

**from the desk of Somtow Sucharitkul**  
*Silpathorn Kittikhun Artist*

To the Secretary of State  
The Honorable John Kerry  
United States of America

June 1, 2014

Dear Mr. Secretary:

In the light of your recently published condemnation of the recent military takeover in Thailand, I am sure you have received many letters both of support and disapproval from Thais of all political colors.

Though born in Thailand and often considered to be a meaningful player in the intellectual community of this country, I am not writing to you as a Thai, but as an American citizen, a registered democrat who has voted twice for your boss and who invariably picks the liberal choice in voting on state initiatives: in other words, as a member of your core electoral base.

You may know that there has been a public backlash of anti-American sentiment in the capital of Thailand since your strongly worded condemnation appeared. I have indeed spent a great deal of time explaining to puzzled people in Thailand why America *must* begin from a position of condemnation when it comes to a military takeover. America would not be America if it publicly supported coups. I have also been

explaining why it is necessary for sanctions to kick in. In America, the rule of law is not just about lip service. We Americans don't attack an unjust law by defying it, but by lobbying to get it changed.

Nevertheless, it is clear from the tone and severity of your condemnation that you have not been thoroughly briefed on the situation here on the ground. Without trivializing America's commitment to upholding its core values throughout the world, the Thai public's reaction to your statement is akin to outraged reaction in the States when a man received life imprisonment for stealing a pizza, because of the old Three Strikes Law, which gave judges no latitude in sentencing. That law eventually proved untenable, and you should consider the possibility that a kneejerk reaction from the United States in the matter of this coup may also prove to be a position on which you will be forced to backpedal as more facts are presented to you.

There is no need to catalog the excesses of the Thaksinite administrations; others have ranted about their alleged extrajudicial killings, their twisting of libel laws to muzzle press criticism, their kleptocratic self-enrichment at length. It is clear, however, that by saying "We were elected, and therefore may do anything we want," they failed to understand the basic rationale for democracy.

Simultaneously, their opposition, by derailing an election and intimidating voters, have also failed to understand the principles of democratic engagement, which are that when you lose an electoral mandate, your job is to convince the voters that your plan is better at the next election, not to try to bring down the government with mobs.

It is hard to justify any seizure of power by any unauthorized entity, military or otherwise. But to say there was no justification whatsoever for this coup is a dangerously uninformed misreading of the situation.

Every effort had been expended by voices of reason from every stratum of society to break the impasse. They only hardened the positions of the conflicted parties until talk of secession, secret pileups of weapons in support of secessionist, warmongering hate speech, and complete disregard for the rule of law not only by protesters, but by the elected government, became the country's normalities.

In short, it was a Gordian knot. If any other way to bring stability and begin the process of reconciliation was available, it was tried and found wanting. Even in the eleventh hour before the coup took place, General Prayuth was still attempting to get the opponents to see reason.

A core principle in Thai culture is face. The issue of face in Thai culture is not amenable to reason. It may be hard to comprehend this in the west, but to us here, it became perfectly clear that for both opposing sides, face had become a higher priority than the fate of their nation.

I believe that the General did the one thing that could allow the opposing camps to retreat without losing face. He chose between incurring the wrath of the international community and saving his country from a civil war. The minute he made this decision, he started to work on a credible plan to return Thailand to a state of a functioning elective democracy.

I do not ask that America refrain from condemning this coup. Indeed, I myself do not approve of coups, and I applaud America for making its fundamental stance immediately public. Nor do I ask that America reconsider the suspension of aid, or other sanctions. These things are necessary because we need a deterrent, should the General not be true to his word, or should other, more power-hungry individuals seek to hijack the process.

We've seen the stick, Mr. Secretary, and now we want to see the carrot.

What I ask is that you seek out, digest, and act on a complete, detailed briefing about the situation on the ground. I ask that the power and influence of the United States be used in a way that helps Thailand in its journey towards a more enlightened governance. I ask that you work through diplomats who understand what is going on the ground, to become as well informed as possible, and (behind the scenes if necessary) you attempt to facilitate, rather than obstruct the future of this country.

The word “coup” is a highly charged word in English, bringing immediate images of strongmen, prison camps, ethnic cleansing, and the trampling of civil liberties. One wishes that General Prayuth had come up with a better word, but this is one instance where the world’s richest language becomes lexically challenged. There is no word in English for a “militarily directed reboot aimed at establishing a permanent democratic system”, but this appears to be what the junta (another charged word) had in mind.

We could be wrong. It could be a trick. The army has certainly fumbled, and stumbled: its heavy-handed attempts at censorship, its “invitations” of dissenters to what is tantamount to involuntary detention, albeit brief, its clumsy dealings with the social media, are certainly black marks.

But there are encouraging signs too. The political violence which has plagued the country for months is finally at an end. Political opponents were forced to at least sit in the same room. Partisan TV channels which spewed forth hate speech have been temporarily put on hold. For the first time in a year, people in the capital city are starting to feel safe.[cv](http://cv)

America need not listen to people from other countries. But as a person who voted your government into power, I do have a right to hold you to account and to challenge you, and to demand that my government act in a less hypocritical manner. With the example of Egypt before us, one can see that America is capable of more nuanced reaction than what it displayed in the case of Thailand. I strongly urge you to arm yourself with the information necessary to make such a nuanced reaction.

Indeed, I am at your disposal should you need my help in clarifying any aspect of the situation, or of the Thai psyche, from the perspective of a bicultural person.

With my best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized, cursive letters. The signature is positioned above a long, sweeping horizontal line that extends to the right and ends in a small loop.

Somtow Sucharitkul