

Thailand's state of emergency

Irreconcilable differences

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Despite talk of reconciliation, the government feels the need for repressive laws

EMERGENCY rule means the suspension of normal rules during extraordinary times. For the Thai government, it seems to be the new normal. On July 6th the prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, extended a state of emergency that he had declared in April during rowdy demonstrations by opposition "red shirts". The army ended the protests on May 19th and red-shirt leaders are in jail or in hiding. In the aftermath, Mr Abhisit launched a national reconciliation plan, but without a promise of early elections, as protesters had demanded.

The security forces insist that danger lingers. So Mr Abhisit, who leads a shaky coalition government formed with the army's backing, extended emergency rule in Bangkok and 18 other provinces. In five quiescent provinces emergency rule was lifted. The rules allow the authorities to detain suspects without charge, censor the press, ban public gatherings and freeze bank accounts.

Opposition politicians argue that Mr Abhisit's reconciliation is a sham. Indeed, the government seems more intent on crushing the red shirts. But the anger and alienation that fed the protests is unlikely to fade away. The International Crisis Group, a think-tank, has called for the government to lift emergency rule. It argues a legitimate movement may be driven underground. A by-election in Bangkok on July 25th, in which a red-shirt leader is running from jail, may test the public mood.

Bangkok is still reeling from the protests, in which 89 people died in bloody clashes. Thailand's supine media have largely dropped the topic, in favour of upbeat accounts of the government's efforts to regain international confidence. The names and circumstances of the dead, mostly rural and working-class protesters, barely rate a mention. Last month the government appointed a retired attorney-general, Kanit na Nakhorn, to investigate the violence, as part of its promised programme of reconciliation.

But anyone wanting a swift investigation into how so many people died on the streets of Bangkok, and the identity of the mysterious gunmen who fought alongside the red shirts, will be disappointed. Mr Kanit's panel has a two-year time-frame, though it is required to report on its work every six months. Human-rights groups complain that there is no provision to prosecute those suspected of crimes. The emergency decree also grants officials immunity from prosecution for actions taken under its provisions.

The other commissions are even less promising. One is supposed to examine press reform. Another is to propose amendments to the 2007 constitution drafted by military appointees. Both are bereft of opposition voices. Mr Abhisit has also set up parallel panels on social, political and economic reforms. One is to be chaired by Anand Panyarachun, a British-educated royalist and former prime minister, now aged 77. The other is reserved for Prawase Wasi, a doctor and academic who helped write the previous, 1997, constitution. They have a leisurely three years in which to make recommendations on how to bridge Thailand's deep divisions.

Both men played similar roles in the 1990s, when a loose alliance of NGOs, intellectuals, trade unions and others thrashed out a consensus on a new constitution. The liberal charter that resulted in 1997 was torn up in 2006, after a royalist coup against a popular prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. He refused to go quietly, setting Thailand on its present self-destructive path.

Duncan McCargo, of the University of Leeds, sees parallels between Thailand's fumbling response to the red shirts and its approach to Muslim insurgents in the troubled south. In both cases, he says, authorities have glossed over political grievances and focused on individual troublemakers like Mr Thaksin. Security forces have behaved badly. When the violence got out of hand, reconciliation commissions were set up to find a solution. Not surprisingly, the same names turn up: Mr Anand chaired a 2005 commission on the southern violence. Mr Prawase also served on it. Its findings were largely ignored. And the conflict shows no sign of ending, despite five years under emergency rule.

Some have predicted a similar red-shirt uprising. A few bombs have gone off. But the leadership is in tatters. Terrorism charges have been filed against 53 people, including Mr Thaksin, a fugitive who already faces a two-year sentence for abusing his power. Hundreds of others are in jail. Red-shirt media have been shut down, including popular radio stations. In the provinces there are whispered claims of state-sanctioned killings. But, for now at least, repression seems to be working.

Mr Abhisit has been busy trying to woo voters with catchy giveaways, such as free bus- and train-rides for the poor and a pay rise for civil servants. How to finance these populist policies is another matter, though the Thai economy is doing quite well, despite the political upheaval. Nomura, a Japanese bank, says it could grow by 6% this year, thanks to robust exports.

This week Thais were encouraged to call a hot line and speak their mind. As television cameras rolled, Mr Abhisit and his ministers took a few of the calls. The telethon was billed as "Six days, 63m opinions". Some callers complained of economic problems. Others expressed political views. Politicians love this sort of thing. There is a much more systematic way to find out what the Thai population wants. It is called an election.

P.S.

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