

The culture of protest and the use of violence

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The level of violence in the political standoff of the last six months is new and disturbing. In Thailand's past history of public protest, the violence committed was almost totally the work of security forces engaged in repression. This time the violence was committed in the name of protest. All sides contributed in various ways. But as PAD was the main protagonist, violence committed by those on the PAD side has been the most prominent.

The security forces killed scores of people while clearing demonstrations in 1976 and 1992, and were responsible for "disappearing" people especially in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in the mopping-up of communism in the 1980s, and in the south in the late 1940s and early 2000s. Political conflict within the military has often erupted into fighting.

But throughout Thailand's modern history of public politics, the culture of political demonstration has been largely cast in the tradition of non-violence. The revolution of 1932 was achieved without firing a shot or injuring anyone. The Peace Movement demonstrations after the Second World War were calm and without casualties. The massive student demonstration of 13-14 October 1973 had the atmosphere of a peaceful celebration until the army was ordered to crackdown. In May 1992, there were a couple of incidents when protesters fought back against the police, but the overall tenor of the demonstration was set by Chamlong Srimuang and his Santi Asoke followers who sat calmly awaiting arrest. The succession of Bangkok demonstrations by the Assembly of the Poor in the mid 1990s incurred no casualties except for a handful of small accidents. The 99-day Assembly protest in 1997—the largest and longest protest prior to PAD this year—was marked by no more than a few minor scuffles. Thousands of smaller demonstrations all over the country in the past twenty years have passed with only a handful of violent incidents attributable usually to over-exuberance.

The PAD protests in 2006 belonged to this same non-violent culture. Violence was confined to verbal abuse. But the campaign that developed from May this year was approached in a mode of warfare. The PAD sites at Government House, Makhawan Bridge, and the airports were like defensive encampments. Barbed wire never featured in earlier demonstrations. This time the bales were everywhere. Defensive barriers were built with used tyres, commandeered vehicles, plastic water bottles, and airport luggage trolleys. Yellow shirts and banners served as a form of uniform. Leaders wore other military-like gear including neck-scarves, epaulette shirts, camouflage trousers, and combat jerkins. Buildings were besieged. Units were moved around Bangkok streets like troops on manoeuvre.

From around September onwards, PAD leaders talked regularly about the prospect of a "civil war." The airport seizure was announced as the "final battle." After this "Hiroshima" we were told to expect "Nagasaki." PAD leaders justified anything by explaining "we are now at war."

A major difference from earlier demonstrations has been the "guards." During the 99-day protest at Government House in 1997, the Assembly of the Poor had a contingent of guards to serve as lookouts and to keep order. But this corps was very small compared to the PAD's equivalent. The Assembly recruits were members of the demonstrations not paid professionals. And they were unarmed or equipped with nothing more elaborate than a stick.

At the time PAD moved to the airports, Sondhi Limthongkul stated that PAD had 10,000 guards on shifts distributed among its protest sites. That figure might well have been exaggerated for effect, but the true number probably runs into thousands. Early in the campaign, Sondhi stated that the guards were mostly recruited among ex-policemen and ex-soldiers, and were paid by the day. Later on PAD imported units of guards from upcountry, especially from Chonburi, Rayong, Phetburi, and towns in the south. The looting that has been a hallmark of the PAD campaign suggests many were petty criminals. Some have said they came from “private armies.”

Most guards were armed with simple weapons such as sticks, lengths of steel pipe, and sling shots. After the first invasion of Government House, over a hundred used golf clubs were confiscated. Photos have shown people wielding knives, machetes, and swords. A famous clip featured a PAD guard emptying a hand gun on a major Bangkok thoroughfare. An Uzi machine gun was found in the car of one PAD leader’s personal bodyguard, and may have been looted from a police cache in Government House. During the October 7 clash, a leader of the PAD guards was blown to pieces by a car full of bombs of some description. Vehicles have also been used as weapons. On October 7, a pick-up deliberately drove over a policeman, and a bus was used to ram the police line. During the police’s token appearance at Suvarnabhumi airport, a truck was accelerated through the police line. Home-made bombs, shotguns, grenades, pistols, and explosives were found in PAD vehicles.

On October 7, PAD itself was on the receiving end of an incompetent police crackdown. From then onwards, shots and bombs were exchanged between PAD guards and others on almost a nightly basis. A PAD supporter was dragged from a car and beaten to death in Chiang Mai. Grenades were launched into PAD positions causing several deaths. At Suvarnabhumi airport, PAD guards roughed up several journalists.

Until very late in the campaign, PAD claimed to be acting in the tradition of non-violent protest. That was intellectually very dishonest. More recently PAD leaders and backers have tried to claim that any violence committed was reactive, and blamed everything on the police. That was even more dishonest.

Violence is intrinsic to politics. When violence becomes part of the political culture, it hands power to those who are willing to use violence most ruthlessly. History is strewn with examples. In the past, Thailand’s culture of protest was framed by a Buddhist appreciation of non-violence. PAD has taken a dangerous step away from that tradition.

P.S.

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