

History in the Making

Victory for peaceful protest and democratic process in Thailand



I'm a lucky ducky. Well, lucky Viking, that is. I came to Thailand in January as a study abroad student through Portland State University. Little did I know I would become a first-hand witness to the only peaceful political revolution in the nation's history.

Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra just stepped down from power, proving an incredible triumph for the tens of thousands of Thai citizens who had been protesting in the streets of Bangkok during the last two months.

Thaksin (or "Thug-Sin" as he is affectionately known by his adversaries) became the center of a nationwide debate after his family announced it had sold its controlling stake in the telecommunications company Shin Corporation to a state-owned company in Singapore for a tax-free \$1.9 billion. Critics allege that the controversial sale involved insider trading and that he clearly abused his power by allowing a large portion of Thailand's telecommunications industry to pass to a foreign government's control for personal profit.

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The Assembly of the Poor (AOP) was one of the first organizations to hit the streets in protest. AOP is made up of villagers from all over Thailand who have been negatively affected or threatened by capitalist development projects Thaksin has instigated and/or supported, including the looming Free Trade Agreement with the United States, which has the potential to destroy the livelihoods of local farmers, textile workers and HIV/AIDS patients, to name a few groups.

AOP joined up with PAD (the People's Alliance for Democracy) and began rallying people together to exercise their democratic rights. Thai citizens of every province, age, income bracket, and background seemed to drop everything and join together in Bangkok. Students, laborers, farmers, teachers, HIV/AIDS patients, sex industry workers, business men and women, parents, children, grandparents – citizens from all walks of life gathered together to share in the incredible possibility of changing their government for the better.

It was spectacular to witness. I was admittedly a little fearful of going to observe protests that contained, at any given time, estimates ranging from 60,000 to 300,000 people. Like many Americans, I have associated the word *protest* with anger, aggression, rebellion, mob mentality, and police brutality. This was absolutely not the case here. The protests I witnessed never held a hint of aggression or threat of violence. They had a determinedly positive, uplifting and uniting vibe! From dawn until dusk, I could look around and see people smiling and patting each other on the back in camaraderie. I could hear laughter. I could smell delicious Thai cuisine as it was passed around free of charge. People slept on old advertisement banners on the ground, or under the massive tent where the Santi Asoke monks had set up their own 'peaceful protest' camp.

Some media sources have claimed that the middle-class intelligentsia was Thaksin's real opposition while the majority of the rural poor greatly supported him. Based on what I witnessed, I disagree. My group of 15 students, as well as translators and teachers, had to make three unscheduled trips to the capital city. We were supposed to be staying in various poor communities across north-east Thailand that have been or could be negatively affected by globalization and development projects such as dams and mines. Yet the majority of these communities cleared out to go to Bangkok. They sensed the incredible possibility of exercising democracy to create a change in their government and did not let the opportunity pass them by.

The media also played a crucial role in Thaksin being successfully "removed" from power. Rather than being another branch of the government (as seems to be the case in the U.S.), the mainstream media here operate independently. Sondhi Limthongkul, who owns and runs Manager Media Group, used to be a good friend of Thaksin's. The two men had a falling out, and Sondhi used his position as media mogul to help spread the campaign against the ex-Prime Minister.

What can we learn from all of this as American citizens? I ask you not to dismiss these events as unrelated to our own collective, democratic power.

Briana Williams is a community health education major at PSU and traveled to Thailand with the Council on International Educational Exchange to study grassroots movements against the effects of globalization on developing countries.

How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NO BIG SURPRISE

Some of us aren't too surprised with Jim Carlson's e-mail slamming Councilor Bonny Bettman. One just has to watch one city council meeting and recognize Bettman's detailed study of local issues. She takes time to be well informed, and items of importance to her constituents don't slide by. What is important to constituents is not always the same as what is important to city staff, and this is where the conflicts and bad attitudes begin.

The problem is the present system where our elected city councilors are not allowed to talk or work with City Hall staff. Staff under City Manager Dennis Taylor prepare projects and bring them to the council for approval with no or little interaction with the elected officials. This does not seem to be a very democratic system when there is no or little direct contact with elected counselors.

I urge voters to elect candidates who will support a system where their vote really counts, and I believe Alan Zalenka and Rich Cunningham will want more democracy at City Hall and less unfortunate slamming.

Ruth Duemler
Eugene

A HEALTHY MIX

Alan Pittman's latest editorial disguised as a news brief (4/13) laments the low wages paid by call centers. He is right that call centers typically are at the lower end of the community pay scale. It is also true that these jobs don't generally require college degrees and are more available to first-time job-seekers, seniors and people with disabilities than many higher-paying jobs.

How many call center employees do you suppose left higher-paying jobs to go to work there? Most likely, none. But there probably are others in the same situation as the young woman working at a local restaurant who told Congressman DeFazio how excited she was to have been hired by Royal Caribbean Cruise Line because it will be the first job she's ever had with full health benefits.

It is true that many call centers are easily

moved, and we've lost a number of these jobs in recent years. But when a new building is constructed for more than \$60 million with the company tied to a 20-year lease, it's a pretty good indication they aren't going to suddenly outsource their jobs to India to save pennies on the dollar in wages.

Just as employees don't turn down better-paying jobs to work in call centers, the Eugene/Springfield community doesn't turn down higher-paying businesses in order to recruit call centers. But neither do we turn up our noses at the opportunity to bring 1,000 jobs that pay well by their industry standards and offer full health benefits, simply because they aren't the jobs some people want for our community.

A healthy local economy has jobs for people across the spectrum of ages, education, skills and interests. There is definitely a place for call centers and their jobs in our community.

Jack Roberts, executive director
Lane Metro Partnership

WRONG FOCUS

It's a specious argument whether to term the ongoing methamphetamine situation an epidemic or not. An epidemic is a rapid and extensive development or growth, usually of something unpleasant. Works for me.

In 22 years of addictions work in this state alone, I professionally have never ever noticed the problem lessening, but simply ignored by the press while remaining endemic: characteristic of a particular place or among a particular group or area of interest or activity. That could be an occupational hazard of my jobs here, reinforced by a personally experienced increase in mail opening, a meth lab being busted across the street, and a constant amount of references by clients, colleagues and friends.

I in particular notice continuous health disparities in treatment access, and treatment success, for people of color in this state, in this town, which not surprisingly, go unreported, remain unreported by your newspa-