

Why Thais Are Angry

Saturday 18 April 2009, by [PONGSUDHIRAK Thitinan](#) (Date first published: 18 April 2009).

Monday was the Thai New Year, a public holiday. Normally you would see people in the streets, having fun and, in keeping with tradition, throwing water at one another. But this year hardly anyone was celebrating in downtown Bangkok. Instead, protesters were clashing with soldiers; at least two people were killed and scores were wounded. I had never seen anything like it. This was raw anger, expressed in wanton violence.

The demonstrators claimed to be protesting systemic injustices and differing standards for rich and poor. But the rebellion reflects a deeper problem. Westerners think of Thailand as a democracy, ruled by the will of the majority. In reality, our country is governed by an establishment made up of the monarchy, military and bureaucracy. Elections are held, but if the establishment doesn't like the winning party, the government is dissolved. Unable to rely on the ballot box, people take to the streets.

The protesters this time are known as "red shirts," supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by the military in 2006. Last year, the protesters were "yellow shirts," members of the People's Alliance for Democracy Party; most notably, they seized two Bangkok airports. Soon after that, the Constitutional Court abolished the red shirts' ruling People Power Party, leaving a vacuum to be filled by the current prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva. Few would call this democracy.

On Tuesday, the protest leaders called it quits. But Mr. Abhisit and his backers still seem reluctant to recognize the red shirts' grievances. This is a mistake. Thailand, a constitutional monarchy, must find a path to real democracy. It should not emulate Nepal, a monarchy turned republic, because the unifying symbol of our king is integral to Thai identity. It shouldn't follow the Philippines, where periodic people's power movements have brought neither political stability nor economic vibrancy. The last thing we need is a military dictatorship like Myanmar's. For all the country's troubles, Indonesia's transition to democracy after decades of autocratic rule may offer the best model.

The onus rests on Mr. Abhisit and his backers. The elite must stand aside and let the power of the ballot carry the day. We need to discard the undemocratic provisions of the 2007 Constitution and replace them with elements of its popularly drafted 1997 precursor. We need a fully elected legislature, courts that can make impartial decisions on election outcomes and independent watchdog agencies.

By Tuesday afternoon people were out everywhere, celebrating what was left of the New Year. But don't be fooled by this uneasy calm. Until Thailand becomes a true democracy, we can expect more chaos in the streets.

P.S.

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