

# From smoke and mirrors to fear and folly

Tuesday 23 March 2010, by [Chang Noi](#) (Date first published: 22 February 2010).

THE TABLEAUX from the daily news have a grainy, sepia-tinted quality, like scenes from an old film. A parade-ground stiff general repeats the daily mantra that there will be no coup.

A wily old columnist, who gives the impression that he has access to privileged and vital information unavailable to the rest of us, releases another rumour of impending chaos and misfortune. A botoxed old soldier-politician, famous throughout his career for impenetrable statements, lets slip a loose sentence about his political plans, seemingly designed to be misunderstood, and to generate scads of confused speculation. A mad-dog warrior, who has never been happy since leaving the real battlefields, makes vague but chilling predictions of looming violence, some of which promptly become almost true.

These vignettes have a stagey, almost dreamlike quality, like those festival events in Europe and the US when hordes of enthusiasts dress up in costume and armour, gather in a great muddy field, and re-enact some battle from centuries ago.

But of course the performances are real. Strikingly, many of the actors in these tableaux are leftovers from the Cold War era and its legacy of disinformation and dirty tricks. The return of the Army to the forefront of Thai politics has brought them all back in the baggage train.

## **Smoke. Mirrors. Darkness.**

The mainstream media are party to this performance. There are many newsworthy things happening of importance to both the present and the future. The organisational development of the red movement in the provincial north and northeast is a landmark in Thai politics. More lese majeste cases are being launched. The nitty gritty of resolving the Map Ta Phut issues is still in process. There is a resurgence of protests about land rights and forest issues.

But very little of this is found in the mainstream media. You have to tap into the blogs, the alternative news sites, and the email circulations. The mainstream media seems to have chosen to concentrate on a narrow range of issues ♦ and especially the public statements of the parade-ground-stiff generals, wily columnists, botoxed old politicians, and mad-dog warriors. Because they are leaving so much out, the mainstream media need a lot of backfill. The favourite forms of backfill seem to be unsubstantiated rumour and apocalyptic prediction.

## **Smoke. Mirrors. Darkness. Fear. Fluff.**

Thaksin is by far the best focus of rumour. He is flying over Thai airspace. He is buying a Mediterranean island. He has adopted a strange name which is not quite an anagram of his old name. He is going bankrupt. He is buying gold mines. He has been made an adviser by several more countries. He has a few new passports. He is going bald. He has cancer. He has a love child. He is about to cross the Cambodian border into the northeast. Each rumour is presented without serious substantiation and dissolves into nothingness like a flimsy cloud.

## **Smoke. Mirrors. Darkness. Fear.**

Other backfill is divination, especially prediction of looming disaster. If matters had followed the predictions of three months ago, by now Thailand would have experienced coup, civil war, fighting in the streets, massive capital flight, Armageddon. According to today's predictions, these same events are coming in three months- predictions like a temple-car lumbering through time, promising chaos and disaster around the corner, and thus keeping everyone's nerves a-jangle. Everybody is an astrologer now.

### **Smoke. Mirrors. Darkness. Fear. Fluff. Fantasy**

In this perpetual half-light, incidents happen but without any certainty, clarity, or detail. The "bombing" of General Anupong's headquarters was a classic of the genre. The first report was denial of something we did not yet know about. The second report claimed the bombing had taken place, but the physical evidence had already been totally obliterated, so there was no way to know whether this report itself was true or false. All subsequent reports became speculation on the truth or falsehood of previous reports. An infinite, inconclusive spiral. Most bomb incidents, security glitches, and other minor panics descend quickly into similar spirals. A is attacking B. No, B has staged the incident to discredit A for seeming to attack B. No, A has staged the incident to make people think that B is trying to discredit A. Round and round. Reflecting mirrors. Ad infinitum.

### **Smoke. Mirrors. Darkness. Fear. Fluff. Fantasy. Mystification.**

One major reason this can happen is because the one thing we know for sure is that the police will never identify a culprit. This is an absolute law in any politically related case. Who killed Shipping Moo? Did all the logs found in a lake belong to Vatana? Where are the Saudi jewels? Who masterminded the assassination of Somchai Nilapaijt? Did someone really try to blow up Thaksin's plane? Were the Bangkok New Year bombings related to national politics or to the far South? Who killed Thanong Po-an? Was the bomb under the bridge wired to blow Thaksin up or not? Who should be held responsible for the Suvarnabhumi closure? Who riddled Sondhi Limthongkul's car with bullets? Who killed Klaeo Thanikul? This list could go on for some time.

The outcome is always the same. The evidence is inconclusive. The key witness disappears, or does a 180 degree turn in testimony. The surveillance cameras go on the blink. Evidence vanishes from police hands. Without clear evidence or concerted investigation, the incidents themselves start to fall apart. Was there really a bomb? Were the jewels real? Did anything really happen at all?

### **Smoke. Mirrors. Darkness. Fear. Fluff. Fantasy. Mystification. Fog.**

When you try to qualify democracy by rigging the rules, when you obstruct the freedom of information with too many repressive laws, when you allow politics to be enveloped by fear, then the fog rolls in, the mirrors change perceptions as in an illusionist's show, and darkness descends.

### **Smoke. Mirrors. Darkness. Fear. Fluff. Fantasy. Mystification. Fog. Folly.**

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**P.S.**

From The Nation.

<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/home/2010/02/22/opinion/From-smoke-and-mirrors-to-fear-and-folly-30123119.html>