

Thailand - PAD: bulldog on a leash or another nail in democracy's coffin

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Since it was formed in February 2006, and especially since it was revived in May of this year, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), has become a distinctive force on the political landscape.

Formally, the PAD is simply an alliance of five orators. But as a political phenomenon, the PAD is also what they are saying, how they are saying it, what visual messages they convey, and who is supporting them.

The movement's main stated aim is to overthrow the current government. Normally any movement that professed this aim would be labelled dangerous, even revolutionary, and be strongly handled by the authorities. Strangely that is not happening. Probably that is because we know its true aim is to obstruct Thaksin's overt return to politics.

The movement's longer-term aim is to undermine the central principles of electoral democracy, namely the sovereignty of the people, and the selection of a parliament by the system of one-man, one-vote. The PAD leaders claim that the electorate cannot be trusted with the franchise because the mass of rural people are uneducated and corrupt. They want the elected portion of the lower house reduced to a minority (perhaps 30 per cent), and the remainder filled partly by "retired officials and important people" and partly by ordinary people and workers, selected by appointment. Since the logic of the PAD's proposal is to disenfranchise the rural poor, this new system is likely to favour the rich, the urban, and the higher educated.

In addition, the PAD wants the military to have a permanent role of political oversight. The military would be removed from political control (by making the defence ministry independent of the Cabinet), and granted the right to intervene in politics to check corruption and to protect the monarchy and national sovereignty.

The PAD seems against the freedom of expression, and in favour of the use of abuse and intimidation to limit the freedom of expression. This conclusion is based on the way PAD orators treat academics, actors or other public figures who disagree with its views. This tactic seems to have been quite successful. Some critics have apologised. The press has been generally rather uncritical of PAD's views and activities.

The PAD makes use of military and martial symbolism. Some of the leaders like to wear brown shirts and black shirts that resemble military and paramilitary uniforms. The headbands worn by leaders and followers recall the outfits of traditional warriors, samurai, and jungle fighters. The oversized neckscarf comes from the scouts, village scouts, and jungle fighters. It is not Chamlong's rural-ascetic look but this barracks-chic that distinguishes the movement. Among the supporters, yellow flags, headbands, T-shirts, and caps combine to give the impression of commonality and conformity which is the role of uniforms.

PAD promotes a visceral nationalism reminiscent of the early Phibun era. The nation is a body that is being physically ripped by its enemies (internal and external), causing pain to the citizens, who must

rise up in the nation's defence.

The PAD's agitational practice suggests a high degree of organisation, strong financing, access to technology, and skill with sophisticated techniques. The equipment for staging and broadcasting the PAD's message requires high capital cost and running expenses. The crowds are well organised and provisioned. The programming shows strategic planning to sustain support and interest with relatively little novelty. The PAD seems skilled in the techniques and rituals of litigation. In short, this is not a few people gathered at a street corner with a soap box.

Analysing the PAD's audience on the streets and in front of television screens is difficult. There are only stray interviews, plus pictures. Perhaps the single word that emerges from this impressionistic data is "respectable". The crowds are generally smartly dressed. The age profile is quite high, though there are also many families in attendance (and the TV audience may be significantly younger). Head-counting from press photos shows a slight preponderance of women over men. From the few on-site interviews available, the crowds include retirees, public servants, small business people, and senior executives from modern firms. There seem to be relatively few manual workers.

The PAD is clearly well connected to other institutions. One of its leaders is a Democrat MP. Other Democrats have spoken from its stages. So too have academics from some of Bangkok's major universities. A serving general has taken the PAD stage in his full uniform. Other military figures, including General Saprang Kalayanamitra, have been seen backstage and are open in their support.

The PAD seems to be protected, perhaps by friends in important places, but also by virtue of its widespread urban support. No other Bangkok protest has suffered so little harassment. When the prime minister angrily threatened to clear PAD off the streets, the security forces refused to cooperate and the prime minister had to back down. When PAD set up a permanent blockade of roads, the police stood aside and public-opinion surveys were surprisingly lenient over the disruption to traffic. When the protest moved to Government House, the police resistance looked like a token showing designed to fail. This apparent immunity gives weight to PAD's message.

The PAD is flirting with the old agent provocateur's technique of placing its own crudely armed gangs in places where they will be attacked by enemies. This creates violent incidents, apparently initiated by their opponents, though in truth a result of the inherent violence of the PAD itself.

In short, PAD is an anti-democratic movement, supported by high investment and shadowy protection, that exploits the fears of the privileged and a deliberately anti-rational nationalism, and flirts with militarism and violence.

Is PAD a bulldog, let out on a leash for a specific purpose, that will be chained up when the threat from thieves has passed? Or is it another step in the destruction of democracy begun by Thaksin, continued by the coup-makers, and now plunging ahead on the momentum?

P.S.

* From: <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/padmeaning.htm>