

'Thailand in 2010: When the royal rumble turned blood red'

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In Thailand's traditional style of kick-boxing, the bout begins with ornate and time-consuming preambles. Offerings are made. Respect is shown. Brutal bursts of punches, high kicks, knees and elbows follow. It is fast and furious combat that rewards total commitment once the fight begins.

As a public spectacle of martial prowess, Thai kick-boxing offers some insight into the formidable capacity for violence which can lurk in the corner of the easy-going Thai smile.

In 2010, the fighting was not confined to the kick-boxing ring and smiles have been hard to find.

This was a year when the inability of Thailand's political elite to broker a democratic compromise saw pent-up social and political frustrations coalesce into blood on the streets. Students of Thai history must gaze all the way back to 1992, or 1976 and 1973, to consider such emblematic or violent events.

Last year, I suggested that '2010 may well be the year when the battle for political and royal power is forced out of the shadows and into public consciousness, once and for all'. This cautious prognosis has sadly proven correct.

The year began ominously with massed Red Shirt protests in central Bangkok. While notionally loyal to deposed former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the 'Red' side of Thailand's colour-coded political landscape sought to voice a broad range of social and economic frustrations. Outrage at the lack of democratic reform motivated huge convoys of protestors to descend on the capital where they brought traffic to a standstill.

Then, from March 2010 until the protests ended in the violence of May, the Red Shirts besieged strategic intersections in an effort to disrupt the machinery of government and commerce.

The government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, no doubt hoping that Red Shirt resentments would just melt away, was nevertheless forced into a tense confrontation. The initial round of violence in April saw 25 people killed, including an Army Colonel and some of his subordinates.

After that bloodshed, the proverbial 'gloves came off' in an increasingly no holds-barred showdown. For Thais who pride themselves on tolerance, restraint and hospitality, the events that followed were a shock to the nation's carefully constructed self-image.

In mid-May 2010 the final chapter in the Red Shirt occupation of central Bangkok began with a sniper taking aim at Major General Khattiya 'Seh Daeng' Sawasdipol, the self-styled combat commander of the Red Shirt's more militant elements.

As Seh Daeng crumpled to the ground, it became apparent that the crackdown was about to begin. Courageous Bangkok-based photo-journalist Nick Nostitz provided harrowing images showing Red Shirts with sling-shots taking heavy fire from government forces.

Others on the Red Shirt side armed themselves with more substantial weapons. Some also set out to retaliate against the crackdown by attacking symbols of power and privilege around Bangkok. Arson marked the final hours of the protests as Red Shirts sought to attack their enemies' real estate.

In total, 85 people were killed and over 1000 were injured during these months of bloodshed. Hundreds of Red Shirt protestors and leaders were also locked up. Many remain behind bars.

Once the immediate crisis was over, the government of Prime Minister Abhisit moved quickly to neuter public disquiet. A campaign of 'reconciliation' was the chosen tonic. It failed, unsurprisingly, to salvage the reputation of a government that has continued to face opposition in the provincial heartlands where Red Shirt politics draws its primary support.

Until a national election is called it remains impossible to judge just how much support the government may have retained. Is it enough to hold on to power?

In 2011, there is a chance that the government will call an election. But regardless of the outcome of any such election, the violence of 2010 demonstrates, in stark and sometimes horrifying terms, just how deep the divisions in Thai society have become.

Arguably the most important fault line concerns the monarchy. Critical comments about its institutional role have become ever more public and vociferous. A republican fringe among the Red Shirts maintains its rage against royal prerogatives.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thailand's 83-year-old monarch, has spent most of the year cloistered at Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok. His fragile health means that he makes only rare public appearances. And his scope for political intervention, or to play a conciliatory role, now appears profoundly constrained. As a result, attention has increasingly shifted to his son and presumed heir, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn.

The Crown Prince has been caught up in the political drama. Questions about his suitability to take the throne have plagued any efforts to present him in a more positive light. Media outlets around the world, notably *The Economist*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and Australia's ABC television, have explicitly tested the protections that he enjoys under Thai law.

And with the release in late 2010 of leaked United State government cables from Bangkok, another source for sensitive information about the Crown Prince has now emerged. Indeed the exposure of unflattering comments about him by senior members of the Thai establishment, including Privy Council Chairman General Prem Tinsulanonda, are perhaps only the beginning of a torrent of materials that deal, quite explicitly, with some of the most sensitive issues for Thailand's future.

For the year ahead, and while further Red Shirt protests are planned, any resolution of Thailand's political problems remains improbable. Anti-Red Shirt forces appear to have convinced themselves that the final period of King Bhumibol's reign should be marked by ostentatious references to the past and its glories. Such reminiscence is designed to displace any thoughts of alternative future political formations.

Unfortunately for the palace and its supporters, this mandated reminiscence seems to sometimes have the opposite effect.

There is clearly a need for a new consensus, including agreement on the role of Thailand's democratic institutions and monarchy. But without any such consensus, fresh rounds of violence remain likely. Both the government and its Red Shirt opponents have shown that they are willing to take their battles to the brink. The challenge for anybody hoping to referee future rounds is that

good-will quickly evaporated in 2010.

The prognosis for stability in Thailand remains poor as its inter-locking and hopelessly unresolved tensions are carried forward for yet another year.

P.S.

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