

Thailand's New Government Staggers Forward

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A real democratic movement could cause the Democrat party some grief

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has faced down immediate threats to his newly-fledged Democrat-led administration, after last weekend's anti-government rally only drew half the numbers that were expected. But any plans to get down to the business of governing will be hampered by formidable problems, not least the continuing corruption and lack of commitment to clean government that historically characterized his party.

Abhisit has already "missed the boat" according to Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute of Security and International Studies, who says the two-month old coalition government is already facing a raft of corruption scandals and is losing credibility. While he expects the prime minister to hold on to power for six to 18 months, the country's entrenched political divisions will take between five and eight years to resolve.

In the meantime, the Thai electorate, weary of the tensions and street violence that hammered Bangkok for months last year – culminating in the closure of its two international airports and the loss of millions of dollars of tourist revenue – is expected to give the new government some time to tackle Thailand's economic woes.

However, in a country divided by color, Abhisit's biggest threat comes not from the red-shirted anti-government protestors that took to Bangkok's streets last Saturday, but from the chance the yellow-clad movement that brought the Democrats to power may eventually turn against him, analysts say.

The right-wing People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) donned yellow, the color of Thailand's much-revered monarch, throughout its protests and airport blockades that effectively brought down the People Power Party (PPP) government, last December. PAD, which won support from powerful military factions and Bangkok's royalist elite, said PPP was a proxy for former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was deposed in a 2006 military coup.

The red-shirt United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) – started by politicians from the deposed Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party when it was ousted – re-emerged to support the People Power Party, Thai Rak Thai's Thaksin-driven successor, and to counter the right-wing yellows late last year.

Last weekend, 20,000 to 40,000 reds – around half the 65,000 expected – marched to the gates of Government House demanding that Abhisit sack Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya, a staunch PAD supporter, take legal action against the PAD leadership for its airport blockades last year and pass draft amendments to the 2007 Constitution.

Although UDD vowed to return within 15 days if its demands are not met, the increasingly confident government shows no signs of acceding. But while the number fell far short of the UDD leadership's

predicted turnout, something else is happening. The predominantly rural red shirts now have a nascent urban support base, and broadening pro-democratic aims are subsuming their initial pro-Thaksin concerns.

"The only real problem facing Abhisit is the potential that the yellow shirts turn against him. That's much more serious than threat of the red shirts," says political observer and academic Chris Baker. *"As long as he keeps his major patrons happy I don't think that will happen. But you can't underestimate how powerful this force has become."*

"Otherwise it's quite likely that Abhisit will weather the storm," he says. *"He's got such powerful backing from the most important people behind him at the moment. But he has to keep those people happy."*

Thitinan, the Institute of Security and International Studies director, says the Democrats entered a "Faustian pact" with the military, which maintains substantial leverage over the party because it was instrumental in bringing it to power.

While power plays by the PAD and its backers continue to dominate institutional politics, the fact that the UDD is broadening the channels for public dissent should not be overlooked, Thitinan says.

He put the number of demonstrators at the weekend at 30,000, which he called *"a substantial number. Even at the peak of its protests last year PAD didn't manage more than 30,000."*

Analysts say the UDD's main weaknesses come from its lack of funding – PAD was able to collect Bt1 million (US\$28,620) per day during its protests last year – and its logistical challenges. Much of UDD's support base comes from the rural provinces and protestors have to be bussed into Bangkok for major rallies.

Internal factions, some of which crossed the line when the northeastern power broker Newin Chidchob switched his allegiance from the PPP to the Democrats last year, further weaken the UDD. Its association with Thaksin, the PAD's continuing *bête noir*, does little to help it gain a wider appeal.

"Thaksin continues to loom large in its leadership," Thitinan says. *"It's difficult to see how the movement can be self-sustaining until it is seen to be more independent from him."*

But support for the UDD is not a black and white issue. Political analysts concur that the formally rural alliance is becoming a freer, more autonomous pro-democracy movement, and is drawing in support from people opposed to Thaksin.

"The group that started gathering in 2006 after the coup d'état was very closely associated with Thai Rak Thai politicians," says Giles Ji Ungpakorn, a political activist and contributor to Asia Sentinel who was charged with *lèse majesté* for allegedly insulting Thailand's monarchy in his book *A Coup for the Rich*.

"Now a lot of red groups are organizing from below. It's classical civil society organization and the rebirth of the Thai people movement, many of whom feel the traditional pressure groups and NGOs sided with PAD last year," he says. *"The PAD may have dragged the monarchy into politics, but now the majority of Thai people see the monarchy as having backed their movement."*

Many have joined the UDD over the last couple of months *"who are not supporters of Thaksin, but who have been quite saddened by the way the Democrats came to power and therefore see the UDD as a legitimate vehicle of protest,"* Baker says. *"Most of the support is from upcountry, but there is*

now more of a Bangkok base for it. "Thitinan says his own research shows more middle class and urban Thais are lending support to the UDD, but that there will not be a mass defection from the PAD's support base to the reds anytime soon." *People's interests are too polarised,*" he says.

Thailand's government has taken steps to stifle dissent in the country. It has blocked more than 2,000 websites, which it says insult the monarchy and as such are a threat to national security. Prime Minister's Office Minister Sathit Wongnontoei warned community radio stations against being overtly political and sowing dissent, though broadcast experts questioned the government's legal capacity to intervene in such affairs.

Last month, the Cabinet drafted a bill to increase airport security guards powers in a bid to reassure the international community and tourism industry that there will be no repeat of last year's airports blockade. If passed, it would allow Airport of Thailand guards to detain and hold troublemakers for 24 hours, at which point they must be released or handed over to the police. Those prosecuted for related offences face a maximum fine of 10,000 baht.

"The bill is laughable," says Ungpakorn. *"It's the height of hypocrisy considering they haven't yet prosecuted the PAD for occupying the airports last year."* PAD leader Somsak Kosaisuk also criticized the bill, saying it could violate basic human rights. Legal analysts say that the government needs to focus on upholding the rule of law and enforcing existing laws, not introducing new ones to the statute books.

While UDD will undoubtedly face increased opposition from the PAD, its backers and the government, its internal challenges are the biggest barriers to prevent it from becoming a force of change in Thai society, says Baker.

"To pull off this last demo was one thing, but to sustain it is much more difficult," he says. *"They probably have to change their tactics if they want to sustain themselves to be effective. It's difficult to sustain the numbers at these big Bangkok rallies, and if they can't produce the numbers they'll get written off quite quickly."*

P.S.

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