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meetingplace

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

Welcome to the first electronic-only version of *MeetingPlace*, Uniya's quarterly newsletter. Every second edition of this newsletter will continue to be in print. Please feel free to forward this newsletter to your friends.

Uniya is completing a number of projects as we move towards the end of the year. One project is to compile a book of papers from the recent Uniya Seminar Series 2006. *Good Neighbour Bad Neighbour: Australia's Relations with Indonesia* will be available in late November.

Uniya has also just completed a research project on Asia Pacific non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) perceptions of Australia. The findings of this research will be released in early November.

Uniya's senior researcher Mark Byrne has been coordinating Australia-wide launches of the final report of the Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor-Leste (Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in Timor-Leste, CAVR).

The final report, *Chega!* ("Enough!"), is a documentation of human rights violations which took place in the context of political

conflicts in Timor-Leste between 25 April 1974 and 25 October 1999. Although *Chega!* was presented to the President of Timor-Leste on 25 October 2005, it was only disseminated in the districts of Timor-Leste in the second half of this year because of the conflict that erupted in Dili early in 2006. Given Australia's recent and current involvement in Timor-Leste, it is important that *Chega!* is also disseminated here. The report will be launched between 12 and 28 November. More information about the launches is on the back page.

Uniya is also delighted to be involved in the launch of Fr Frank Brennan's new book, *Acting on Conscience: How Can We Responsibly Mix Law, Religion and Politics?* (UQP). Details of this event will be available on the Uniya website and will be emailed to you later this month.

Finally, we would like to invite our supporters to the Uniya and Jesuit Refugee Service Christmas party which will be held on 1 December. Invitations will be sent out in a few weeks.

Blessings and Peace
Mary Bryant



MeetingPlace is a quarterly publication of the Uniya Jesuit Social Justice Centre

Uniya is a Jesuit centre for social justice and human rights



What coup?

By Minh Nguyen

There is something ironic about staging a military coup against a popularly elected government in order to uphold democracy. But this is exactly what coup leaders in Thailand claimed to have done. That the bloodless coup happened in one of the most admired democracies in the region and that it prompted only a casual reaction from the locals, highlights a major paradox in Thai democracy which is both worrying and hopeful.

With Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra across the globe in New York, the military, led by Muslim army chief General Sondhi Boonyaratkalin, moved to oust a government that in the past year has become increasingly destabilising. Referring to themselves as the “Council for Democratic Reform”, the junta declared martial law, revoked the constitution, dissolved parliament, censored the media and banned “political activities”.



Photo source: [flickr.com/photos/beebah](https://www.flickr.com/photos/beebah)

Announcing the changes, General Sondhi said the country’s first coup in 15 years was necessary to heal rifts in Thai society. He accused Thaksin of “undermining the democratic norms” and of “harming the dignity” of Thailand’s greatly revered king. The military commanders also referred to “unprecedented division in the country, widespread corruption [and] nepotism,” as being among the catalysts for their actions.

The complaints against Thaksin are not far off the mark. Thaksin’s wealth and power, which once satisfied Thailand’s need for political stability, also enabled him to undermine institutions designed to preserve political

checks and balances. Critics complained that he used his massive wealth to file anti-defamation lawsuits against the media and his vocal opponents. He is also accused of nepotism and cronyism in a number of state-initiated mega-projects and in his business dealings. This style of bullyboy governance explains the casual response from many Thais who perhaps saw no difference between a slow or speedy death for democracy. At least now there is a possibility for change, they say. The memorable images of people offering flowers to troops suggest that many Thais are relieved, if not glad, to see the self-made billionaire go, even if the means were less than ideal. “It’s a military coup to overthrow an undemocratic democratically elected regime,” declared a former senator and civil society activist, Jon Ungpakorn.

The paradoxes of this coup do not end here. Andrew Walker notes in the *Canberra Times* that much of the groundwork for the coup had been laid by self-declared advocates of democracy, including sections of civil society and the Bangkok “elite”, lead by media mogul and former Thaksin crony Sondhi Limthongkul. With most of the anti-government rallies concentrated in Bangkok, Walker says the advocates for democracy surrounded “themselves with the symbolism of an unelected monarch” and boycotted Thaksin’s snap referendum-like election in April.

The issue would not have been so complicated but for Thaksin’s popular support among the nation’s poor. He was seen as a political innovator who introduced policies and programs which fostered entrepreneurship and helped the poor. His government gave the rural poor government-subsidised health care and introduced a debt moratorium. They paid the incumbent government in kind by giving Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai party an overwhelming victory at last year’s general election and again in April this year.

However, several months have passed since the last election and, in rural Thailand, the impact of the king’s tacit endorsement of the coup remains unclear. The few political protests against the coup indicate that there may have been a mood swing outside the nation’s capital. This notion is supported by results of a survey of 2000 people conducted by the *Bangkok Post* on the first day of Thailand’s new military rule – before strict censorship laws were in place – which found nearly 84 per cent of those surveyed were in favour of the regime change, with 75 per cent believing that the coup would improve the political situation.

This highlights a final paradox of what Colum Murphy of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* calls “Thai-style democracy” which fuses the popular will with the

unquestioned authority of the king. This is the only system that will work for Thailand, the king's right-hand man, General Prem Tinsulanonda, was quoted as saying. "We will never be a republic or without a king," he said in an interview on the day of the coup. The notion that the Thais love their democracy as much as their king is hinted at in an upcoming report on Asia Pacific non-governmental organisations' (NGOs) perceptions of Australia conducted by Uniya Jesuit

Social Justice Centre. In the survey, Thai NGOs were asked how they rate the importance of a series of foreign policy goals. Promoting democracy in the region was rated fourth among eleven policy goals, with eight out of ten NGOs claiming that it is very or fairly important. Interestingly the survey also found that promoting democracy and human rights in Asia were rated ahead of the need to strengthen the local economy.

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Indonesia is changing

By Frank Brennan SJ

Whenever we Australians talk about Indonesia, we tend to start with the presumption that we are a robust pluralist democracy displaying the finest political virtues, and Indonesia is playing catch up. Sidney Jones was very upfront in warning the Uniya Seminar Series 2006 in Sydney: "You can't judge Indonesia by its government; and you can't judge it by its independence movements, and my limited experience here is that Australians tend to do both."

Many of us do not like being tarred by foreigners with the same brush as the Howard government. Neither are we to be taken as sharing the views of John Pilger or Germaine Greer. Richard Woolcott told the Melbourne seminar, "An active and important bilateral relationship is like a rope. It is made up of many strands. Some may be positive; others negative." In Wollongong, Adrian Vickers said, "If you think that the idea of Canberra as being typical of Australia is absurd, then so is the idea that Jakarta might stand for the whole of Indonesia in any meaningful way."

Though Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any nation, it is the world's third largest democracy and it boasts as many Catholics as does Australia. When I joined the Jesuits in 1975, there were approximately the same number of Jesuits in Australia and Indonesia (300 in each). Now there are 431 of us in Indonesia and 154 in Australia – a 50 per cent increase in Indonesia and a corresponding 50 per cent decrease in Australia. While we Australians have only 13 Jesuit scholastics in training for the priesthood, Indonesia has 129 – 10 times more. There are now more Indonesian Jesuits with US doctorates than we have ever had in the Australian Jesuit province.

Jesuits do not give the whole picture, but these figures provide a window into the rapid change in the social and religious worlds of our two societies.

Excerpt from Uniya's upcoming book, Good Neighbour, Bad Neighbour, available in November. Order forms available at www.uniya.org



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While it is not easy to compare NGO opinion with public opinion, a similar survey in Australia by the Lowy Institute in 2005 found almost an opposite set of priorities among Australians. Respondents rated strengthening the Australian economy (with 94 per cent saying it was very or fairly important) ahead of promoting democracy abroad (61 per cent). The survey found that for at least one group of Thais, a group most likely to have supported the coup, democratic values themselves are not questioned.

While democratic institutions in Thailand may have taken a step backward last month, it would be a mistake to think, as some cynics have claimed, that the Thais' casual approach to the eighteenth coup in 74 years reveals a national disposition towards authoritarianism. The fact that so many Thais were conscious and concerned about Thaksin's electoral rigging and cronyism is hardly a sign of democratic complacency. To make a comparison, perhaps Australian politics would be in a different place today if the public showed the same levels of consciousness and concern over issues of democracy and public accountability as they do over interest rates and petrol prices.

With the junta making good its promise on an interim prime minister within a fortnight of the coup, the onus is now on those who applauded the coup to ensure that the democratic institutions they had previously enjoyed are not just returned, but strengthened.

It is hopeful to know that there are already signs of democratic agitation, despite a ban on political activities. NGOs and civic groups from across the nation are planning a massive gathering to discuss political and constitutional reforms. Thousands of people are expected to join the three-day Thai Social Forum in one of the biggest gatherings in Thailand of academics and social activists in years. Ahead of this meeting, the organisers have released a petition which called on the junta to lift martial law, revoke its ban on political gatherings and end media interference. This is a positive sign and a reminder to the West not to brush off democracy – Thai-style – just yet. ■

A version of this article is published in EurekaStreet, 16(14), 3 October 2006, www.eurekastreet.com.au. The Uniya NGO survey is due for release in early November.

UPCOMING EVENT

Australia and justice in East Timor

With a slight easing of the crisis in the Timor-Leste capital, Dili, *Chega!* ("Enough!"), the final report of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR in its Portuguese acronym) is now, belatedly, being disseminated in the districts of Timor-Leste. ACTJET, the Australian Coalition for Transitional Justice in East Timor set up by Uniya, is organising, in November, formal public launches of *Chega!* around Australia to coincide with the 15th anniversary of the Santa Cruz massacre in which Indonesian troops opened fire on Timorese protesters killing 71 people and wounding hundreds more, and the anniversary of Fretilin's declaration of independence for East Timor.

There will be a number of other events around the launches, including a mass for the victims of the Santa Cruz massacre at Mary Mackillop Chapel, North Sydney, at 1 pm on Sunday, 12 November, and public forums on justice and reconciliation. The launches will

be attended by former CAVR Chair Aniceto Lopes, former Commissioner Isabel Guterres, Post-CAVR Secretariat Senior Advisor Pat Walsh, and the Timor-Leste Ambassador or Consul General. Uniya is also producing a booklet, titled *Justice and Reconciliation in East Timor: Australia and the CAVR*, which will be available at the launches.

The launch dates are as follows:

Sydney	Sunday 12 November
Melbourne	Tuesday 14 November
Ballarat	Wednesday 15 November
Adelaide	Thursday 16 November
Canberra	Tuesday 28 November

There will be updates on the ACTJET website (www.actjet.org), or call Uniya for more information.