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Thaksin Shinawatra: the full transcript of his interview with The Times

Richard Lloyd Parry, Asia Editor of The Times, spoke to the ousted Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra at his home in Dubai



(Charney Magri/The Times)

Ousted Thai leader Thaksin Shinawatra

Richard Lloyd Parry in Dubai

Thaksin Shinawatra: [My election victory in 2001] was the first time in Thai history that one party won half of parliament's seats. We won a landslide — half of parliament's seats — and we formed a coalition government. And it was the first time in Thai history we stayed for a four-year term without the House being dissolved. And it's the first time in Thai history that the prime minister was re-elected for a second term. And the first time in Thai history that we won 377 seats so that we could form a government without needing a coalition — 76 per cent of the parliament's seats at that time.

That became my problem — because I was too popular, being loved by the people too much. That's where my problem comes from.

I was told by some of my people that the media would start to attack me — because the opposition is so weak so the media would become the opposition. I didn't believe that at that time. And finally I saw the media attack me with unreasonable things. One day I came across the son of the owner of a daily newspaper. I asked him: 'Ask your dad, why does your newspaper attack me unreasonably?' He said, 'Uncle [a general term of respect], there's nothing I can do because my father has been lobbied by two

Privy Councillors. They came to have dinner with my father and they said the King doesn't want you anymore.' I said I don't believe that — His Majesty never wants to become involved in politics. Maybe it's because of their own prejudice against me.

Why are they prejudiced against you?

They spread rumours that I wanted to turn Thailand into a republic and that I wanted to be president, which is something I never thought. I'm very loyal to the monarchy. You know, when I first became prime minister I went to an audience with His Majesty. I said, 'Your Majesty, I'm very loyal to you. I'm the first prime minister born in your reign. I'm humbly saying – not that I consider myself as your child – but my age is about the age of your children. So please consider me and teach me as though I'm your children's age, even though I'm prime minister. Your Majesty has been reigning for three generations – the generation of my grandfather, the generation of my father and then my generation. So I very much respect Your Majesty. Whatever I need to do properly, please teach me.' This is how I present myself. And, 'Your Majesty has been working hard for the Thai people for many years and you may be tired and you're getting old. Please use me. I will shoulder all the burdens and I will work hard for you to solve the problems of your citizens.' That is the very first thing ? I told His Majesty.

And I worked hard until I got more and more popular, and the popularity became my problem. The opposition Democrats are very good at alleging things about people. They start rumours and attacking me. Even when they are in power, they still allege that I want to be president. This is a very sensitive issue for Thai people because Thais love His Majesty, and Thais will not allow anyone who dare to topple the monarchy?

Was it because people thought you were more popular than the King?

When you have a son, he loves the wife and he loves the mother ? It's a different kind of love. The people love me because they can touch me. They can use me to improve their well-being. But the King, they respect him very much like God. It's a different kind of love. But the people are trying to make it the same love. That's really the whole problem.

In Thai politics the King is one of the most powerful people. Is that a good thing?

The King is the most respected person. He's become god in the feelings of the Thai people. Thais don't obey one another. They need someone they really respect – that is the King. But the people who surround the King and the Queen, what I call the palace circle, they try to make influence.

Most privy councillors are retired government officials? they have their subordinates so they want to have some kind of influence. Let's say like General Prem [Tinsulanonda, president of the Privy Council] – he wants someone to be army commander-in-chief. But if you appoint someone else he may not be happy. That is the exercise of power without the intention or anything of the monarch. It's the palace circle who are playing the games.

So General Prem and people like him are manipulating the King?

The Privy Councillors are. Not only Prem but others like ladies-in-waiting, and whatever, of the Queen. Thai society looks big, but it is very narrow in terms of the elite in Bangkok. So the influence, the network is

there. That's what makes politics complicated. It's not like the UK or Japan, where people are not allowed to influence things.

That's the problem in Thailand. The monarchy is not the problem. The monarchy is good for Thailand. Thailand needs to have a monarchy but it should not be abused or played by the palace circles.

So the monarchy is a good thing but the royal institution needs reform – is that right?

Yes, yes.

What kind of reform?

The constitutional monarchy must be strictly abided by. All the institutions must function according to the rule of law and the political rules, but sometimes they've been influenced. The justice system can be intervened in by the palace circle.

Thai democracy is not really mature. It looks mature but it's not mature, because of the intervention of the military which should not be allowed. Every time you stage a coup you take control of sovereignty — that should not be allowed. Democracy should be through elections only — you have to give the power to the people. But power is not with the people. The election has become just a rubber stamp for democracy. You have to care for the people, you have to respond to their needs.

It's been a plot to shift the power. Actually there are two camps, the Democrats [the Democrat Party of the current prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva] and my supporters. They want to shift from my supporters to Democrats. Democrats wanted power twice — not by people power, it's from defection of MPs from some other party.

In Thailand we call them cobra — because people don't trust the cobra. The cobra can bite the owner.

In April you made an appeal to the King [Bhumibol Adulyadej] to intervene to heal the divisions in Thai society. Do you still hope the King will do that?

The government is engaged in a conflict with my supporters. We are rivals, so the government is not in a position to solve the problems. The government is not in a position to be trusted because they steal the power, they rob the power from the people.

The only way the government can be involved is that they have to rethink being antagonistic to others. But they're not generous enough, because they're afraid that if they have an election again they will lose. I can assure you that the government will lose in the election. We [the Pua Thai party of Thaksin's supporters] are going to win a landslide again. So that's the reason they want to hang on in power regardless – they never want to dissolve parliament. I don't care, but the people are now suffering, the country is suffering – you can see it. Thailand is now heading to more problems.

What can the King do in this situation?

You have to bring the two parties together and then start it over again. That is, forgive every party involved.

What would you say to the King?

I would say, 'Your Majesty, it's time for Your Majesty to be kind to the Thai citizens, by giving them peace. Let them stay together peacefully through the blanket amnesty and pardons. So let everyone go back to their normal life and draft the new constitution.'

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They [the enemies of Mr Thaksin] tried to kill me. They had a meeting in the house of Mr Pi [Malakul], who is close to Her Majesty? General Surayud [Chulanont, former Thai army commander, and prime minister after Thaksin was ousted by the military coup] asked General Panlop [Pinmanee] to assassinate me.

Did His Majesty know about this?

I don't think so. I can assure you His Majesty is above [politics], but those in the circle have a network. They stay together, they talk together, they try to give the impression that they are very loyal so they have to get rid of the one who is not loyal, who might turn Thailand into a republic. They want to get rid of me because they say I am trying to turn Thailand into a republic and topple the monarchy. That's not true. I have a very high respect for the monarchy and royal family.

The Queen attended the funeral of one of the Yellow Shirt supporters [the 'Yellow Shirts', Mr Thaksin's opponents]. You must have been very surprised about that.

Everybody, the whole of Thailand, was surprised. But I know Her Majesty. Her Majesty is very kind when someone gives her wrong information [such as] 'That lady's dying because she tried to protect the monarchy.' I think she was lied to. People around her circles try to give her the wrong impression, to give wrong information to Their Majesties.

You've made your appeal to the King to intervene and your supporters have presented a petition for your pardon. Why has the King ignored them?

I think His Majesty maybe now feels unwell because he's been in and out of hospital. I hope after His Majesty gets stronger he will find a way for the country to be back to unity. We cannot let the country go on like this. We will be getting worse and worse and the division will be getting deeper and stronger.

The King seems to be recovering from his latest illness now. But there will eventually be a change of monarch. What will that mean for Thai politics and Thai society?

Thailand's been governed by? this dynasty more than 200 years. There's going to be a smooth transition but Thais need to reconcile their differences first, before the reign change. The reign change will be smooth.

One day the Crown Prince will become King. How will his style be different from that of the current King?

It may be different, but I think it will go smoothly because he's a constitutional monarch. The people around the Crown Prince will be new, and the palace circle will not be that big because he will be new.

The Crown Prince, because he will be new, may not be as popular as His Majesty the King. However, he will have less problem because the palace circle will be smaller, because of being new in the reign.

How would you describe the Crown Prince's character?

He's the newer generation, modern.

What kind of personality does he have?

He has a very strong determination to do what he really wants to achieve. He has a strong determination.

What does he want to achieve?

He's not the King yet, he may not be shining. But after he becomes the King I'm confident he can be shining to perform Kingship, because he has observed His Majesty, his father, for many years. He learns a lot from His Majesty. It's not his time yet. But when the time comes I think he will be able to perform.

Sometimes even in a constitutional monarchy when a new monarch succeeds to the throne there is a new spirit in the country. Do you expect that will happen in Thailand?

I think His Royal Highness the Crown Prince – he has grown up abroad, he had education abroad and he's young. I think he understands the modern world. For a constitutional monarch the world is changing. The monarchy is evolving according to the changing world anyway.

How do you think the Thai monarchy needs to evolve in the next generation?

Being a constitutional monarch and understanding the changing world – that is enough to be a change.

You were elected three times in Thailand. You were never defeated and you were ousted in a military coup. What is your position? Are you still the prime minister of Thailand in exile?

Now I consider myself as ex-prime minister of Thailand and in exile. I was asked to lead a government in exile. I didn't do that because I don't want to hurt the monarchy. So after the King signed the decree accepting the coup, I said then 'I am finished'.

I am now just trying to fight for justice, not for myself but for the people of Thailand, especially the poor. They'd been provided with opportunities and they started to see light at the end of the tunnel. But they staged a coup and destroyed their hopes and now the country has got worse for three years. So I fight for their justice. They deserve to be provided with opportunities.

Cambodian prime minister Hun Sen compared you to Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma. Is that a good comparison?

There are some similarities there, but not really everything. The similarity is we won elections, we rule the countries. We've been ousted by the coup d'etat and we come from the people. We are democratically elected leaders and we come from the majority of the people – a big majority, not just a small majority.

She's under house arrest, I've been kicked out of the country. They know that if I am in the country it'll be worse [for them] than Aung San Suu Kyi.

You're meeting Cambodia's Hun Sen this week. Are you going to relocate to Cambodia?

No, I can work online. I can work through email, but I want to thank Hun Sen in person.

After he announced the royal decree I rang him to thank him and he invited me to go to Cambodia.

The government of Thailand reacted very strongly, by withdrawing their ambassador. Why did they react so strongly?

This government's trying to protect its power by every means. They're afraid that if I were staying there it might be too close. I'm not going to stay, anyway, but I have to travel there.

The whole government is just in a panic about me and doing nothing for the country. They over-protect their power. They don't have power easily, so when they managed to gain power with the help of the military and the president of the privy council they have to protect it very well – like the cobra protects the eggs.

They are very childish. They're afraid if I were there my supporters would be more upbeat, because I stay close. I'm not going to stay, I know it's too close, but I will visit from time to time.

In March you said: 'If there is the sound of gunfire, of soldiers shooting the people, I'll return immediately to lead you to march on Bangkok'. Would Cambodia be a good place to start that march?

If I were to start the march I would start from the north-eastern part of Thailand, on the soil of Thailand, but I will have to enter Thailand from the border. I can enter Thailand from Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar. I can find a way.

Under what circumstances would you do that?

I try not to. I have the steps [to take before doing that]. Win the next election - that's crucial, but it doesn't really solve the problems of Thailand. It may solve my problem but not the problem of Thailand. The problem of Thailand must be solved by bringing both sides together and make them bury the hatchet for national reconciliation's sake.

Who can do that?

The King. Normally the president of the Privy Council should be able to do it but now the president of the Privy Council has got involved, and will be attacked strongly by Red Shirts [the supporters of Thaksin], and there is nobody left. There is nobody left to make this thing happen. It can be the King or the Crown Prince, who is going to be the next King.

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The government want to keep me out of Thailand. They don't want me to go back to Thailand. They want to keep me out of politics. It's really politically motivated.

If I were to go back now it would be even more chaos because my supporters, millions of them, would come out. They know that I've been bullied politically. I haven't really had a fair trial or justice.

If I were to go back now there might be bloodshed because the government will definitely use military force

with live ammunition. So it wouldn't benefit anyone.

How would you describe the situation in Thailand now?

Any sport will never have chaos if the referee is fair and if both sides play by the rules of the game. In Thai politics they don't play by the rules of the game.

Until a few years ago, the image of Thailand was of a country very united with a strong sense of national identity. How have Thais become so disunited?

Because of paranoia over the stability of the monarchy. They thought that I'm too popular and might topple the monarchy and then I will turn Thailand into a republic, which I've never thought of. I just try to serve my country. I'm loyal to my monarch. I keep doing good things for them.

Is there a possibility of compromise?

Yes. It depends on who sits at the head of the table.

Have you been in contact with people in government?

No, they have never contacted me. They claim that they called me, but they never did. They never want to settle, otherwise they cannot hold power. They are obsessed with power. If the country is not in a mess and there is no one helping them to get the power they will not be able to hold on to power.

A lot of your money is still in Thailand, \$2.2 billion [frozen by the government while Mr Thaksin was being prosecuted and convicted of corruption]. Are you ever going to get it back?

I hope that one day if there is justice I will get it back. Because it is family money which has been declared long before. It's the same amount of shares that we owned before entering politics. And the whole family sold that amount of shares so the source of money is clear, but they're trying to make the story that the price increased because of my influence. Actually all the shares in the stock market increased in line with the index of the stock market and some companies increased more than the average, but it's not our family company but the companies of others. Our family's went in line with the index.

If the government said to you: 'OK, we'll give you back your money, but you've got to stay out of politics, just be a businessman', would you agree?

Well, you know, I just want justice. I don't care whether I will go back to politics or not. But if the majority need me then I have to go back, I cannot be selfish. But if I were able to choose, I would live my life peacefully. I want to form a new party called 'Enjoy Life Party'. [Laughs.] You know I have no time to enjoy my life. I have been working hard since I grew up. After I became a successful businessman, instead of living my life happily, I volunteered to work for the country. Normally politics is not for rich people to go into. Seldom people who are rich want to go in politics. But I love the people. I love my country, I want to do good things for them. ? I could walk away. I'm really fed up of Thai style politics. But if the people make me go back, I owe them.

I'm very, very revolutionary. I want to reform. I reformed so many things. I reformed ministries that have been there for 100 years. I was about to reform the whole legal system to make it modern.

Since you left Thailand, how has your support within Thailand changed?

It's gone down a little bit, especially in the urban areas because of the biased news against me, just one-sided all the time. But after I'm cleared, the support will come back very quickly. The last election after the coup [in December 2007] shows that even though I'm not there we still win more seats. That's going to be true again in the next election. If I were to be there, that's going to be an even bigger majority. That's the reason why my opponents, the Democratic Party, are very afraid of me and try to tarnish me. They are trying to do everything to keep me away.

How much financial support do you give to the Red Shirts?

If you go and talk to the Red Shirts you will understand very well that they come by their own money. And they even help each other, donating a bit of money when they come to Bangkok. They collect money. They help each other a lot. It's very surprising, it's not like the Yellows [Yellow Shirts]. The Yellows come from the military to take control of the airport [Suvarnabhumi airport, occupied by Yellow Shirts in 2008].

You must give them some money. You're a billionaire.

No, they've been frozen, my assets.

But not all of them - you must have some assets outside Thailand.

Very few, not much.

What is your net worth now outside Thailand?

Outside Thailand it's only a hundred million, or couple of hundred million US dollars. A hundred million US dollars, actually.

A couple of hundred or a hundred?

It used to be a couple but I spent some on my house, this and that. I have about a hundred left.

How long will that last?

I don't know. Now I'm working, I'm doing business. I cannot just sit here and spend money. I'm doing business. Now I invest. I have ten gold mines in Uganda. I have lottery licences in Uganda, in Fiji, in Angola. We are about to start in January. Then the gold mining licence, which has very good potential. Then I'm signing the contract in Papua New Guinea on the gold concession, on land. I do the rough diamonds, too, we do the polishing. I decided not to do the mining because it's too risky. We will turn a profit quickly.

How do you spend your time when you're in Dubai?

Doing business, meeting friends and my supporters from Thailand, and travelling. I average about ten days travelling in a month, 20 days here.

How many hours a day do you spend talking to supporters in Thailand?

About three hours, maybe.

Who do you talk to?

Even taxi drivers, small merchants and some politicians.

Which politicians?

The Pua Thai party.

What's your input into the Pua Thai party? What do you do for them?

Myself is the selling point for the party. I sometimes have to talk to my supporters from time to time. Every Tuesday I do the radio broadcasts on the internet.

On November 14 there will be a fundraising concert. I'm going to sing [a Thai song entitled] 'Thanks for beating me up again!', because they keep beating me. The song is saying, 'Thanks for repeatedly beating me, and you beat me in the same place where it really hurts!' That's a song about love.

Do you have a political strategy?

I do have, but by very peaceful means. I want to see reconciliation rather than confrontation. I want the red shirts to be a pressure for reconciliation, not for bloodshed or confrontation.

Do you have a timetable for returning to Thailand?

The ball is not in my court. Now the ball is with the Thailand government. I can stay here one year, two years. I'm fine. But the situation in Thailand needs to be solved quickly.

Why? If it's not solved, what's going to happen?

The economy will get worse, the Thai people, their life, is getting worse, and Thailand is not on the radar screen of major countries anymore. Now the political centre is not going to be in Thailand anymore. For the US, it's shifted to Indonesia.

Some people in Thailand seem to have worse fears than just economic and diplomatic stagnation. You hear people talking about some kind of economic collapse, civil war. Is that possible?

Thailand is near to being a 'failed state'. Because every institution almost cannot function because you don't allow the rules of the game to take their course. You don't allow the rule of law to prevail and you are biased against others. You don't shine before the whole world. You just want to control power regardless. That's why I'm saying Thailand has almost become a failed state, because no one trusts each other. There's no institution that's being trusted like before.

What were your mistakes?

I did politics without understanding the power structure of Thai society that much. I just tried to do it like a businessman, tried to do the marketing and campaigning and sales. I tried to help the poor and campaign for popularity, campaign on what I have done for them and work hard for them without being aware of the

complication of the power structure of Thai politics. I was very naïve in that. So I stumbled.

What about the sale of Shin Corp [Mr Thaksin's family telecommunications company which was sold to the Singaporean government for 77.3 billion bath (£1.14 billion) without paying tax, a cause of intense criticism of Mr Thaksin when he was prime minister]. You didn't pay tax. Putting aside the legal rights and wrongs, was that a misjudgement, politically?

Even if you want to pay tax the revenue department cannot accept your tax. Capital gains tax in Thailand is not tax payable. It's exempted by law. Some countries tax capital gains, but the Thai law has been there for many years as an incentive for a company to register itself in the stock market to exempt the capital gains tax.

So you don't have any regrets or misgivings about the way you handled that?

Well, you know, I'm in a difficult position to say anything as prime minister because it's a family affair, it's not my personal affair. I'm in a very awkward position as a prime minister to say anything.

But speaking now as a private citizen, it was a mistake, wasn't it?

No, because it's jealousy. I am one of the very few who have so much cash. It's the jealousy of the elite. I'm a representative of the rural people who grew up and had that much cash. [My] family wanted me to be free and clear from being criticised for conflict of interest. So they thought they'd better sell [the company].

What about the insurgency in the South [where thousands of people have died in attacks by Muslim separatists]?

I used the concept of the iron fist and velvet glove. The iron fist has been portrayed in the news and mass media more than the velvet glove. I gave a lot of help in education. I gave a lot of help in terms of housing, healthcare and the religion.

But it didn't do any good – the situation got worse every year.

Well you know it was ripe for many years because of the history of that part of Thailand. The map has been redrawn. Some parts that used to be Thailand have become Malaysia. Some parts that used to be Malaysia have become Thailand. The Thai part that became Malaysia, there's no problem with, but in the part of Malaysia that became Thai there is a problem. They look at Malaysia, where they prosper. The side in Thailand does not prosper. It could, but we haven't handled it properly because education is a problem. We allowed them to have only religious education which means they cannot work after that. So they are poor – they want to go back to the Malaysian side because the Malaysian side is better. That's the problem that has been there for many years.

And when they robbed the barracks and took the four hundred-something M16s – from there they started to build the force. And it's getting stronger.

We have to enforce the law. But it was unlucky when things happened at Tak Bai [a notorious incident in which 85 Muslim men died after being arrested following a violent demonstration. They were stacked in the back of army trucks where scores of them suffocated]. It was unlucky because of the transportation of the military – they were so stupid. They didn't have enough trucks so they stacked up the protestors. So they

suffocated. That is very unlucky. At the accident [the demonstration] the deaths were about four or five at the site. But it went up to 80 because they stacked them up and during the fasting month they suffocated easily. They don't drink, they don't eat, they've been transported by the low ranking military. They stacked them up because they were afraid for their lives.

A few years ago you got divorced from your wife. Some people said that was a political, legal move to protect your assets.

My wife understands that I have a lot of supporters. I cannot avoid going back to politics because of the supporters who pinned hopes on me. And she really was not supporting me from the beginning to enter politics, because she comes from a very low profile family. She seldom went out with me, especially abroad, she never followed me. She wanted to be low profile, she doesn't like politics at all, but she understands that I have to go back to politics. So she said: 'I cannot be against you in politics anymore because I sympathise with those who are supporting you. But you have to sympathise with me. I cannot bear it anymore, it's too much on my life, so we'd better divorce'. So we divorced with understanding. We help one another to take care of children but with politics she said, 'Please - I don't want to be involved anymore'. She lives in Thailand and since we divorced we never see each other.

[On reform of the monarchy] When the world is changing every organisation must adapt to the changing environment like the human body. When you're born as a baby your heart is very small. When you grow up your heart must grow up according to your body. You cannot keep the baby heart in an adult body. It's impossible. Every institution, not just the royal institution, every institution is the same - it must be adapted to what is changing.

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