

Thailand's Troubles Grow

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With former Prime Minister Thaksin orchestrating events, pressure on the royalty grows

Thailand's royalist leaders are beginning to learn the consequences of deposing a legitimately elected government, with red-shirted protesters at their gates and violence intensifying even during Songkran, the keenly-awaited Thai new year festival, a time when Thais traditionally splash water on each other with great abandon.

It is questionable whether the Democrat Party government headed by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva can survive and, even if he goes, whether peace can be restored. Abhisit declared a state of emergency Sunday after the Asean summit in Pattaya was undone by pro-Thaksin mobs only to have rioters storm his office and smash up his car. He escaped with minor injuries although his driver and an aide were injured more seriously. Some police were seen donning red shirts over the weekend. Abhisit's office has been surrounded since March 26 by protesters, mostly from the poor, who have been described as waking up to the fact that they have been ignored by the societal and political engines of Thai society.

By Monday the violence spread to the streets of Bangkok, beginning before dawn as soldiers fired tear gas to clear intersections blocked with public buses and burning tires. Protesters drove two trucks loaded with natural gas into the Din Daeng area, which has been a focus of the protests and shouted to residents to evacuate, raising concerns that they would explode the two trucks. At last count, as many as 77 people had been hurt as soldiers sought to take command of the streets.

Reuters reported that the army fired warning shots and tear gas at protesters, with eyewitnesses saying rioters threw Molotov cocktails back at them. A state of emergency remains in effect.

Thaksin has considerably escalated the stakes, calling publicly for a revolution from outside the country and saying he would fly home to lead it if necessary. Given the polarization in the country, it is difficult to see how the crisis can be resolved. Although much of Thailand — especially the odd coalition of elites and liberal reformers in Bangkok — breathed a sigh of relief after the autocratic Thaksin was deposed, the coup and subsequent events have seen two democratically elected governments allied with him driven from power by means other than the ballot box.

Were the royalist, anti-Thaksin forces used mobs of yellow-shirt clad demonstrators (yellow is the color of the Thai king) to enforce their will, this time Thaksin's red shirts are upping the stakes in the battle for power.

While Thaksin has repeatedly said he would bow to the wishes of the king, his forces appear to feel it is safe to go after the establishment that surrounds the king, particularly Prem Tinsunalonda, the octogenarian privy counselor, whom many regard as a key figure in engineering the 2006 coup. Unlike in the past, their ire seems to be spreading from the government itself to the vast apparatus that surrounds the royal family.

Thaksin has been largely coordinating events from outside the country ever since he was ousted, now reportedly from a sanctuary in Dubai. It appears that his call for revolution has precipitated a

crisis in which the confrontation is between his forces among Thailand's rural poor and the urban middle class in Bangkok.

"The protesters are going against the establishment, not just Abhisit," Bloomberg quoted Thitinan Pongsudhirak, director of the Institute for Strategic and International Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. "We have this brinkmanship and confrontation that appears now untenable."

On rare occasions in the past, King Bhumibol Adulyadej has stepped forward to tell protesters to cool it, despite the fact that he has no formal ruling powers, other than his godlike status among the people.

However, at 82, and having been on the throne since 1946, the king appears to be increasingly frail. There has been no such pronouncement from the palace as yet, and, given the anti-royalist caste of the red shirts, it is unsure whether he would be obeyed as he was in the past. Some of the protesters have been openly critical of the king, a rare occurrence in a society with strict lese majeste laws that have been used against people who don't stand up in theaters for the king's anthem, among other things,

The protesters regard the current government as illegitimate after it was installed last November following riots by yellow-shirted royalists who shut down the country's two airports and occupied Government House for weeks. A court ruled that the People's Power Party, a surrogate controlled by Thaksin from outside the country, was illegal. After a period of relative calm, Thaksin's red-shirted followers took to the streets.

Unrest has been simmering since the September 2006 coup deposed Thaksin while he was out of the country. With heavy support from the mostly poor, rural Northeast of the country, the Thaksin forces retaliated with a new election that returned an allied party to power. The newly minted prime minister, Samak Sundaravej, was removed from power on charges of having hosted a cooking show on TV while prime minister, a charge he seemed as silly at the time as it does now.

Somchai Wongsawat, Thaksin's brother-in-law, who headed the People's Power Party, succeeded Samak and was driven from power by the courts after weeks of protest by the yellow shirts.

The crisis is taking a continuing toll on the country's business climate as protests and counter-protests have effectively shut down the city from time to time for over a year. Although financial markets are closed until Thursday for the new year holiday, the baht fell by nearly 1 percent in Singapore against the US dollar and is down 2.5 percent since the beginning of the year. It appears set to dive more as the export-oriented economy, caught in the grip of the global recession as well as the political crisis, appears set to contract for the first time in 11 years.

Tourism, which accounts directly for 6 percent of Thailand's gross domestic product and perhaps twice that in indirect benefits to airlines, the hospitality industry and other sectors, is going from bad to worse in the face of political turmoil that puts the lie to all those posters of smiling Thais greeting foreigners, even though there have been no reports of tourists becoming targets of the unrest. has fallen into disaster and appears to be set for worse times. The British, Japanese, Philippine and Australian governments have all issued advisories warning their citizens from traveling to what used to be called the Land of Smiles.

P.S.

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