

Dousing the flames

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A truce on the streets may not herald a durable political peace

BAR-HOPPING visitors to Thailand are warned that minor brawls can turn deadly in the blink of an eye. The same applies to political violence. Over four days of mayhem, Thailand lurched from a mob invasion of a regional leaders' summit in Pattaya to a military crackdown on protesters in Bangkok and then, on April 14th, to a negotiated surrender to authorities. By restoring order, the reeling government, and the prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, won themselves a temporary breathing space.

But a ceasefire is not a peace deal. More ruptures seem certain as Thailand fumbles for a path out of perennial political conflict. Politicians talk of reform, but cannot agree on what to change. The army has closed ranks for now behind Mr Abhisit but its motivations are hard to fathom. Anger and frustration curdle in rival political camps, fed by a partisan press. Even the standard Thai solution of holding fresh elections is unlikely to work. Mr Abhisit's Democrat Party, which heads the ruling coalition, justifiably fears that, in a free and fair election, voters would, as on the past three occasions, elect a government loyal to Thaksin Shinawatra, a former prime minister. Such a government would, inevitably, face protests by the royalist People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), who wear yellow shirts and despise Mr Thaksin.

The latest unrest in Bangkok was led by red-shirted protesters roused by a televised call to arms by Mr Thaksin, a self-exiled fugitive. For three weeks, tens of thousands of red shirts, who call themselves the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), besieged Mr Abhisit's offices, calling for his resignation and a restoration of unfettered democracy. On April 8th they did the same at the residence of Prem Tinsulanonda, the chief adviser to King Bhumibol and the alleged plotter of a 2006 coup that ousted Mr Thaksin. Three days later, in a remarkable lapse of security, hundreds of unarmed UDD supporters stormed a seaside resort where Asian leaders were gathering, forcing a humiliated Mr Abhisit to cancel the event. The next day he declared a state of emergency in Bangkok to disperse the protesters.

This was a high-stakes gamble that paid off for Mr Abhisit. He fared better than his two predecessors, who faced protracted PAD protests last year. After a hesitant start, combat troops contained sporadic rioting, including pitched battles between red shirts and residents. Over 100 people were injured and two died. The army then cordoned off the main protest camp, where only a few thousand UDD faithful remained. Outgunned and isolated, their leaders surrendered on April 14th, as the rank-and-file trudged past security checkpoints, still mouthing defiance. "We didn't lose. We can do it again if we want to," said Jua Saeng-rattana, an elderly cook.

Pulling off another red invasion of Bangkok may be harder. Images of protesters attacking Mr Abhisit's car and torching buses hurt their credibility as peaceful pro-democracy activists. It also exposed Mr Thaksin as a demagogue who is ready to incite a revolt from his Dubai redoubt. Middle-class voters who admired Mr Thaksin's leadership skills may become more wary of the rural and urban masses who support him and more receptive to the PAD's conservative agenda. By taking on Mr Abhisit and his royal backers, UDD leaders apparently bet that a show of mass support would split the security forces and force a reckoning with Mr Thaksin. That never happened. Instead, it is

likely to be hardliners in the government and army who call the shots now.

Naturally, the reds see it differently. They accuse the army of shooting dead several protesters and hiding the bodies (the army has denied this). They also claim that the rioting was stoked by pro-government militia and plainclothes soldiers to discredit their movement. In the past, the army's playbook has featured such tactics. But its mopping up of red-shirt resistance was a fairly professional job. It does, however, raise the question of why the army refused to use emergency powers last year to eject the PAD from Bangkok's main airport—arguably a graver security threat than a rabble at a roundabout.

The same double standard applies to the protest organisers. Two UDD leaders have been detained and charged, and arrest warrants issued for others on the run. But legal action against PAD leaders has all but stalled under Mr Abhisit. Even Thais who disdain both the rival colour-coded camps smell something fishy here. Red shirts who believe that the ruling elite are conspiring to keep them down will seize on this as evidence. Their anger is unlikely to dissipate and could easily ignite again, just as quickly as it did last time.

P.S.

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