

Thailand: The fatal logic of the latest October tragedy?

Monday 13 October 2008, by [Chang Noi](#) (Date first published: 13 October 2008).

IT'S STILL ALL about Thaksin. The people on Bangkok's streets last week were not fighting for or against "new politics", because nobody really knows what "new politics" means. Every time a PAD person tries to explain, it comes out differently. They were not fighting for or against the current government, because everybody knows this government is a tatty puppet made out of rags and refuse. They were fighting against Thaksin - the possibility he might return or might escape legal reckoning.

The PAD came into existence to drive Thaksin from power. It revived early this year after Thaksin returned to Thailand and appeared to be steering the Samak government to block the avalanche of lawsuits descending on Thaksin and his family. Thaksin claimed he had washed his hands of Thai politics, but this clearly was not true. After he fled into exile, he dropped the pretence altogether. In the press release on the day of his flight, he wrote: "Today is not my day. I would like to ask my supporters to be a little more patient", with the implicit message that he would stay involved. Just three weeks before the recent street battle, he told Reuters: "Politically motivated cases must be resolved by political means." In short, he sees political influence as the best way to avoid a judicial reckoning.

In the transition from Samak to Somchai, Thaksin's role was not covert at all. PPP faction leaders flew to London to lobby his support. Party spokesmen announced that Thaksin had a role in distributing the Cabinet posts. Because Thaksin gave public backing for Samak to continue as premier, some have interpreted Samak's fall as a blow to Thaksin. That's naïve. Although Samak was hand-picked by Thaksin, once he had become premier Samak burnished his royalist and pro-military credentials, clung onto Anupong, and eased away from his patron. In the cookery coup, Thaksin got rid of this unreliable two-faced puppet, placed his own brother-in-law in the premiership and filled key Cabinet posts with members of the northern faction or his personal followers. Sompong Amornwiwat seemed genuinely flabbergasted to find himself in the role of foreign minister, and there's really only one way to explain this extraordinary appointment. Even before the new line-up had paraded in their brilliant white uniforms, constitutional change was back on the agenda.

And by the laws of physics, more meddling by Thaksin meant more storm and fury from the PAD.

Like other ragged protest coalitions, PAD is held together by what they are against (Thaksin). After Thaksin's exile, Sondhi Limthongkul began a debate on what they should be for. The idea of "new politics" broadened the PAD's message into new territory - that the problem is not just "Thaksin" but a parliamentary system easily hijacked by corrupt and self-serving politicians. This message tapped into many people's concern, fear and disgust, but it also was much more difficult to focus. The issue of political reform is highly complex, and the PAD is an alliance of many different groups with varying interests and ideas. The effort to define "new politics" threatened to sap energies and introduce division. Uniting against an enemy is a lot easier. Thaksin's meddling gave the PAD leaders an opportunity to return to their successful formula: Thaksin out! Samak out! Somchai out!

Whatever out! Just shake your hand-clapper. It would be hard to find a device that symbolises simple conformity so aptly.

In the PAD's claims, Thaksin is so fearsome that their own actions are justified. The ordinary people attending the rallies wear caps and shirts claiming they are "saving the country" and tell interviewers they are there because they want to protect the King. These noble aims justify extraordinary actions. Over recent weeks, Sondhi Limthongkul has used the words "civil war". The siege of Parliament was an attempt to overthrow the government by semi-constitutional means. This is not peaceful protest but violence justified in the name of a cause. As Sondhi explained, the PAD has recruited paid militia, mostly among former soldiers and policemen. Some notorious veterans of underground warfare have helped with training. Weapons seized from the PAD have ranged from guns to golf clubs. In the videos of 7 October, the PAD militia were armed with sticks, pipes, poles, handguns, slingshots and a variety of missiles including home-made grenades and raw sewage. This is un-civil war.

On the basis of the past history of Bangkok street fighting, there were two things that the PAD could rely on when the big clash finally came. First, the security forces would perform very badly. They always do. The absence of live ammunition on 7 October was a huge step forward in Bangkok's history of crowd control, but the police seemed to think tear gas was live ammunition, to be used in the same way. They gave no warning. They fired horizontally into the crowd. They fired far larger volumes than necessary.

Second, Bangkok street fights always have their nasty, dark side. Look at the cast of characters skulking in the shadows of the past week's events: Chavalit, Chamlong, Phanlop, Prasong. The dirty violence, traditionally attributed to a "third hand" is an absolutely guaranteed element of such events with such people around. The sickening deaths and injuries were not unfortunate but inevitable.

Perhaps the saddest sight in all this is the Democrat Party. So many of their core constituents support the PAD that any dissent by the Democrats would be electoral suicide, but now they are hitched to the baggage train of a movement that claims the right to use violence and overrule law in order to overthrow an elected government. They are being dragged along at the back, shedding principles and scruples behind them like a litter of plastic bottles

Talk of reconciliation is so much air. There is nothing to reconcile about. In this drama the puppets can only shout, clap, fight and get hurt. The solution lies with the puppet-masters, meaning Thaksin and the anti-Thaksin forces behind the PAD. They are truly responsible for the loss and pain. Both sides.

P.S.

* Published by the Nation on October 13, 2008.