

Thai Politics: Back to Normal?

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Normal doesn't necessarily mean democratic

Thailand's Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has recently jetted to Hong Kong and South Korea, assuring investors that Thailand's politics are back to normal.

But in Abhisit's Thailand, normality means a depressing slide back to the past political configurations that can be called Thai-style democracy. This is a system where politicians, parties and parliament are made weak and where real power resides with traditional, repressive and hierarchical institutions.

Abhisit's assurances follow several years of political turmoil that began in 2005 with a protest movement to oust then Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and was punctuated by the 2006 putsch that sent Thaksin packing, increasing street violence, the occupation of Bangkok's airports by the royalist People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the army's mid-April crackdown on anti-government protests in Bangkok.

These institutions have provided Thailand's "political stability" in the past: the monarchy, military and the bureaucracy. Each of these institutions came under pressure from a developing parliamentary system.

With Thaksin as premier, the concentration of political and economic power in his hands and his obvious appeal to the poorest and weakest classes challenged the conservative consensus that concentrated political power with the conservative elite.

There is now ample evidence that the conservatives who have long considered themselves the country's rightful rulers are now back in charge. Prime Minister Abhisit and his Democrat Party-led coalition are merely stage-managing this comeback for the conservatives.

The most recent confirmation is last Friday's clearing of all officials involved in the October 25, 2004 Tak Bai incident in the restive South. Ruling that the military and police had acted according to the law and had used sound judgment, the court has approved of the army's suppression of protestors that saw 85 die. Seventy-eight of the dead died in custody after they were piled into military trucks and driven away.

This tragic event occurred during Thaksin's premiership, and he was roundly and rightfully criticized for it. But in the court's decision, what mattered was not Thaksin's role but the protection of the officials and military figures involved.

There are many similar cases. For example, the 2004 massacre at Pattani's Kru Se mosque has never been adequately investigated. The mistreatment of Rohingya refugees by officials, caught on film just a few weeks ago, has been forgotten, with Prime Minister Abhisit claiming misdeeds by security forces. The execution-style murder of two men found floating in the river following April's Bangkok uprising has also been neglected.

Getting back to normal means that the conservative establishment protects its own. Officials continue to operate outside the law, especially those who are part and parcel of the apparatus that

protects the establishment and maintains its rule.

Letting the military operate with impunity is not just rewarding it for its service in shoring up the establishment's rule but reflects its burgeoning political power. When Abhisit's government was spawned in December 2008, it had three midwives: the People's Alliance for Democracy, palace-aligned conservatives, and the military.

The PAD street demonstrations destabilized two governments that owed allegiance to Thaksin. The palace-aligned conservatives managed legal cases against Thaksin and those parties. General Anupong Paojinda, the army commander and a member of the 2006 coup junta, allowed PAD demonstrators free reign, and directed or approved the Democrat's coalition that saw several pro-Thaksin politicians suddenly swapping loyalties.

The military now provides a protective shell for the conservative re-establishment and for Abhisit's government. The troops have intervened twice during the years of political turmoil. The first was in making the 2006 coup. The second was when General Anupong ordered troops to save the government by putting down April's uprising by red-shirted Thaksin supporters and other government opponents.

Getting back to normal in Thailand means a powerful and political military. It also means that parliament becomes a place of shifting loyalties. Coalition governments are the norm, so party support is tenuous and expensive. This government is less than six months old but the smaller parties are already destabilizing it. Smaller parties negotiate cabinet seats and other means that bolster their coffers and position them for expensive upcoming elections and the horse-trading that will follow.

For all the criticism of Thaksin's alleged vote-buying in the elections he won, it is the conservatives and their military guard who have again made money politics paramount. This is not as ironic as it might sound, for money politics keeps parliament weak and dependent. This means that true power continues to reside with the conservative elite.

Interestingly, PAD is also choosing the political party route. As they appeal to the same constituency, the PAD party is likely to take votes from the Democrats in the next election. That might seem an odd outcome, but for the conservatives, neutering PAD's ability to mobilize mass support is an important victory and becoming a political party will probably achieve this.

Like the conservative and military governments of the past, Abhisit's administration is increasingly reliant on the coercive state apparatus to keep people in their place. The critical agencies are the military, the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the Ministry of Interior, and the Ministry of Information, Communications and Technology. Each has been given the budget needed to find and suppress perceived subversion and reinvigorate nationalist and royalist propaganda.

The government easily controls the mainstream media as much of it is state-owned. It is doing much more to intimidate the so-called new media, attempting to ensure that self-censorship becomes the norm.

This is especially the case when it comes to the monarchy, which is a pivotal element in re-establishing ideological consensus and determining "loyalty." Several high-profile cases, using draconian lese majeste and computer crime laws, have targeted internet activity. These cases remind people that they are monitored and that transgressions are heavily punished.

Billboards, television and radio spots, and the prime minister exhort people to love and protect the monarchy. The security agencies are running seemingly endless campaigns that promote loyalty to

the royal institution.

More insidious are the programs that exhort and train people as spies, asking them to inform on anyone they consider an enemy of the monarchy. Prime Minister Abhisit symbolically signed up as a volunteer spy. This is in addition to the hordes of government employed spies that trawl the media for acts of disloyalty.

The current government and the conservative agenda are bolstered by urban middle-class support. In the past it was thought that the middle class would be the force for democratization, but that's no longer the case. This support was sealed during the April uprising that convinced the middle class that the red shirts will burn their houses, shops and factories to the ground the next time they rise. Hence they will support the establishment and limited democracy, backstopped by the men with guns.

Conservatives like palace insider Sumet Tantivejkul caution the middle class that their salvation lies with the monarchy and its ideas advise that this institution is under threat. They also warn that the red shirts will rise again if there is a lack of loyalty and vigilance.

But getting back to this style of conservative normality is no easy task. The establishment and their supporters are not going to have it all their own way. The April uprising demonstrated that the poor and disenfranchised are angry about the reinvigorated conservative political agenda. They want to have their political voice heard. Keeping them quiet is not going to be easy.

P.S.

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