

## STREET PROTESTS

# The hijacking of Thai democracy

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The anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) is going for the jugular. Now in its fourth week of street protests, PAD laid siege to Government House over the weekend, declaring victory but refusing to go home.

It now intends to prevent the People Power party-led government of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej from returning to its seat of power, as if such an act is sufficient for government resignation en masse.

Every step along the way since it retook the streets several weeks ago, PAD has provoked heavy-handed government responses in order to create the conditions for an extra-constitutional, extra-parliamentary intervention.

PAD has grossly distorted and manipulated news and events to its own ends, launching character assassinations and criticism of anyone who posits opposing and contrarian views, all in the name of "rescuing the nation".

In so doing, PAD has ironically morphed into the very object of condemnation on which it initially built its reputation. Prior to his ouster in a military coup in September 2006, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra was roundly despised and rejected for his influence over and outright capture of political institutions and constitutional mechanisms. In other words, he monopolised Thai politics so completely that it engendered extra-parliamentary street demonstrations that paved the way for extra-constitutional change.

PAD is now hijacking Thai democracy in the same fashion that Mr Thaksin's authoritarian tendencies and political party machine monopolised it. The extremist movement tolerates no dissent. It is either PAD's way or the wrong way, which ranges from pro-Thaksin accusations and lack of loyalty to the throne to questions of patriotism.

To be sure, PAD is in a hurry to topple the Samak government because street demonstrations are expensive and at risk of exhaustion. If PAD cannot quickly force the issue and seal the game by pressuring Mr Samak to resign or by inviting outside intervention, it risks fizzling out.

For the government's part, Mr Samak and his key lieutenants have been just as belligerent and defiant in return, fanning PAD's flames. The brinkmanship game between PAD and the Samak government has now reached a crescendo. Something will soon have to give.

PAD would have to back off or Mr Samak would have to budge by resigning, alone or along with his ministers. Otherwise the escalating face-off between the two sides will increase pressure for outside intervention from the military.

As it now appears that PAD has political and financial backing from the highest corridors of power, the street demonstrations will continue far beyond PAD's eventful but indecisive "D-Day" on May 20.

And PAD's street noises are having their intended impact on Mr Samak. His tenure appears increasingly untenable. Few doubt that he could withstand PAD's maelstrom much longer without resorting to a hard-line response, which would spell his demise in any event. The endgame of his downfall is being played out against Mr Samak's will.

Yet what really plagues the Samak government is less PAD than growing economic hardships and standard-of-living issues. Many of the street demonstrators, numbering in five digits in peak periods, are disaffected by rising energy and food prices, and the lack of effective policy responses.

As a result, PAD has gained some foot soldiers from the farm sector and state enterprise unions. Some of the non-PAD protesters have also staged their own shows separate from PAD. Several large mobs have occupied areas near Government House. The air of anarchy and inevitable confrontation is palpable.

The Samak government has failed to respond by sticking to policy issues. This is because the majority of the Samak cabinet lacks policy experience and expertise. In the face of adversity and rising expectations, Mr Samak and his lieutenants, such as Interior Minister Chalerm Yubamrung, are more attuned to throwing the rhetoric back at the protesters and issuing counter threats.

The only policy hands are Commerce Minister Mingkwan Sangsuwan and Finance Minister Surapong Suebwonglee, but their voices and roles have been drowned out by Mr Samak's and Mr Chalerm's fiery political machinations.

Granted, the government is fighting for political survival, and thus has less time and energy to devote to addressing public grievances through adequate policy responses.

This precarious environment has called the military's role into question. Mr Samak is seen as close to Army chief Anupong Paochinda, who still insists on staying out of the fray. But his colleagues in the regional commands and elsewhere, especially the First Army Region with jurisdiction over Bangkok, are playing their cards closer to their chests.

In view of their lacklustre coup the last time, the army is unlikely to come out again unless there is unmanageable violence in the streets which the government and the police cannot handle.

Such a military intervention could come in two related ways. First, the army could simply impose limited martial law through the Samak cabinet's emergency decree in the affected areas of Bangkok. The other would be another outright seizure of power, resetting the democratic game all over again.

This is what PAD apparently has been egging the army to do. But even if violence spirals out of control, it will be confined to a few areas of Bangkok. A coup would be unnecessary. Gen Anupong is not seen as pro-coup but his immediate subordinates in key commands may have other ideas. Accordingly, Gen Anupong's role and the First Army Region commander's movements should be watched if violence flares and degenerates.

Mr Samak has himself to blame for not being more competent on policy fronts and for exacerbating the tit-for-tat battle between his government and PAD. His position is now shaky, and PAD will keep gnawing at his personal credibility and his administration's eroding legitimacy. His term will be shortened correspondingly. It will serve as a bad precedent and a blow to Thailand's topsy-turvy democracy.

Mr Samak's government deserves scrutiny in parliament and through constitutional channels and mechanisms, but not through PAD's rabid and reckless, rights-over-responsibilities street campaign. Indeed, PAD's success would be Thailand's setback.

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\* From the Bangkok Post:

[http://www.bangkokpost.com/230608\\_News/23Jun2008\\_news17.php](http://www.bangkokpost.com/230608_News/23Jun2008_news17.php)

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