

November 26 Bangkok

**P**rotesters are bedding down on plastic sheets in its grand reception area. Some bathe in the well-kept garden or hang laundry from its potted plants.

But Thailand's Finance Ministry insists it still runs despite thousands of demonstrators occupying its buildings.

As political tension rises in Bangkok, protesters seeking to topple Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra settled in at the Finance Ministry on Tuesday for a second day.

Most bureaucrats left on Monday when the protesters stormed in, waving flags and blowing whistles. But a determined few stayed behind, including those at the all-important revenue department.

"Today we work normally in the office," said a Revenue Department officer.

Very little is normal, however, about the besieged ministry in Bangkok's government district.

Not all its seven buildings have power. Protesters flicked the switch on a transformer outside the main building to shut off the lights shortly before entering on Monday.

Many senior civil servants retreated to a back-up office at a central business district building.

"Key officials are still working as normal from our backup office," Finance Minister Kittirat Na Ranong told Reuters. "So there will be no impact on the fiscal budget and important functions."

There was no imminent threat to auctions of government bonds, which are handled by the Bank of Thailand. One of its officials said an auction of 5 billion baht (\$160 million) of government bonds on Wednesday would be conducted as usual.

Protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban, until recently a senior Democrat Party politician, told Reuters on Tuesday that the demonstration "might be longer" than the three days originally planned. He has camped overnight in the building.

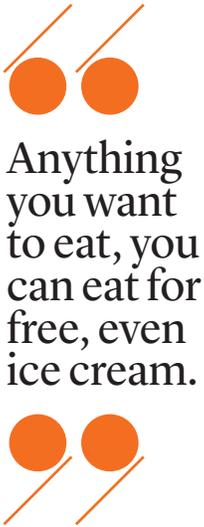
The Finance Ministry protesters seem to be taking that news seriously. They form human chains beneath pick-up trucks to unload hundreds of packs of drinking water.

In scenes more like a rock festival than a revolution, electricity generators have been set up in the parking lot to power the stage lights and sound system. They also recharge the cellphones which protesters use to shoot "selfies" in front of the ministry's official bird-of-paradise seal.

## "EAT FOR FREE"

**Direk Sutthikong, 54, an ebullient clothes merchant** from the southern city of Ranong, is camped out on plastic sheets in the ministry's reception area.

Direk spent the previous night on the hard floor with his sister, his grown-up daughter and dozens of other protesters, who he



Anything  
you want  
to eat, you  
can eat for  
free, even  
ice cream.

said had everything they needed. Makeshift canteens dispense food and water donated by well-wishers.

“Anything you want to eat, you can eat for free, even ice cream,” he said.

The doors to the reception are flanked by two garland-draped elephant statues which watch over dozens of pairs of shoes and sandals. Protesters go barefoot inside the building, as they would in one of Bangkok’s myriad Buddhist temples.

Most of the building is still out of bounds, say protesters, who are camped out in sheltered hallways and stairways between the compound’s buildings.

In the well-kept garden, women in sarongs wash themselves beneath a hosepipe. Toilets are provided on a bus parked outside the gates, said Direk, although the whiff of urine emanates from the ministry’s darker corners.

Finance Minister Kittirat said he was worried the closure, however, would hurt investor confidence. “There will be some impact on the economy in the current quarter if the situation continues,” he said.

Thailand’s economy, Southeast Asia’s second largest, has already slowed this year due to weak exports and subdued domestic demand. The state planning agency said growth could be just 1 percent in the final quarter from a year earlier.

A large number of Finance Ministry bureaucrats sympathise with the protesters, who are aligned with the elite-backed opposition Democrat Party.

“Some people were very happy to let the protesters in,” said an official in the Public Debt Management Office who declined to be identified because he was not authorised to speak to the media. “Thailand is decidedly split right now and most people at the Finance Ministry side with the protesters.”

The official said there would be no immediate impact on civil-servant salaries, unless the protests were prolonged. “They were filed three to four days ago. If this continues, there will be an impact on December salaries.”

“If they close other ministries down its game over for the government,” he said.

The protesters occupying the ministry come from all walks of life, said Manoonsak Tantiwat, 63, formerly a senior official at the nearby Environment Ministry.

“They are doctors, farmers, engineers,” said Manoonsak, who wore a whistle around his neck, which the protesters blow to signal their opposition. “People are waking up.”

He said occupying the ministry was symbolic, since it controlled the money of a government he said was “the most corrupt in my lifetime”. As night fell, hundreds more protesters arrived on tuk-tuks and motorbikes, undeterred by downpours.

Also at the ministry to support the protesters was Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, a prominent academic. He said it was hard to tell how long the occupation would last.

“But the longer they stay, the more support they’ll get,” he said. 

---

Cover photograph by **Dylan Martinez**  
 Additional reporting by **Pairat Tempthairojana**  
 and **Pracha Hariraksapitak**  
 Editing by **Jason Szep** and **Robert Birsell**

# Thailand's red-shirt heartland hides its strength

BY AUBREY BELFORD

November 29 Hua Khua, Thailand

**S**quatting on flat feet, their faces drawn with exhaustion from harvesting rice, Chantee Sanwang and Nang Laor still had the energy to tussle over who loathes Thailand's anti-government protesters more.

"I really hate them," said Chantee, a rail-thin 65 year-old grandmother with teeth stained red by betel nut.

Nang, also 65, refused to be outdone. "I want them dead," she countered, sending both into wheezy hysterics.

As thousands of largely middle-class Thais flood Bangkok streets in protests aimed at overthrowing the government of the populist Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, one volatile factor has been largely absent from the streets: the red-shirted protesters who helped bring her to power.

But in the background, the red shirts remain a potent force, despite being hobbled by a bitterly divided leadership and the atrophy that comes

with more than two years of their side being in power.

In interviews with Reuters, red-shirt leaders and members said they are avoiding direct confrontation with anti-government protesters, which would likely provoke bloodshed. But they are marshalling their forces, just in case.

Like the province it sits in, Udon Thani, the village of Hua Khua is part of the rural north and northeastern heartland that is the support base of Yingluck's Puea Thai Party and her self-exiled brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was deposed as prime minister in a 2006 military coup.

Hua Khua is one thousands of communities that movement leaders call "Red Shirt Villages". These days, this means little more than one tattered office bearing Thaksin's image. But support here for the government runs high.

Love for Thaksin stems from pro-poor policies during his time in power, including easy credit and near-free healthcare. More recently, his sister's government has maintained support with a rice subsidy scheme, which has been derided by the opposition. The economy in the northeast grew 40 percent between 2007 and 2011, nearly twice the national average.

There are some signs support may have slipped a little. A survey by the Isaan Poll Project, run out of the city of Khon Kaen, found Puea Thai's support in the northeast dropped from 80 percent after her 2011 election to about 64 percent in the third quarter of this year.

Support for the opposition Democrats has stayed low.

Perhaps most importantly, residents bridle at what they see as the Bangkok elite's condescending belief that the Thaksin camp has been able to win every election since 2001 by simply buying votes.

"This is about respect," said Thasadaporn, a rice farmer who goes by one name. "The law says that if you get elected, you get a four-year term."

## KEEPING CALM

So far, Thaksin's supporters have stuck to a policy



Love for Thaksin stems from pro-poor policies during his time in power.



of showing their strength while avoiding the kind of violence that could potentially trigger military intervention.

Red shirts have been bussed in their thousands for regular rallies at Rajamangala Stadium, in a Bangkok suburb far from the government buildings being targeted by their opponents. A major gathering is planned for Saturday evening.

“We don’t want to have any reaction between the two groups. We’re trying to keep our people from that color,” said Tida Tawornseth, the chairwoman of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), the largest red shirt group.

The red rallies have been limited in size by the fact that the rice harvest is now on, tying up much of the protest muscle in the fields, leaders and members say. But if the crisis drags on, and harvest time ends, that should no longer be a factor.

“We don’t want the anti-government protests to stop just yet,” said Paritporn Hongthanithorn, a leader of the Red Shirt Village Committee, which oversees Hua Khua.

“Keep it going,” she said, as if to address her opponents. “We’ll see you there.”

### LEADERSHIP RIFTS

**Another key factor holding back the red shirts is their own deep internal division.**

Splits have emerged over the willingness of some leaders to pursue political careers under the Puea Thai banner.

The UDD also suffered a rift with Yingluck after Puea Thai proposed a broad-ranging amnesty bill that would have quashed a two-year corruption sentence against Thaksin, paving the way for his return.

Although the bill would have freed jailed UDD members, it would also have dropped murder charges against anti-Thaksin leaders accused of ordering a 2010 crackdown that killed scores of red shirts. Both sides opposed the bill, which has now been shelved amid the protests.

Disillusionment with Puea Thai has led some

red-shirt figures to meet over the last year to discuss establishing a new, non-Thaksin party for the movement. Nothing has come of it yet.

Even in Hua Khua, the effect of division is visible. The Red Shirt Village movement, launched in 2011, has already split into three factions, Paritporn said. Of the three groups, hers is the only one on speaking terms with the UDD leadership.

Up the road in the provincial capital, Udon Thani, is one person Paritporn is not on speaking terms with: Kwanchai Praipana. He leads the biggest local pro-Thaksin group, People Who Love Udon, which is separate to the UDD.

Kwanchai styles himself as a true Thaksin loyalist and was a supporter of the amnesty bill. But perhaps contradictorily, he is also a critic of red shirts who have joined the Puea Thai government.

“The people have seen so many red shirts have taken positions in the government. It makes them feel these people are not fighting for democracy but fighting for themselves,” he said.

Combined with the rice harvest and the general difficulty of organizing protesters to support, rather than oppose, a government, Kwanchai estimated he is able to marshal about half as many protesters as he could in 2010.

Kwanchai sent hundreds of his supporters to Bangkok earlier in the week, but was barred from going on stage by the UDD leader, Tida. She accuses him of being an opportunist who has attached himself to Thaksin for his own benefit. He reckons she wants to steer the movement down the dangerous path of opposing Thailand’s revered monarchy.

In spite of the division, Kwanchai is still sending his people to the main rally in Bangkok.

And if the current protests trigger a coup, or the judiciary forces Yingluck from power, the trickle will turn into a flood.

“It will be chaos,” he said, repeating himself for emphasis. “It will be chaos. Definitely.” 

Editing by Robert Birsell

# Thailand's Suthep: dissent crusher turns protest leader

BY AUBREY BELFORD AND AMY SAWITTA LEFEVRE

November 27 Bangkok

**I**n 2010, the last time Thailand was gripped by large-scale anti-government protests, Suthep Thaugsuban, then deputy prime minister, was the man wielding the sword.

The Democrat Party politician authorised a crackdown by security forces that left downtown Bangkok burning and killed scores of red-shirt supporters of his arch-rival, Thaksin Shinawatra, a populist former prime minister who was overthrown in a 2006 coup.

Now, just three-and-a-half-years later, Thai politics has flipped. Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, is the prime minister. This time, Suthep is on the outside, leading protests aimed at bringing down Yingluck's government.

And this time, he thinks, Yingluck could not use force to stop him, even if she tried.

"I believe Yingluck doesn't have the authority to order the police or military to do anything," Suthep told Reuters at Bangkok's Finance Ministry, which has been occupied by protesters since Monday. "They've realised she's a prime minister that doesn't obey the rule of law."

The emergence of Suthep as a protest leader betrays how just a few personalities — and their grudges — drive Thailand's political soap opera, with its cycle of violent protests and interventions by the judiciary, military and palace.

Since resigning from parliament this month along with eight other members, the wily, silver-haired politician from Thailand's south has emerged as the firebrand voice of anti-Thaksin forces, a motley collection aligned with Bangkok's royalist civilian and military elite.

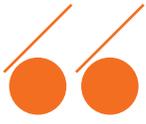
He projects himself as champion of the dispossessed rubber farmers from his home region and of Bangkok's middle classes in speeches that have energised protesters flooding Bangkok's streets by the tens of thousands, in an echo of "yellow shirt" protests that helped to bring Thaksin down.

A warrant has been issued for his arrest after thousands of his supporters swarmed the Finance Ministry. Along with former prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, he faces murder charges over the 2010 crackdown.

He has characterised the protests as a movement to eradicate the network of the now self-exiled Thaksin from Thailand's political system. How that will happen and whether it entails intercession by the judiciary or the coup-prone military is unclear.

He dismissed suggestions of an alliance with the military, a major force in politics since Thailand became a democracy in 1932. The military has staged 18 coups — some successful, some not — and made several discreet interventions in forming coalition governments, almost all with the tacit backing of the royalist establishment that now reviles Thaksin.

"We hope this will be a movement of the people to temporarily seize hold of the governance of Thailand," he said.



I have no idea what Suthep means by a 'people's parliament'.



### “BACKROOM DEALMAKER”

**Suthep says parliament, now controlled by Yingluck's Puea Thai Party, should be suspended and replaced by a “people's parliament” directly elected by the public and free of politicians — except for himself and his fellow recently resigned MPs.**

He wants to make provincial governors directly elected, and institute reforms of the corruption-plagued police and bureaucracy.

Although Thaksin or his allies have won every election of the past decade, he says that reflects rampant vote-buying, which he says his “temporary administration” would end.

Such revolutionary language jars with Suthep's long political pedigree. Until just a few weeks ago, the 64-year-old former shrimp-farm and palm-oil magnate had held a seat in parliament since 1979. He served in cabinet as Communications Minister and twice as Deputy Agriculture Minister.

In 1995, a scandal involving his land reform programme caused then-Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai to dissolve the House rather than face a no-confidence vote. Suthep was criticised for allegedly giving land rights to the wealthy under a reform scheme intended for the poor. He denied the charge but resigned.

Ironically, the ensuing political storm swept Thaksin into politics.

Over the years, Suthep developed an image as a consummate politician. A leaked U.S. diplomatic cable from 2008 described him as his party's “backroom dealmaker”.

“He maintains contacts in all camps, including the military,” the cable said. “He has reportedly had direct contact with Thaksin after Thaksin was deposed as prime minister,” the cable said. He has denied such contacts with Thaksin.

### “THAKSIN IS TOXIC”

**Suthep's followers are galvanized by the alleged excesses of Yingluck, her brother and their policies, including a runaway multibillion dollar**

rice-subsidy scheme seen as an attempt to lock in the support of farmers.

Even more galling, he said, was an attempt to put forward a broad-ranging amnesty bill aimed at securing the return of Thaksin, who was sentenced to two years in prison in absentia for corruption. The opposition Democrats have bitterly opposed the bill, despite a sweetener that would have seen the charges against Suthep and Abhisit dropped.

The Democrats for their part have played a delicate game, attempting to ride in the slipstream of anti-government sentiment while at times distancing themselves from the rallies.

“I have no idea what Suthep means by a ‘people's parliament’,” said Korn Chatikavanij, a senior Democrat member and former finance minister. “We think the best way to find a solution to all of this is for the government to resign and dissolve parliament.”

But he said the Democrats and the protesters “share a common belief that Thaksin is toxic for Thailand.”

At the protest, participants appear to be similarly wary of connecting their movement to the opposition party.

“Before, (Suthep) was like any other politician. We wouldn't say he's very good,” said Kochamakorn Homglee, who has joined with a group of stay-at-home mothers from Bangkok's posh Harrow International School, where Yingluck also sends her son.

“But now he's a hero.” 

Editing by **Jason Szep and Robert Birsell**

# Powerful forces revealed behind Thai protest movement

BY JASON SZEP AND AMY SAWITTA LEFEVRE

December 13 Bangkok

**H**is whistle-toting crowds of supporters are dwindling. His threats against Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra veer from the bold to the bizarre.

But behind Thailand's fiery anti-government protest leader, Suthep Thaugsuban, are two powerful retired generals with palace connections, a deep rivalry with the Shinawatra family and an ability to influence Thailand's coup-prone armed forces.

The forces behind Suthep are led by former defence minister General Prawit Wongsuwan and former army chief General Anupong Paochinda, towering figures in Thailand's military establishment, said two military sources with direct knowledge of the matter and a third with connections to Thai generals.

A glimpse into Suthep's connections sheds light on how he could prevail in a seemingly improbable bid to oust a leader who won a 2011 election by a landslide and impose rule by an unelected "People's Council" of appointed "good people", even as his street rallies start to flag.

Although retired, Anupong, 64, and Prawit, 67, still wield influence in a powerful and highly politicised military that has played a pivotal role in a country that has seen 18 successful or attempted coups in the past 81 years.

It is unclear how far that influence goes, or how decisive they could be. But both have close ties to army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha. And all three have a history of enmity with Yingluck's billionaire brother, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who they helped oust in a 2006 coup.

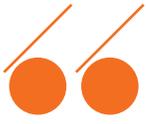
The military sources said that if Suthep's protests lead to violence, the two could help sway the military to intervene or even to seize power on the pretext of national security, allowing Suthep to go ahead with his People's Council, though analysts say such a scenario appears unlikely in the immediate term.

The two were not available to comment despite requests from Reuters.

Anupong and Prayuth served with the Queen's Guard, an elite unit with greater autonomy from the rest of military, with its allegiance foremost to the monarchy rather than the direct chain of command, said Paul Chambers, director of research at the Institute of South East Asian Affairs in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

While most Thais still express steadfast loyalty to 86-year-old King Bhumibol Adulyadej, his throne is seen as entwined with the political forces that removed Thaksin, especially ultra-nationalists who in the past have worn the king's colour of yellow at protests and now back Suthep.

As his reign gradually draws to a close, long-simmering business, political and military rivalries are rising to the surface, forcing Thailand to choose sides between supporters of the Bangkok establishment or those seeking to



On the face of it, Suthep's bid to upend Thailand's current political order looks far-fetched.



upend the status quo — a constituency associated with Thaksin.

Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn has yet to command the same popular support as his father, raising questions over whether royal succession will go smoothly. The palace did not reply to requests for comment.

### “FAILED STATE”

**Prawit and Anupong had expressed readiness to intervene if there was a security crisis, such as a crackdown by police on protesters or clashes between pro and anti-government demonstrators, and if Suthep's plan for an interim government was constitutional, said the source with military connections.**

Army leaders say they are neutral in the crisis. But Tanasak Patimapragorn, supreme commander of the armed forces, will meet on Saturday with Suthep and his allies, who have openly courted violence on Bangkok's streets in hopes of inducing a military coup or judicial intervention to bring down Yingluck.

Suthep says the meeting shows he has public backing of the military. But a statement from the supreme commander says the meeting is a “public forum” that includes civic groups.

On the face of it, Suthep's bid to upend Thailand's current political order looks far-fetched.

The former deputy prime minister has called for a parallel government and a volunteer police force. He wants Yingluck arrested for insurrection and has ordered civil servants and the army to report to him, not the government.

Struggling to defuse the crisis, Yingluck has set parliamentary elections for Feb. 2, which Suthep and his allies have ignored but which a pro-Shinawatra party is almost certain to win, as they have in every election since 2001.

The military has provided little security for her caretaker government at protests, such as on Thursday when demonstrators cut power to Government House, Yingluck's office, and scaled a wall to enter the compound.

The military has left police to control the crowds, unlike 2010 when a Democrat-led government was in power and the soldiers used force against pro-Thaksin protesters.

“That means a government that is not supported by the elite cannot enforce the law. Once a lot of violence takes place and the government cannot enforce the law, then this country becomes a failed state. Then there can be a pretext for the military to come in,” said a senior member of Yingluck's Party.

The army denies it is taking sides.

“We try to avoid getting ourselves involved directly or be seen as taking sides,” army spokesman Colonel Werachon Sukondhahpapatipak said, adding that the military is trying to encourage all sides to remain peaceful rather than conduct crowd control.

Asked if the military supported the government, he replied: “At the moment, yes.”

### “PLAYING THE GAME”

**The impasse is a reminder of the turmoil that has overshadowed Thailand for much of the last decade.**

On one side is Thaksin, a former telecommunications tycoon who redrew the political map by courting rural voters to win back-to-back elections in 2001 and 2005 and gain an unassailable mandate that he then used to advance the interests of major companies, including his own.

On the other are the elite and establishment, threatened by his rise. Thaksin's opponents include unions and academics who saw him as a corrupt rights abuser, and the urban middle-class who resented, as they saw it, their taxes being used as a political war chest for Thaksin, his sister and their allies.

Failure to quell the demonstrations makes her vulnerable to the same military and judicial forces that toppled two Thaksin-allied prime ministers in 2008, said Boonyakiat Karavekphan, a political analyst at Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok.

“If Prawit and Anupong back Suthep, it could

help sway the decision makers in the military to not side with the government which gives Suthep's movement more legitimacy," he said.

"No matter how you look at it, the military is an important pressure group in Thai politics," he said. "The people's movement has come as far as it can on its own. It now needs a push from other quarters."

Anupong was a leader of the military coup that removed Thaksin in September 2006 and two years later recommended on television that the Thaksin-allied prime minister step down. As army chief, he oversaw a bloody crackdown on Thaksin's red-shirted supporters in 2010 in which 91 people, mostly red shirts, were killed. Anupong made Prayuth his heir apparent.

A former army commander, Prawit was a mentor of Anupong and a defence minister under the previous government replaced by Yingluck in the 2011 election. He's also a close associate of former general Sonthi Boonyaratkalin, leader of the coup against Thaksin, who now lives in self-exile to avoid jail for corruption, a charge he says was politically motivated.

"Suthep is playing the game on the outside

while Prawit tries to play the game on the inside," said a senior military official who could not be identified because he was not authorised to speak to the media. "General Prawit has been clear about his aspirations to become prime minister."

Anupong and Prawit were present at a Dec. 1 meeting between Suthep and Yingluck at a military camp, according to three aides of military officials who attended.

One military source said Prayuth was being pulled in two directions, with Anupong and Prawit on one side, and a need on the other to restore the military's image after the 2010 clashes and ensure an untarnished retirement in 2014. 

Additional reporting by **Martin Petty**

Editing by **Nick Macfie**



# High society hits the streets as prominent Thais join protests

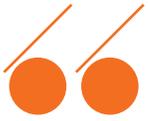
BY ANDREW R.C. MARSHALL

December 13 Bangkok

**C**hitpas Bhirombhakdi is heiress to a \$2.6 billion family fortune and, according to high-society magazine Thailand Tatler, one of Bangkok's "most eligible young ladies". She can also handle tear gas and ride a tractor.

On December 2, as anti-government demonstrations in Bangkok turned violent, the 27-year-old climbed aboard a front-loader brought in by protesters to break down police barricades.

Chitpas, whose family owns the Boon Rawd Brewery that makes Singha Beer, had dismantled the machine long before police pelted it with rubber bullets and gas canisters. But her gung-ho act showed how members of Thailand's most celebrated families are



All the people from big families used to be called the silent minority. Well, they're not silent anymore.



discarding all past pretence of neutrality to hit the streets in the hope of toppling Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

Along with their wealth and privilege, these elite protesters share a declarative love of Thailand's aging King Bhumibol Adulyadej and an abhorrence for Yingluck and her brother Thaksin, a billionaire ex-prime minister ousted by a 2006 military coup, whom they accuse of corruption and abuse of power.

For many in Bangkok's high society, anti-government rallies have supplemented — if not quite replaced — customary haunts in posh hotels and restaurants, although only a dwindling hardcore of less privileged protesters sleeps rough on the street.

While visiting the main protest site at Democracy Monument, Naphalai Areesorn, editor of Thailand Tatler, said she bumped into a than phuying — the Thai equivalent of a dame — and others with royally-bestowed titles.

"People you would normally see in the society pages were out there," she said. "All the people from big families used to be called the silent minority. Well, they're not silent anymore."

Banks, construction companies and other big Thai businesses have often openly supported Thaksin-backed parties or the opposition Democrats, said prominent Thailand scholar Chris Baker. "What is different is seeing these figures at demonstrations," he said.

They are drawn in part by what they regard as a moral crusade against what protest leaders call the "evil" Thaksin. "These are 'good' demos, so old constraints are removed," said Baker.

Many of their demands — for example, for greater government transparency — should appeal even to traditional supporters of Yingluck's government, which faces growing discontent from farmers over an opaque and wasteful rice subsidy scheme.

But their disdain for Thaksin loyalists is unlikely to impress many of the nearly 16 million people who voted Yingluck into office by a landslide in 2011, or heal a country already riven by class, wealth and politics.

## CORPORATE PROTESTS

**Chitpas is a Democrat spokeswoman and a staunch royalist who last year campaigned in favor of Thailand's harsh lese majesté laws.**

When the protests grew violent, with police firing tear gas to stop people over-running government buildings, she worked as a volunteer medic. Her Instagram page shows her washing out the eyes of gas-stricken compatriots.

"I saw more people getting hurt," she said. "My gut feeling was I wanted to be there to help out." The front-loader driver was knocked unconscious by a rubber bullet, she said.

Another prominent Thai hitting the streets was real estate tycoon Srivara Issara, who along with her husband Songkran runs Charn Issara Development PLC. She led her own protest march from her company's Bangkok headquarters to the nearby offices of the ruling Puea Thai Party.

Srivara claims no party affiliation. "I really hate politics," she said. Her march was inspired by her disgust for Thaksin ("that runaway criminal") and her faith in protest leader Suthep, a former Democrat politician.

A friend in the PR business helped her dream up a protest slogan: "Moral righteousness comes above democracy". Srivara publicized the march through Facebook and by personally handing out leaflets in the street the night before.

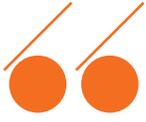
Thousands of people joined her peaceful rally, which she saw as an extension of Charn Issara's corporate social responsibility program. "It's our duty to do something good for the country," she said.

## TAKING A STAND

**Others are more wary about involving their companies.**

Among the 100,000-plus protesters on Bangkok's streets on December 9 was Petch Osathanugrah, who along with his brother Ratch has an estimated fortune of \$630 million. They own the energy drinks producer Osotspa and 51 percent of Shiseido Thailand.

"It was time to take a stand," said Petch, a



They just want their lives to be comfortable, but they don't think that in the long run they will have debts.



former pop star who is widely recognized in Thailand by his Struwwelpeter shock of hair, thick-rimmed glasses and salt-and-pepper goatee.

He stressed, however, that he wanted to keep the family business out of politics. “We hardly talk to each other about politics,” he said of his brother Ratch. “I think we think the same way.”

Yingluck has called a snap election for February 2. Petch believed it will only install another Thaksin-backed government, which will spark further protests.

His opinion of the mainly rural Thais who voted for Yingluck is unsparing but typical. They are ill-educated, easily swayed and greedy, he said, and their willingness to sell their vote to Thaksin-backed politicians renders elections pointless.

“I’m not really for democracy,” said Petch, who was educated in the United States. “I don’t think we’re ready for it. We need a strong government like China’s or Singapore’s — almost like a dictatorship, but for the good of the country.”

“I am longing for a Lee Kuan Yew,” he said, referring to former prime minister who oversaw Singapore’s economic rise.

Protest leader Suthep wants the Yingluck administration replaced by a “people’s council” of reform-minded professionals. Yingluck has rejected the idea, which has also perplexed Thai scholars and senior Democrat members.

Red-shirted Thaksin loyalists have vowed to stage their own protests if the February election does not take place. Thaksin or his allies have won every Thai election in the past decade.

## GREEDY AND UNEDUCATED

**Educating the electorate begins with people** such as “our own drivers and maids,” said Palawi Bunnag, a scion of a celebrated family of Persian descent who served Thailand’s early kings.

Palawi, a qualified lawyer and frequent visitor to the protest sites, felt people from north-east Thailand should be made to understand the limitations of short-term populist policies such as easy credit.

“They just want their lives to be comfortable, but they don’t think that in the long run they will have debts,” said Palawi. “Thaksin’s regime makes everyone have a lot of greed.”

But scholar Chris Baker argues that vote-buying, although it still occurs, no longer determines election results, and that most people are better informed than privileged Thais think.

“Members of Bangkok’s elite and middle classes are more likely to have spent time in Hong Kong, Boston or Paris than in a Thai village,” he said. “Their image of the poor, uneducated villager is two decades out of date.”

## “NICE FRIENDS”

**Many in Thailand’s elite publicly excoriate** Thaksin and his clan. But they also occupy the same rich lists — Forbes places the Shinawatra family 10th with a fortune of \$1.7 billion — and move in the same rarefied circles.

Srivara Issara’s oldest son Vorasit, who recently vowed on his Facebook page to “beat the living crap” out of red shirt leaders, told Reuters he was friends with Thaksin’s son Panthongtae.

“Everyone knows each other,” said Palawi Bunnag, who — proving her point — is married to Vorasit and went to the same British university as Thaksin’s nephew Rupop.

Such proximity to the Shinawatras also affords a privileged insight. “They’re nice friends,” said Palawi. “But we also know their hidden agendas, their hidden businesses.” 

Additional reporting by **Pairat Tempairojana** and **Khettiya Jittapong**  
Editing by **Alex Richardson**