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**Contentious Politics in Thailand 2005 – 2010:  
Towards a New Understanding of Contemporary Thai Insurgencies  
through the Lenses of Opportunities and Cycles**


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**Abstract** One strand of social movement theory allows for a historical access to the question why a particular movement emerges in a particular context in a particular historical window. This is the political process theory, or also called contentious politics studies. The analytical tools *political opportunity structure* and *cycles of contention* are valuable lenses for the historical analysis of movements' emergence. Unfortunately, the theoretical corpus is limited, covering mostly single-issue movements. Especially for the context of Thailand, which has experienced sustained, repeated and similar kind of contention since the middle of the 2000s, current theories cannot account for such counter-hegemonic projects that are in turn struck by their own countermovements at the same time. The repeating character of the cycles is yet neither understood. By analysing the cycles 2005-2006, 2008 and 2009-2010 through the lens of opportunities and cycles, I will draw new theoretical implications. In contrast to the prevailing "isolated singular parabola model" I propose an integrated model with sub-cycles and super-cycles that can account for lacks of the former model. This bears also practical implications.

**Keywords** Dynamics of contention; Social Movements; Red Shirts; Yellow Shirts; Political Opportunities; Cycles;

## **Introduction**

The political sphere in Thailand since the 2000s was all but smooth. Winning the 2001 election under the innovated 1997 constitution, the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party with its charismatic leader, the entrepreneur and billionaire Thaksin Shinawatr, formed a coalition government that would rule the country and transform it for the subsequent four years. Although Thaksin was initially supported by parts of the civil society, during his reign, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), consisting of a varied mixture of social actors, was forming to oppose him and his government by performing rallies, blockades of government buildings and other measures. However, it did not prevent TRT from winning the 2005 general elections. On 19 September, the military took over by staging a *coup d'état*, returning to a democratic polity only after introducing a new constitution by the end of 2007. With Thaksin ousted and TRT dissolved, the successor party to TRT, the People's Power Party (PPP) under its leader Samak Sundaravej, formed a new coalition party after winning the elections. Samak's government, like

previously Thaksin's, was met with severe opposition from PAD, or the Yellow Shirts. A dubious court ruling led to Samak's replacement by Somchai Wongsawat in September. With demonstrations, rallies and blockades continuing throughout the next two months, another court verdict followed, this time ordering the dissolution of the governing PPP, thereby essentially overthrowing the government on 2 December. Soon after, without new elections and seducing a faction of former PPP MPs, Abhisit Vejjajiva of the Democrat Party (DP) formed a new coalition, governing Thailand until 2011. In 2009 and 2010, Thailand saw its political crisis entrenched. The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), with its Red Shirt protesters, took to streets. A reconciliatory ground between the two sides could not be found in the ensuing bitter political fights. The violent clashes on the streets saw death and wounded people on both sides.

Treating Thailand's national-scale uprisings, which aimed at overthrowing the government, as social movements (SM) helps understanding the phenomenon in question by drawing from varied theories developed over decades by a whole strand of the social sciences. Particular approaches of social movement theory were already employed to study insurgencies from the setting of Thailand outlined above. For example, Kitirianglarp and Hewison (2009) showed how the 2005-2006 events stand for a counter-example against eurocentric assumptions among many so-called new social movement (NSM) authors according to which a widening of the civic space automatically goes hand in hand with democratisation. While I agree with their observation, it nevertheless only contributes to the complication of the already heterogeneous body of NSM theory. Furthermore, NSM theory largely deals with questions of the situation of individuals' identity to the hegemonic system.

Social movements, however tend to be associated with a singular problem definition, aiming at a social change in a particular field. Counter-hegemonic projects, like the ones in question of this article, are often rather ranked as revolts or revolutions. There is, however, another strand of SM studies, which is commonly known as political process theory. This group of theorists have moved on conceptually by framing all of these together as “contentious politics”<sup>1</sup>, thereby avoiding a rather technical taxonomy. A second reason why I align my research with contentious politics is that it allows for a

1 In their seminal work *Dynamics of Contention*, McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001: 5) define contentious politics as:  
“episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants.”

historical reading of the events and simultaneously integrates several approaches. If, on the one hand, we want to understand the causes for the emergences of national uprisings like those in Thailand since the 2000s and if, on the other hand, we wish to prognosticate chances for future insurgencies, then, this article argues, we should adopt such theoretical concepts as opportunity structures and cycles of contention which allow for an integrated historical perspective on Thailand's uprisings since the 2000s.

Nevertheless, even political process studies have not yet developed sufficiently satisfying theoretical tools to fully grasp Thailand's political disorder since the 2000s. By enhancing the framework of *cycles* to *super-cycles*, I show how contentious politics can still do justice to such complex situations as those in Thailand. Building on my concept, future studies may also draw conclusions about the insurgencies of 2013-2014 or, depending on the upcoming political development, evaluate a potential for future insurgencies. Similar settings with a counter-hegemonic contentious politics, like Syria or Egypt since the 'Arab Spring' may likewise be studied with my concept.

### **Contentious Politics: Political Opportunities and Cycles**

According to Ford, political process theory lays “a greater emphasis on movement success and failure than on movement structure and process, and is more sensitive to the relationship between social movement organizations and their socio-political and institutional environments than traditional Resource Mobilization Theory” (2013: 4). While Ford's statement is indeed a main argument to favour political process theory over resource mobilisation theory for the Thai case, Tarrow adds another dimension to political process theory. He delineates it from pre-1960s studies where students of social movements posed the “why-question”, asking if “life-space” or “post-material attitudes” were the major incentives to contention. He argues that those scholars were not able to answer “why people would lend support to movements during certain periods of history and not others, and why some countries within the West were experiencing more sustained contention than others” (2011: 161). Here, Tarrow points at the historical dimension, at the analysis of conditions and circumstances in a concrete political setting and a concrete historical time. Political process theory, hence, does not only deal with success or failure of movements, it also integrates the quest for answering: How come that certain movements emerge, while others do not? The

historical political conditions are called *opportunities*.

## Political Opportunities

The concept of opportunities dates back to the seventies, after Lipsky (1970: 74) directs scholars' attention to fluctuations in the openness of a given political system to specific groups. By first using the term "structure of political opportunities", Eisinger (1973: 11) spurred a rich theoretical development around the this concept which advanced until about the end of the 1990s. Under the term 'opportunities' we can understand, following Goldstone and Tilly, "the [perceived] probability that social protest actions will lead to success in achieving a desired outcome" (2001: 182). Tarrow, on the other hand, gives two definitions for 'political opportunity structure'. He understands those as "consistent [...] *signals* to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements" (1996: 54; my emphasis). Later, he refines this definition by meaning "consistent – but not necessarily formal or permanent – *dimensions of the political environment or change in that environment* that provide incentives for collective action by affecting expectations for success or failure" (2011: 163, my emphasis).

Whether *perceived probability*, *signals* to actors or simply the *dimensions* or *changes* of the political environment, it is clear that shifts in the political opportunity structure may give rise to contention and that they function as resources external to otherwise resource-poor groups. The dimensions of a political opportunity structure vary slightly from author to author; I decided to stick to Tarrow (2011: 164-167). Thus, they are: (1) opening of access to participation for new actors; (2) evidence of political realignment within the polity; (3) emerging splits within the elite; and (4) availability of influential allies.

(1) *Increasing access*. Being aware of living under a highly repressive regime will unlikely spark incentives to protest, just as a fully inclusive system that grants its citizens full and easy political participation is unlikely to produce unrest. Eisinger (1973: 15) found that protests are more likely to occur "in systems characterized by a mix of open and closed factors."

(2) *Shifting alignments*. A shift in the general, or sometimes in a particular, policy agenda of a polity can incite protest among the opponents to that new alignment. In

democratic polities this could be epitomized by a shift in voting, leading to a new government coalition.

(3) *Divided elites*. Conflicts within elites can also encourage outbreaks of contention. Elites that are newly out of power could join the opposition and take the role of the “tribune of the people”. Furthermore, these elites may bring resources to emerging movements.

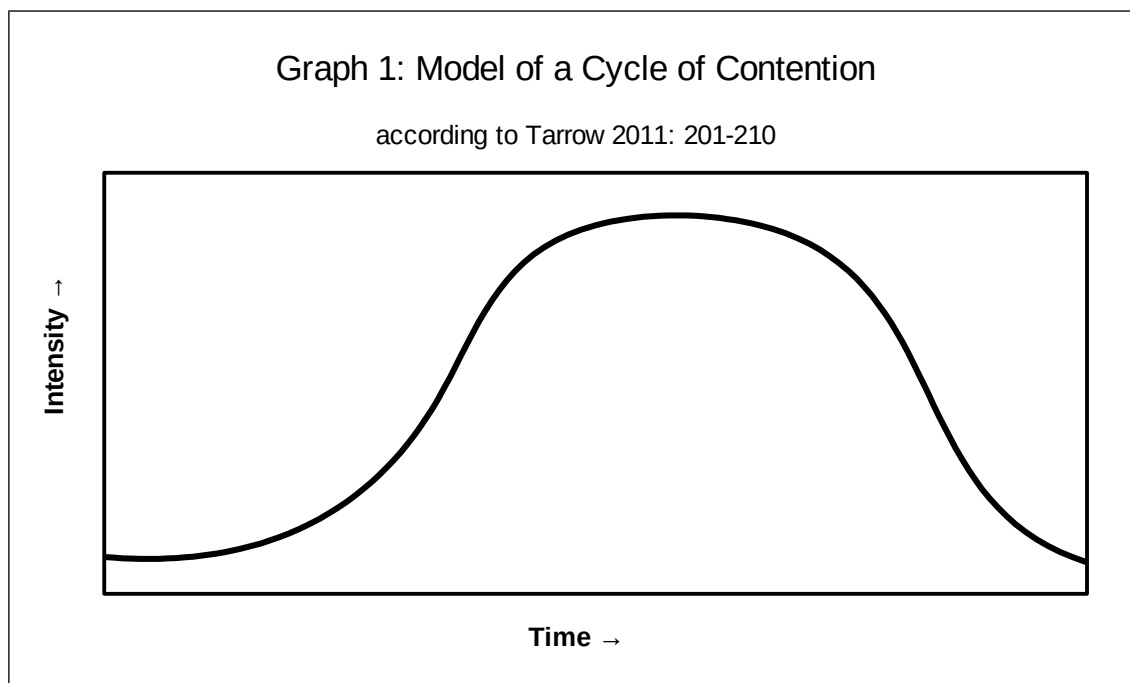
(4) *Influential allies*. Connected to *divided elites*, yet analytically distinct, is the presence of elite allies. Challengers are encouraged to take action if they have allies who can work as friends in courts, guarantors against suppression, or as acceptable negotiators on their behalf.

As we will see later, all of these four dimensions will play a role in the context of Thailand.

Lastly, opportunities are not static. They open up in the political structure at a point of point time for challengers. They may be centred around certain geographical spots or among certain groups. After taking opportunities, these groups may increase opportunities for themselves (e.g. by widening access to the political field), for others (sympathetic groups or opponents), for the elites (negatively if it provokes suppression or positively if elites join the movements) or for parties (e.g. by a boost in voting turnout through championing the challengers' causes), albeit the case of the parties tends to apply rather when they can surf on the waves of a “range of movements” (ibid.: 167-169). Finally, opportunities do not only migrate from challengers to allies or opponents, they also decline.

## Cycles of Contention

As just indicated, the time factor began to play an increasing role in the contentious politics literature. Touching off by the end of the 1980s, a paradigm shift occurred, away from the concentration on static conditions of political systems and input-output-oriented studies, towards processes and mechanisms, and relational models, of contention, as well as a theory that would encompass the whole of the hitherto heterogeneous body of the “classical social movement theory” (resource mobilisation, framing, political opportunities, repertoires; see McAdam et al. 2001: 40-42). One major outcome of this theoretical advancement is the concept *cycles of contention*, or



shortly, *cycles*.

For Tarrow (2011: 199), a cycle of contention is “a phase of heightened conflict across the social system”. Furthermore, a cycle includes the following elements: (1) a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilized sectors; (2) a rapid pace of innovations in the forms of contention employed; (3) the creation of new or transformed collective action frames; (4) a combination of organized and unorganized participation; (5) sequences of intensified information flow; and (6) interaction between challengers and authorities.

Graph 1 illustrates a theoretical sequence of a single cycle of contention, according to Tarrow (2011: 201-210). Some political opportunities open up for a “early risers” (Tarrow 2011) or “initiator movements” (McAdam 1999), usually with a narrow focus. Their claims will resonate with other challengers, thereby opening opportunities to them by exposing the vulnerability of their targets. Further opportunities open up due to conflicts among the elites; state responses are rejective of the initial claims – thus encouraging the assimilation of other possible claimants which eventually leads to broader contention (*alliance formation*) by the “late-comers” (Tarrow 2011) or “spin-off movements” (McAdam 1999). Phases of increased contention go hand in hand with a more rapid information flow, heightened political attention and a high frequency and intensity of interaction among protest groups and between them and authorities. This gives special relevance to “information brokers and communities of discourse that are



prepared to interpret new information in new ways to potential challengers” (Rochon 1998, cited in Tarrow 2011: 202).

Eventually, meanings are *framed* (mostly leading to “master frames”), thereby justifying and dignifying the movement; symbols, narratives and identities produced. Together with tactics, movement-specific performances and demands put forward to the targets, these *innovations* form culture and sink down in the collective memory of the movements, serving as a marker of identity for the protesters involved. Later movements, more specifically: organisations that have also formed during the cycle, may profit from this as they feed upon these sentiments established previously (ibid.: 204).

Another process that happens during a cycle is *diffusion* of conflict. As indicated above, peoples do not rise all at once in the same direction. Rather, early risers open the protest gates for late-comers, thereby also leaving a chance for a change in the nature of protest. But the claims made by challengers can likewise evoke anger among opponents to the movement and hence trigger countermovements. Especially contentions which resort to violent forms tend to induce counter-violence, as happens for example when states are on the brink of collapsing or in cases of ethnic or communal violence (ibid. 205). A special case of diffusion is “scale shift”. Here, not only does contention spread out geographically, but challengers make use of the the different levels of the polity (local, intermediate, national or international) in the search for new potential allies (which, on the other hand, may also bring new opponents to the scene) as well as to employ different tactics.

In the beginning of a cycle, movements can be quite exhilarating. Yet, over time, as activists will argue over goals and methods, or divide into factions, they involve risk, personal costs and eventually turn into weariness or disillusionment. However, *exhaustion* does not apply to all actors equally. Protesters at the periphery, lacking strong motivation, are the ones more likely to break away while those at the core are likely to remain. Since, as a general rule, those at the periphery tend to be more moderate and those at the core more militant, such unequal decline in participation, on the one hand, bears the risk of a balance shift from moderate to more radical claims and actions. On the other hand, movement leaders are aware of the power of numbers. They may hence choose to adopt more moderate tones. Conversely, if they desire to take more militant action steps, they will make more radical claims. Eventually, thereby, exhaustion leads a polarisation of the movement between those who are willing to

compromise with the authorities and those willing to take radical actions (ibid.: 206)<sup>2</sup>.

The end of cycles may already be heralded by full exhaustions if movements are less sustained. If not, the outcome of the cycle of contention depends, to some extent, on the reaction of the state as well. Tarrow (ibid.: 208-210) differentiates between *repression* and *facilitation*. For Goldstone (1998: 130), repression is likely to end a cycle if “the government is able to focus its repressive measures squarely on the movement supporters and uses violence and imprisonment to curtail their actions.” But where repression is unfocused, inconsistent, and arbitrary, or where it is limited by international or domestic pressures, “the movement is likely to attract supporters while becoming more radicalized in its goals and actions.” Extreme measures of repression, though, are rather associated with authoritarian regimes. More commonly, a mix of repression and facilitation can be observed. While more radical factions of a movement are repressed, the state engages in selective facilitation of moderate claims. Facilitation alone is another possible outcome of a protest cycle. On the strive for reform, however, is improbable that all the claims of the contenders will be implemented. This is, so Tarrow, “not only because protesters typically make their claims in extreme form, but also because claims are raised in competition with competing and complementary claims and are processed through a mixture of state and non-state actors and veto groups” (2011: 209). It is indeed more likely that marginal power of intermediate groups is increased. Finally, we may conceptualize the end of cycles as *restabilisation* with Koopmans by understanding that, by the end of the cycle, “the relationship between actors become more stable” (2004: 37-38).

With those two concepts, opportunities and cycles, the groundwork for a historical analysis from the perspective of the contentious politics theory is laid. Opportunities engender a historical judgement of a concrete historical situation in terms of why movements emerge at this a specific juncture of time and place. Cycles allow for an analysis of, and over, the course of a movement during its phase of existence.

Although this theoretical work is on the more elaborate side in explaining what happens on the ground I still see two critical points. Firstly, as my illustration suggests, the protest cycle model takes the shape of a parabola: mobilisation, diffusion of contention, exhaustion, repression and/or facilitation, restabilisation. Hence McAdam et

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2 This is the reason why a contentious politics in question often stands at the crossroads between institutionalisation and radicalisation. For Tarrow (2011: 207-208) these two processes are therefore two sides of the same theoretical medal. In this paper, I do not dwell further on these two processes.

al. are correct in their criticism: “By positing a recurring parabolic shape to episodes of contention, cyclical theory begged the question of the internal composition of the cycle and whether there are episodes that take different forms altogether” (2001: 66). In other words: this theory is one that deals with the up and down of one single movement. It does account for the triggering of a countermovement or the internationalisation of contention. But it only touches upon them and leaves them aside – the cyclical model does not integrate them into the same cycle. Filling this gap, Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) study the mechanisms of the interplay of contending movements. Unfortunately for this article, they build their observations on single-issue movements (e.g. pro-choice vs. pro-life in the USA) and therefore have little to say about a counter-hegemonic movements and *its* countermovement like was the case in Thailand in 2006.

My second point certainly joins the criticism of McAdam et al. above. It pertains to the empirical fact, as we shall see later, that cycles of contention do not have to stand alone in history. The Thai setting will show that two cycles relate to, and cannot be thought independently of, one another. With this in mind, I will now turn to a re-analysis of episodes of Thai history.

## **Thailand's political crises**

The polity of Thailand can be said to remain in a constant state of crisis since 2006 and at least until the day of writing. For a while, roughly between 2011 and 2013, it seemed as if Thailand came back to normal. Yet over a single issue – an amnesty bill that would have restored her brother Thaksin's assets and dropped charges of political crimes, such as corruption, since 2004 – old fissures came to the fore and history was repeated (DW 2013). In this section of the paper I analyse Thailand's political crises since the middle of the 2000s through the theoretical lens I have outlined in the previous part. It takes a look at three episodes: 2005-2006, 2008 and 2008-2010. However, at this point I must emphasise that it is not the intention of this article to give full-fledged accounts of the events in question; and I cannot provide new empirical data. For comprehensive overviews, I recommend the lecture of the literature cited in the respective sections. As a compensation, I provide a new reading of the period that, if continued, may purvey insights into the recent and future events.

Therefore, in the section to follow, I deliver a brief narration of what happened

followed by an overview over what made up the opportunities and the cycles during the respective period. In the following part of this paper, theoretical implications and conclusions for Thai case will be drawn.

## 2005-2006: PAD

Since 2001 in office, the first elected government under the 1997 constitution led by Thaksin Shinawatr and his Thai Rak Thai party was initially supported by a range of activists and sectors of the civil society. The contradictory nature of Thaksin's policies attracted a great deal of criticism, but even more silent approval<sup>3</sup>. Over the four years leading up to the 2005 elections, enough contention was brewing that would contribute during the heightened phase of 2006. But the dissent Thaksin had to face was never brought together as it would be in 2006, leaving him and his coalition to deal only with single matters. Hence the TRT landslide victory came to no surprise.

Things picked up pace by the end of 2005 when Sondhi Limthongkul, a former Thaksin advisor and media mogul, fell out with his former associate and started his government-critical open air talks in Lumpini Park, attracting up to 30,000 people. At roughly the same time, a group of a hundred-odd activists from Thailand's farmer networks and HIV activists went to Hong Kong to join international protests against the WTO ministerial meeting in December. In January 2006, a coalition of NGOs called FTA Watch, that had been organising against FTAs for years, called for demonstrations during the US-Thailand FTA talks in Chiangmai which was followed by an extraordinary turnout of 10,000 people, compared with previous rounds of FTA talks. Newly learned tactics from Hong Kong – storming the building of the meeting by entering the area by swimming across a river – almost led to a postponement of the talk. To the embarrassment of the government, the talks had to be shifted to a nearby golf course (Pye and Schaffar 2008: 40-41). These two independent strands of contention represent what we would call the *early risers* of the protest cycle. They were the ones that opened up opportunities by signalling dissent to others and by revealing the

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3 The contradictory nature of his policies has received a good analysis by Pye and Schaffar (2008). These include a domestically much applauded turn away from IMF-imposed policies, yet following a programme termed by the authors as “post-neoliberal” restructuring including privatisations, free trade agreements (FTA) with other countries and the creation of a large-scale agro-industrial sector. On the other hand, so-called “pro-poor” policies were also implemented, such as a debt-restructuring scheme, the one million baht community fund, the 30 baht health programme, and government-funded infrastructure projects. These, it is deemed, are responsible for the high support Thaksin, TRT and all its later successors receive.

Type	Empirics	Beneficiary	Source
Shifting alignments	Contradictions in Thaksin's economic "post-neoliberal" restructuring	PAD, non-elites / resource-poor groups such as peasants	P&S
Divided elites	Urban elites contra Thaksin. E.g. Sondhi Limthongkul: former adviser to Thaksin, media mogul, organiser of the open-air talk shows at Lumpini Park since September 2005, later co-founder and secretary of PAD	PAD	P&S: 39, 40
Divided elites	Thaksin vs. "Network-Monarchy" (McCargo 2005)	PAD	P&S: 39

Table 1: *Opportunity Structure in the 2006 cycle. Sources: P&S: Pye and Schaffar 2008*

vulnerability of the government.

Larger-scale dissent was triggered after the a massive outrage (fomented by Sondhi's talk show) over the sale of the Shin Corp business at the end of January<sup>4</sup>. Sondhi led a demonstration with 50,000 attendants on February 4. This was followed by the announcement of the formation of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD). Its central committee, drawn from 22 social movements, was led by Sondhi Limthongkul; 1992 activist former Bangkok governor Chamlong Srimuang; Phipop Thongchai from the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD); Somsak Kosaisuk of the State Enterprise Relations Group (SERG, the major public sector labour organization); and former Assembly of the Poor (AOP) advisor Somkiat Pongpaiboon. PAD was the central force in the ensuing political confrontations and was associated with the Yellow Shirt protesters, representing the royalist flavour spread by the likes of Sondhi, though not all protesters identified with this during this cycle.

Contention *diffused* out quickly over the whole country over February and March, assembling 100,000 protesters at the peak, opening up opportunities to hitherto less mobile sections. The Government House became a target of occupation and roads were blocked. The unifying force of the movement was epitomised by the common goal to which all demands could be broken down: to oust Thaksin (see Pye and Schaffar 2008: 40-44; Kitarinaglarp and Hewison 2009: 467-468)

In the literature it is often overlooked that Thaksin actually called his adherents to a counter-demonstration which took place on March 4 in Bangkok. He was able to mobilise 200,000 people, mainly farmers (Pye and Schaffar 2008: 45). This is quite

4 The company belonged to Thaksin's family and was sold to Singapore's state-owned investment company Temasek in a tax-free deal. Although Shin Corp was private property, this deal would later hold as a case in point for opponents of Thaksin who would rage about him 'selling Thai national assets' and shout for 'saving the nation'.

Element / Process	Empirics	Source
Early risers	Globalisation critics in Hong Kong December 2005; FTA watch demonstration in Chiangmai January 2006 with 10.000 participants; Lumpini talks of Sondhi Limthongkul	P&S: 41
Opening opportunities	End of January 2006 Shin Corp sale: unifying protest	P&S: 41
Alliance Formation	PAD formation on February 4: 22 organisations, e.g. FTA Watch, CPD, SERG, AOP, many small TRT-critical movements	P&S: 41; K&H: 459-460, 462-463, 467
Diffusion of contention	Mass movements: February-March 2006 in Bangkok with up to more than 100,000; also in other provinces	P&S: 40, 42-43
Opening of opportunities	After initial mass demonstrations, university groups, workers of EGAT, teacher groups and rural farmers networks join protests	P&S: 43
Innovation of performances	Road blocks, blockade of Government House (March 14)	P&S: 43
Framing	Unifying master frame / goal: Getting rid of Thaksin and his government, 'Save the nation', moral authority of the king vs. the greed of Thaksin	P&S: 54 K&H 467
Innovation of symbols	Yellow shirts as a symbol of royalists, but de-emphasised with growing demonstration	P&S: 43
Countermovement	Demonstration organised by TRT, March 6 in Bangkok, 200,000 people turnout; supportive of TRT	P&S: 45
Claim	PAD leadership: call for royal intervention (Art. 7)	K&H: 469
Facilitation	King's Speech April 25 – annulling the snap elections of April 2; Coup d'état on September 19	P&S: 55-56

*Table 2: Sequencing of the 2006 cycle. Sources: P&S: Pye and Schaffar 2008; K&H: Kitarianglarp and Hewison 2009*

remarkable considering that PAD's supporters numbered only half that many, albeit their actions were more sustained. For the scarce sources about this countermovement, we cannot make any further statements about it. But we can assume this overwhelming turnout gave Thaksin enough confidence to call for snap elections on April 4.

PAD reacted two-fold: Firstly, by tackling the election arena, they successfully urged the Democrat Party and other opposition parties not to stand for elections and staged a “No-Vote” campaign. Secondly, the initial consensus not to call for royal intervention was reversed by a frustrated leadership. What followed was all grist to the mills of the contenders. King Bhumipol held a speech on April 26, denying PAD's demand for a royally appointed prime minister. But he acknowledged the political crisis that Thailand was facing and called judges to “find a way to solve the problem”. Indeed, the elections were annulled and election commissioners jailed (Kitarianglarp and Hewison 2009 468-

469). A full *facilitation* of PAD's demand that Thaksin be ousted was reached with the staging of the *coup d'état* by the military on September 19.

If history had stopped at this point, or had Thailand taken a reconciliatory path, we could indeed interpret this episode with the parabola model presented in the previous section. Instead, I will continue my analysis; moving to the next episode from 2008

## 2008: Yellow Shirts

In May 2007, the Thai Rak Thai party was dissolved through court rule; its successor party was the People's Power Party (PPP). In August 2007, a referendum adopted a new constitution, followed by elections in December after 12 months of military rule. These were won by Thaksin's camp, spearheaded by PPP, and in February 2008, a new coalition under Samak Sundaravaj. PPP had campaigned for a revision of the 2007 constitution and for a variety of measure that would rehabilitate self-exiled Thaksin and return to old TRT policies. In April the government announced its determination to take first steps by amending the constitution. This was met with severe resistance from both inside and outside parliament. PAD was back on the scene within no-time, beginning its campaign against the government in late May and again in June by staging a mass march and rally. In July, Sondhi announced PAD's aim of a "new politics", based on the idea of sectoral representation, with a 70:30 ratio of indirectly appointed sectoral representatives to directly elected ones (Askew 2000: 31-35).

The Government House is a again the target of PAD supporters. On August 26, they begin a long occupation. Three days later, Samak holds a speech in parliament. Waiting outside is a crowd of his supporters. If at all, these initial countermovements can be understood as early risers for the coming cycle beginning less than half a year later. On September 1, some of these UDD supporters clash with PAD guards at Rachadamnoen Avenue, leaving the first dead protester behind. As a consequence to these events, Samak calls out the state of emergency. On September 9, a dubious court ruling ousts Samak on the grounds of conflict of interests. Instead of him, Somchai Wongsawat is sworn in only four days later who lifts the state of emergency. Since the state of emergency did not help recapturing the Government House, the government had to switch offices to the Dong Mueang Airport (ibid.: 36-38).

The increasingly violent acts continued. For example, on October 7, the police,

Type	Empirics	Beneficiary	Source
Fragmented elite	same split lines as in 2005-2006	all oppositional forces, esp. Yellow Shirts	
Influential allies	military, opposition politicians, courts (newly empowered, highly receptive to charge laid by government opponents), academics, press	Democratic Party, PAD	32
Shifting alignments	the strive of the government to amend the constitution and to get Thasin back to Thailand	PAD, Yellow Shirt protesters	33
Increasing access	Sondhi's ASTV channel improves communication and propaganda tools for persuasion	Elites, non-elites	39-40

*Table 3: Opportunity Structure in the 2008 cycle. Source: Askew 2010*

poorly trained, used water canons and tears gas grenades in an attempt to dissolve PAD blockade of parliament building. Some PAD protesters also carried along “ping pong” bombs. This day left the next casualties behind. In the ensuing moral fight over the interpretation of the event, ASTV channel of Sondhi and speakers at the Government House rally site downplayed the role of PAD protesters and demonised the police as “enemy of the people”. The police, on the other hand, found itself in a miserable situation. With the reluctant army leaving it to do the 'dirty' jobs, and rhetorically besmeared by PAD and members of the Democratic Party (DP), a great part of the police tended to lean over to the side of the Red Shirts, a valuable ally to them only a year later during the storming of the ASEAN summit (ibid.: 39-40).

By the end of November, the Yellow Shirts shifted up gears by seizing Suvarnabumi Airport, leaving hundreds of thousands of tourists virtually stranded for over a week.



Element / Process	Empirics	Source
Opening of opportunity	Government seeks to amend the constitution, ultimately aiming at restoring the pre-coup state	33
Diffusion of contention	PAD rallies in May and June to the siege of the Government House in August to comprehensive demonstrations in September (clash with UDD supporters) and October (clash with police) to the airport seizure at the end of November	34-41
Framing	Saving the nation; final war, holy war	36
Countermovement	August 31: crowd of government supporters outside parliament while Samak holds speech inside; <i>early risers of the next cycle</i>	37
Interaction challengers – authorities	Regularly through the media and in parliament; October 7: clashes between Yellow Shirts and the police	39-40
Radicalisation	Increase in violence, clashes and the use of weapons	37, 39
Innovation of performances	Government House seizure; Airport seizure	37, 41
Facilitation	“Judicial coup”: dissolving of PPP, new government under DP	41-43

*Table 4: Sequencing of the 2008 cycle. Source: Askew 2010*

Coincidence or not, 8 days after the beginning of the occupation, on December 3, a court ruled that the PPP and its coalition partners be dissolved, thereby ousting the government. Events came thick and fast. On December 13, it was announced that a faction around Newin Chidchob had changed sides in parliament, forming a new coalition under the DP. Without new elections, a new government under Abhisit Vejjajiva took office on December 17 (41-43). This government would rule Thailand until 2011. The wheel of protest cycle was turned anew; this time in the other direction.

## 2009-2010: Red Shirts

Once again, Thaksin's political arm had to re-constitute, this time as Phuea Thai. Suddenly in the role of the opposition, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), with its Red Shirt supporters being the counterpart to PAD. They took quickly to the streets, voicing their anger over the “coup in disguise”, double standards and injustices when treated by the authorities (e.g. court cases took long if a PAD member had to face trial, while fast processes and harsh verdicts were spoken if UDD members stood trial) or over the appointment of Kasit Piromya as the foreign minister whom they labelled as a “traitor and terrorist”. Rallies and demonstrations were staged each month, culminating with the episode usually termed “Bloody Songkran” in April. On April 8, the D-Day attracted 100,000 people at the Government

House. The next day saw broad road blockades in Bangkok. On April 10, protesters marched to ASEAN summit venue in Pattaya, demanding that a letter be handed to general secretary of ASEAN. On April 11, clashes occurred between the Red Shirts and “Blue Shirts”, a hired militia armed with clubs, apparently organized by the minister of the interior. A rumour of two people being shot dead became the pretext for the escalation: The summit venue was stormed which led to its the abortion. A major international embarrassment to the government who would exploit on the fact months later by demonising the Red Shirts as “national traitors”. On the same day, the cabinet invoked the Emergency Decree for Chonburi Province (to which Pattaya belongs). It was extended to Bangkok on the next day. This permitted the government to push for a severe crackdown. The UDD TV-station was shut down, troops that were sent into Bangkok dispersed the crowds and clashed with Red Shirts on April 13. The violence left over a hundred people injured (Askew 2010a: 45-52).

Type	Empirics	Beneficiary	Source
Influential allies	Police, as during the ASEAN summit in April 2009	Red Shirts	40
Shifting alignments	New, oppositional government	Red shirts, UDD	
Fragmented elite	As before	Both sides	

*Table 5: Opportunity Structure in the 2009-2010 cycle. Source: Askew 2010*

In the period after the crackdown, contenders took time to lick their wounds. The movement used its time for restructuring. District committees were formed and “schools of politics” organized. These measures were aimed at improving the hitherto chaotic situation of coordination and control on the streets. A new satellite channel (“people station”) was back on air, replacing D-Station, and new newspaper appeared. In June, by-elections for two constituencies in the north-east were clearly won by Phuea Thai. This gave the Red Shirt movement a fresh boost. On June 28, a UDD rally in Bangkok was held. The idea of submitting a petition that would ask for royal pardon for Thaksin was discussed and finally handed to the Office of the Prime Minister on August 17, with some impressive five million signatures. If processed at all, of course, the processing of the petition was slow. UDD staged a mass rally in October and a smaller one in mid-January 2010 as reminders to the government, demanding the petition to be processed. But to no avail (ibid. 56-58)

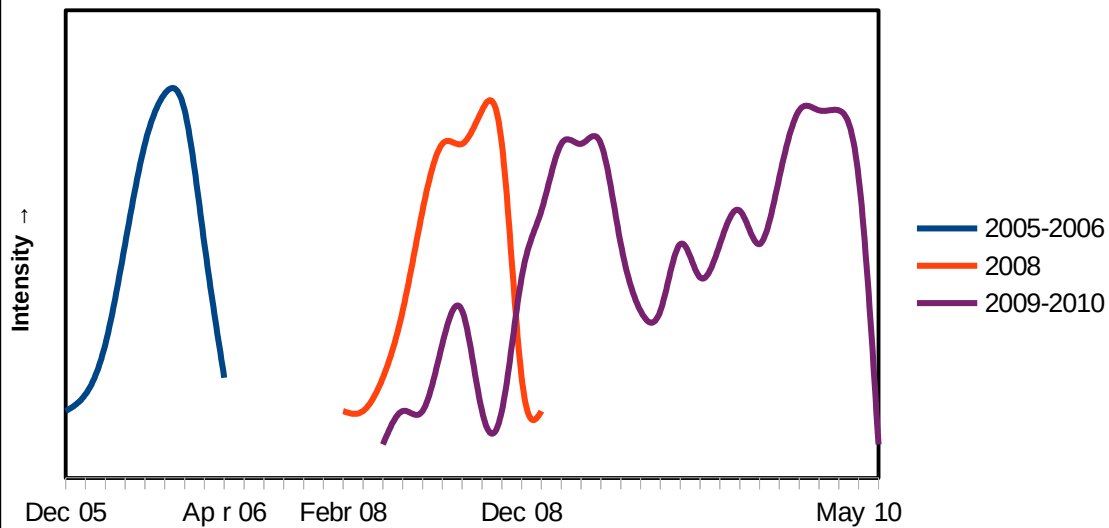
The final episode in this cycle is too comprehensive to be retold in detail here<sup>5</sup>. This much may be told nevertheless: a first phase from mid-March to April 7 included new mass demonstration with a turnout of 200,000 people on March 14, intra-UDD splits into a more radical and a more peaceful faction, televised Abhisit-UDD talks (with no results) and the shift of the demonstrations to the city's popular upscale retail district of Ratchaprasong. Secondly, the government re-invoked the Emergency Decree on April 7. One measurement under the emergency was to shut down the People Station, thereby robbing the Red Shirts of their own communication medium. Likewise, 36 websites were blocked. Thirdly, violence broke loose from April 10 in chaotic of troops moving into Bangkok and firing in the masses after a bomb hit soldiers. Up until the end of April, the whole action had concentrated on the “red zone” rally site of Ratchprasong where militant and armed Red Shirts entrenched themselves. In early May, a possible way out opened up through a five-point reconciliation “road map” offered by Abhisit. Paranoia, mistrust against the government and division among UDD prevailed and

<b>Element / Process</b>	<b>Empirics</b>	<b>Source</b>
Early risers	August 31, 2008, as countermovement to yellow shirts in previous cycle	
Diffusion of contention	Rallies and demonstrations from end of December 2008 to March 2009; “bloody Songkran” episode with storming the ASEAN summit, clashes and dead, in April; mass demonstration in October, a smaller one in January 2010; the violent clashes of May 2010	45-51, 58
Innovation of performance	Posing ultimatums to the government; storming a summit that leads to its abortion; petition for royal pardon; otherwise mere reproduction of PAD / Yellow Shirt protest forms	46, 50-51, 57
Framing of conflict	“True democracy”, double standards / injustice	47, 48
Repression	Crackdown during “Bloody Songkran”	51-52
Exhaustion	“Lowtime” after crackdown in April	56
Opening new opportunities	Re-formation during “lowtime”: “schools of politics”, new satellite TV station (“people station”), new newspapers	56
Further opportunities	Phuea Thai wins two by-elections on June 2, giving the movement a boost	56-57
Cycle renovation	mass demonstration in October, a smaller one in January 2010	58
Radicalisation	The may-abyss: warfare-like confrontation between the military and armed militant Red Shirts in the Ratchaprasong area in Bangkok	Askew 2010b
Repression	Capture of “red zone”; full crackdown on the movement afterwards	

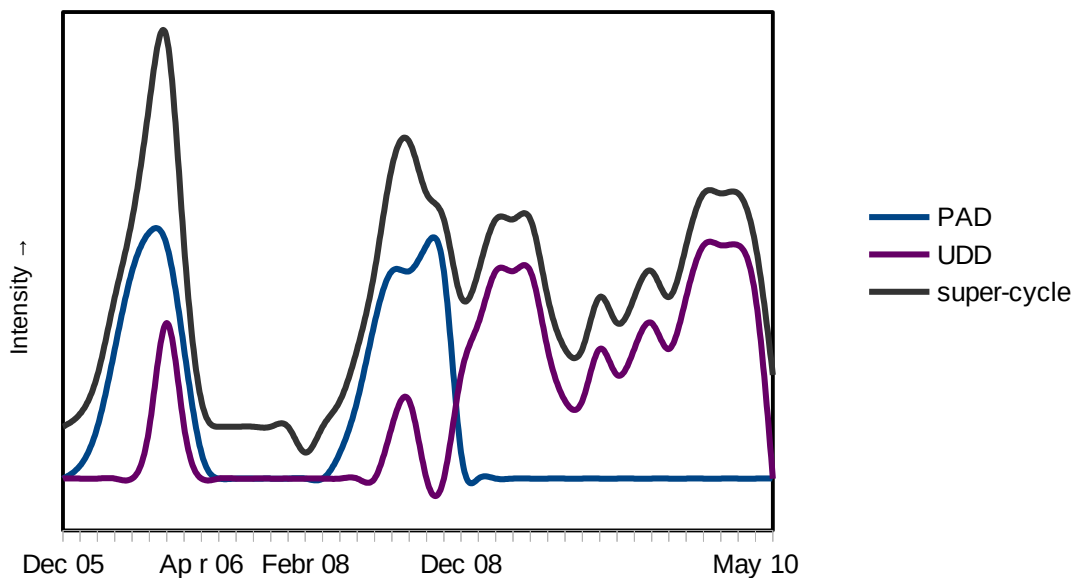
*Table 6: Sequencing of the 2009-2010 cycle. Source: Askew 2010a*

5 Askew (2010b) gives a sufficient overview. The turmoil events from May 2010 Bangkok left such an imprint that a whole book is dedicated to their analysis: Montesano et al. 2012

Graph 2: the three cycles in a disparate singular parabola model



Graph 3: sub-cycles and super-cycle in the integrated model



hindered a possibly peaceful outcome. By May 13, troops (including snipers) began sealing off the red zone. A minority of protesters had military experience and were armed with, and made use of, grenades and weapons – the majority being armed with little more than slingshots. The final push into the zone came about on May 19, leading to the capitulation of UDD. The operation of the military was crafted on a model of urban warfare and based on estimations of a far higher degree of armed resistance than actually faced. After the operation, a full-fledged crackdown on the movement was

pursued. The government emerged stronger than ever. The bloody events resulted in at least 90 dead and over 800 injured.

## **Towards a historically interwoven concept of cycles**

### Theoretical Implications

Let's recapitulate my points of criticism raised two sections ago about the hitherto existing theory about cycles of contention;

1. It cannot account for counter-hegemonic movements and *its* countermovement at the same time.
2. It does not account for the interplay of two or more cycles.

These critical points hold true for the model I call “isolated singular parabola model” - precisely the model that Tarrow and his contemporaries would describe. In Graph 2, I have illustrated what this would roughly look like for the Thai context I have outlined above. No statements can be made about the relationship between PAD and UDD movements, apart from the fact that, at certain juncture, one may open opportunities for the other. Also, we cannot learn anything from one cycle about another cycle.

In contrast, my integrated model: The question that arises is: What is a cycle? As for the Thai case, I am convinced that since 2005, the cycle has not yet come to a close, restabilisation has not occurred yet. Therefore, I wish to account for this by terming this longer historical period *super-cycles*. However, analytically distinct are the episodes that make up what previously had been termed “cycle of contention”. This, I wish to call *sub-cycles*.

This conceptual distinction and simultaneous integration into one model bears a few advantages. Firstly, a hierarchy is established. It is clear that super-cycles encompass sub-cycles.

Secondly, it is clear that sub-cycles are related to one another by belonging to the same historical period and setting. By the same token, this implies that sub-cycles do not really decline by default, unless the super-cycle comes to a close. Rather, they simmer under the surface until they re-erupt when time is ripe. This was, and still is,

true for the Thai case: Contention broke out after the opening of opportunities or when discontent was heightened. Even in times of a seemingly peaceful situation, that is, during military rule when neither side had an opponent to fight against; even then, the mindset is directed to old wounds and towards future paths. When it is likely that military rule is going to end, the question will arise, which side will take over power and how will the other side react? Hence, even during calm periods, contention does not fly away entirely.

Third, by switching the talk between super-cycle and sub-cycle, is possible to speak about the contention of a single movement alone, or about both movement and countermovement at the same time. By speaking of a super-cycle, it is automatically implied that one means the movement *and* its countermovement at the same time. Consider Graph 3: in phases when both movements are active, the overall tension doubles in comparison with phases when only one movement takes action.

## Practical Implications

For the complex political situation of Thailand my theoretical advancements allow the following remarks:

1. For as long as politics in Thailand do not strive for reconciliation, the antagonistic fissures between red and yellow or Thaksin and DP, are likely to continue as too many interests are at stake. (This point assumes that the political divide remains “two-fold”, that is, that not a third political camp emerges while the others remain.) Without reconciliatory politics, it is likely that either a) the eternal super-cycle continues, b) the cycle breaks into extreme forms of antagonism, i.e. civil war, or c) one side will permanently take over power and repress the other over its causes, thereby departing from a democratic polity.

2. Learning from the history. As long as the super-cycle has not declined, history is likely to repeat. This can be seen in the sudden outbreak of the 2013 contentions which, little later, led to the *coup d'état* of 2014 and finally back to military rule. If, and that seems likely, Thailand is to return to a democratic polity, the mistakes of the past should be avoided. This is especially the case for the design of the new constitution. But even later political actors should be aware of the simmering grievances and that the (unintended) opening of political opportunities may trigger contention among the

politically oppositional camp.

## **Conclusion**

The complex reality of contentious politics in settings like Thailand are still not fully understood theoretically. There is still a lack of knowledge, for example, we may ask how other types of contention, like single-issue movements may have a repercussion on the overall picture of counter-hegemonic contention.

Although dynamics of contention is an attempt to encompass a variety of strands of theory such as resource mobilisation, framing and ideologies, and political opportunity structure into one cyclical model. What is still lacking is a convergence of these strands to the heterogeneous body of the new social movement theory. To bring together questions of identity with a range of static or procedural theories, is a riddle I cannot solve at this point.

Yet, with this article, I have tried to develop the political process theory a little bit further. It brings back in the historical trajectory into the study of social movements, that is, the trajectory of its own history. Unfortunately, my theory still lacks studies of other polities under this lens. Hence it remains to be seen if the integrated model can make wider claims or if it is just little more than an understanding of a particular society's political culture.

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Berlin, 31.03.2015

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