

# Thailand Takes On Neo-Colonial Press

by Michael Billington

Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has attacked the neo-colonial policy and actions of the two leading journalistic representatives of the Anglo-American financial oligarchy in Asia: the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (*FEER*), owned by Dow Jones & Company, publisher of the *Wall Street Journal*; and *The Economist*, which, together with its sister publication, the *Financial Times* of London, speaks for the modern-day inheritors of the colonial British East India Company. Unwilling to bow to the lords of the colonial third estate, Thailand banned the distribution of one issue of each of these magazines, and moved to withdraw the visas of two long-standing resident journalists from the *FEER*—one American, Shawn Crispin, and one Briton, Rodney Tasker.

The immediate issue was the allegation, published in both journals, that there was a public spat between the King of Thailand, Bhumipol Adulvadei, and Prime Minister Thaksin. Not only was the allegation itself highly speculative, but both journals were totally aware that the publication of such political commentary regarding the King is the one subject absolutely forbidden in the kingdom, which is otherwise the home of (arguably) the most unrestricted media in all of Asia. Only when the *FEER* issued an effusive apology to the government of Thailand, were the journalists allowed to remain in the country—at least until their current visas expire.

## **'No Directed Credits!'**

There is a background to this fight, which is only hinted at in the press coverage around the world, in which Prime Minister Thaksin has been called a dictator and a fascist. The Jan. 10 issue of *FEER*, which contained the article in question, had been preceded a month earlier by an article by one of the same journalists, Shawn Crispin. This was both an attack on the economic policies of the Prime Minister, and a threat to Thailand, from the leading Asian mouthpiece of Wall Street and the City of London—warning of dire consequences to the nation if Thaksin failed to follow the dictates of free trade and deregulation. At issue was the fact that Thaksin, since his overwhelming election victory in January 2001, had taken several steps contrary to his image as a follower of the free-trade mantra of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the "Washington Consensus," instead looking for ways of

protecting his nation's depressed economy and the general welfare of the population.

The *FEER* article of Dec. 13, entitled "The Risk of Di-

rected Credit," instructed Thailand to heed the IMF's "concerns about Thaksin's move towards policy-directed lending . . . and a state-led economic-development model." Thailand

## The Financial Oligarchy's Foothold in Malaysia

The fear expressed by *The Economist*, that Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin may be taking Thailand down a path like that of Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, appears focussed on the role of the press. But it clearly reflects the British magazine's hatred for the sovereign exchange controls imposed by Malaysia in 1998, which prevented the speculative destruction which otherwise swept the region. However, despite *The Economist's* lie that there is "almost no freedom" for the Malaysian media, the New York/London financial oligarchy does have its own press outlet in Malaysia. It is called *Malaysiakini*—one of the best-known online "independent" newspapers in Southeast Asia.

*Malaysiakini* is a business funded by the Bangkok-based non-governmental organization (NGO) South East Asia Press Alliance (SEAPA). It started operating in 1999—just after the currency attacks against Southeast Asia of 1997-98, by speculator George Soros and his fellow hedge fund-pirates. *Malaysiakini* had an initial grant of 375,303 ringgit (\$98,895) from SEAPA, with more grants in subsequent years. SEAPA was founded in 1998, to "support press freedom in the region," by five regional "press NGOs." Four of these founding NGOs—the Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (Philippines), the Thai Journalists Association (Thailand), the Institute for Studies on Free Flow of Information (Indonesia), and the Alliance of Independent Journalists (Indonesia)—are members of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange. IFEX is based in Montreal, Canada, and lists the Open Society of George Soros as one of its "support organizations." Other than grants from SEAPA, *Malaysiakini* has benefitted from a computer business deal with the Prague-based Center for Advanced Media. This is the venture capital arm of the Media Development Loan Fund (MDLF), which received a total of \$3.26 million in 1999-2000 in grant money from the Open Society, to carry out "Internet programs."

### Working for Foreign Agents

These "Internet programs" led Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir to remind a *Malaysiakini* reporter during a press conference last April, that she was working for a "foreign agent," and told her to tell Soros "not to come and interfere with our politics here." *Malaysiakini* later denied that they accepted any money from Soros. This was sophistry, since *Malaysiakini* is financed by those who are financed by Soros. One of the editors of *Malaysiakini* resigned in protest when these revelations surfaced last year.

Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir estimates that Soros and the other currency speculators, who forced the devaluation of the ringgit during 1997-98, cost Malaysia at least \$250 billion—\$200 billion in stock capitalization and \$50 billion in foreign exchange—before the destruction was stopped by the implementation of sovereign currency controls. Mahathir added that the irony was, despite the huge losses by Malaysia and other Southeast Asian countries, the currency traders made only \$5 billion. "They are not swimming in money, and from that point of view, they are not efficient," he said, adding that it was "ridiculous" to inflict so much damage just to make a relatively small amount of money. The political intent of the currency raids is obvious.

*Malaysiakini* promotes its sponsor, Soros, who described Prime Minister Mahathir as a menace to his own country; and also Anwar Ibrahim, the now-imprisoned former Deputy Prime Minister, who opposed the protective controls and championed the policies of the IMF.

In February, the German ambassador to Malaysia, Jürgen Staks, repeated the "*reformasi*" stunt pulled by then-U.S. Vice President Al Gore in Kuala Lumpur in 1999. His chosen channel was *Malaysiakini*. In an interview with the newspaper, Staks urged Malaysia to "look into the [Anwar case] again to make it a just affair," adding that "this is the only case [about Malaysia] in Germany that is known even to the churches, and not just the NGOs." He warned that these NGOs may raise their concern over Anwar, when Dr. Mahathir visits German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder on March 20, at the latter's invitation.

In the name of "press freedom," *Malaysiakini* replied to Mahathir's challenge by publishing a list from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), naming Mahathir as an "enemy of the press." The CPJ is also a member of the Soros-supported IFEX.—*Martin Chew Wooi Keat*

must, Crispin wrote, return to the orthodox globalization model, give up the effort to protect Thai industry, and shut down the “overproduction” in the country, regardless of the already massive unemployment and poverty brought on by the international speculators’ attacks on Thailand and its neighbors in 1997-98.

The article’s pompous and neo-colonial tone, and threatening character, make a mockery of the international hue and cry portraying its author as a champion of “freedom and democracy.” The article was particularly threatening when the Prime Minister was about to make his first visit to the United States, where he hoped to find new investors in the nation’s industries and infrastructure.

At the time, *EIR* exposed the nature of the attack in *FEER*, as representing that faction of the Anglo-American financial institutions which, confronted with their own rapidly approaching bankruptcy, were intent on looting every last bit of real value from the developing-sector nations, regardless of the consequences. Their greatest fear, *EIR* reported, was that Thaksin was working too closely with Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad of Malaysia, on implementing debt policies aimed at protecting the productive sector, health policies aimed at providing universal health care, and cooperation regionally to establish rice and rubber cartels to confront the speculators. The article, published in the Dec. 21, 2001 issue of *EIR*, was circulated widely among the business and political leaders who accompanied the Prime Minister on his trip to the United States.

*FEER*’s disdain for Thailand’s sovereignty and well-being was further magnified in the subsequent article, which breeched the law against political speculation concerning the Royal Family. The intention of that article was perhaps revealed most clearly in the editorial of the March 14 issue of *FEER*, in which the bankers’ boys tried to justify their actions. First, the editorial repeated the speculation about the King, stating, as if it were proven fact, that “the king is dissatisfied with the prime minister.” This is an assertion neither the King nor the Prime Minister can publicly refute, due to Thai customs and laws—a fact well known to the authors! The *FEER* editorial ends with an unequivocal threat: “Mr. Thaksin’s authoritarian tendencies should give investors pause.”

### ‘The Economist’ Weighs In

Similarly, when *The Economist* of March 9 editorialized in its own defense against the banning of its March 2 issue—which had carried similar material regarding the King—they exposed their real fears about the direction of policies in Thailand: Prime Minister Thaksin, they charged, was adopting the “authoritarianism of Malaysia!” Dr. Mahathir, they wrote, “allows almost no freedom, either for the international press . . . , or for the local media, which are almost completely muzzled. It would be sad if Thailand went down that path.” Here again, the real concern is not just Malaysia’s press pol-

icy, but the open disdain by the Malaysian government for the cult-worship of globalization by Western governments and their controlled press, and for the destructive policies imposed on the weaker nations by the IMF.

Prime Minister Thaksin has indeed proven that he is willing to stand up to the threats and hot air emanating from the would-be colonial masters. U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), a long-standing enemy of Thailand and of Asia generally, issued a blustering statement that “this episode of attempted censorship may cause the U.S. to rethink its aid policies toward Thailand. The Thai leadership had better bear in mind that their conduct is not going unnoticed.” Thaksin shot back: Helms “knows nothing about the long-established relationship between Thailand and the U.S. . . . His comments don’t carry any weight. Thailand doesn’t beg the U.S. for assistance. My administration has never asked for anything more than partnership. It’s about sovereignty. Leave us alone!”

### Demands for Removal of Thaksin

One of the local English-language newspapers in Thailand, *The Nation*, which pompously announced early last year that it had dedicated itself to a sustained attack upon the Prime Minister, has not only led the campaign in support of the foreign “heroes of freedom and democracy” from Wall Street and the City of London, but has called for a Thai “Watergate” to remove Thaksin from office. Perhaps it is not coincidental, that, since the 1997-98 crisis, Dow Jones has become a significant partial owner of *The Nation*! They have accused Thaksin of ordering the government Anti-Money-Laundering Office (AMLO) to investigate a kind of “enemies list” of media and non-governmental organization (NGO) leaders, including *The Nation*’s editors, which was leaked to the press. The Prime Minister has denied the allegation, insisting that he was not so stupid as to set up such an obvious political trap. Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh said the investigations were procedural, but blamed a “third party” for the leak of the confidential investigations: “This is just too nasty. There’s a possibility that someone might want to create a situation, especially at a time when the country is overwhelmed by news about tension between the government and the media.”

If *The Nation* wishes to call this Thailand’s “Watergate,” it would be well to remember that the architect of the Watergate break-in, and the author of the famous Nixon “enemies list,” was Henry Kissinger, who coordinated the *Washington Post* attacks on President Nixon from his position inside the administration, while convincing Nixon to resign, thus discrediting the Presidency. Kissinger, of course, came out unscathed. He, the Wall Street/London financial houses which control him, and the press whores who serve those now-bankrupt banks, are still in place, but are like the emperor with no clothes. If world leaders, even of smaller nations like Thailand, stand up to the naked oligarchs in an effective way, the days of the latter will be numbered.