

Abhisit's teflon starting to wear off

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While street protests against him by the People's Alliance for Democracy have intensified in recent weeks, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva now faces heat in Parliament as the censure debate tentatively starts on March 15.

On the one hand, the PAD's relatively limited but not insignificant street-based campaign to oust Mr Abhisit is unlikely to cease, irrespective of the parliamentary muckraking and mudslinging. On the other, whether the prime minister survives the parliamentary grilling will depend on the conventional bottom-line of how coalition partners show their hands.

Street demonstrations and parliamentary machinations notwithstanding, Mr Abhisit's once-shining political star has waned. Its descent is likely to mark a new phase of political volatility.

Until recently, it appeared as if the force had been with Mr Abhisit. The formation of his coalition government in an army barracks seemed to have the blessing of those who ultimately mattered in Thailand. He was their newfound darling _ The One _ with consummate pedigree, profile and talent to go up against those at home and abroad who doubted the integrity of Thailand's democratic system in which political parties had been dissolved and leading politicians banished into the political wilderness, to enable the Democrat Party's breakthrough.

Untouchable until excessive exposure revealed his doublespeak and duplicity, Mr Abhisit bobbed and weaved, ducked and dodged, twisted and turned his way out of political trouble with his fancy oratory footwork. His clean record in Thailand's political den of the unscrupulous and textbook know-how carried his leadership for two years.

The street demonstrations against Mr Abhisit's government by the red shirts came to naught in April 2009 and again in April and May 2010. The Democrat Party was swiftly cleared of two ominous fraud charges, either of which might have led to its dissolution. Corruption allegations against the government came and went, unable to stick. A comprehensive review of the 2007 Constitution was stalled for almost two years, eventually pared down to tactical amendments favouring the ruling party. The party-list allotment goes up by more than 50% at the expense of constituency MPs.

But somehow the constellation of powers appears no longer in Mr Abhisit's corner. It is difficult to imagine the PAD's street protests not having powerful backing. Their rabid attacks against Mr Abhisit and his government have whittled down his credibility markedly. These enmesh and range from a lack of leadership and the stench of corruption over which he presides, to the alleged loss of territory to Cambodia and Mr Abhisit's personal controversies, the latest being his dual nationality. Even his patrician surname and famous good looks are now being ridiculed.

In Parliament, the prime minister will have to answer charges of a similar direction. His leadership and government performance, corruption scandals, rice and noodle issues from rising consumer prices, and his personal preferences in respect of dual nationality will feature in the opposition's thrust of attack.

All of this will come from the Puea Thai Party, which is bereft of clear and viable leadership and without a marketable policy platform of its own. That so weak an opposition can still be effective suggests government performance has much to answer for.

Thai censure debates are essentially about gamesmanship whose aim is to dethrone the incumbent government. The government has faced down and sailed through previous censure attempts. The coalition partners are likely to trade votes for the Democrats in exchange for continued access to the pie and increased leverage. And the powerful backers who cobbled together this coalition government apparently have no better option but to bide time until a better alternative can be found. Yet pressure will mount from inside Parliament and on the streets for Mr Abhisit to dissolve the lower house and call new elections.

Such is his dilemma. After a record deficit-spending and two years of pork-barrelling _ blatant populism masked as social welfare in the name of Pracha Wiwat _ the Democrat Party is still uncertain of winning the votes even with the rules stacked for it and the referees against its chief opponent Puea Thai. Having passed off the Democrats as the good guys in the coalition vis-a-vis graft-prone partners, Mr Abhisit cannot be certain that his coalition allies will fall into line after elections.

Moreover, the PAD has eroded limited but significant support in Bangkok and the South, the Democrats' strongholds, just as the North and Northeast electorates remain impenetrable. Indeed, the perverse outcome of Mr Abhisit's two-year rule so far is that Puea Thai can still win the next round of elections after all that has happened.

Above all, the prime minister must be unsure of the backing he used to enjoy. How can he count on another Democrat Party-led coalition formation inside the army barracks? The backers from before may have come to the conclusion that Mr Abhisit is spent. They just do not have another "The One" at this time. Which is why an extra-parliamentary, ad hoc outcome should not be ruled out down the road.

To date, Mr Abhisit has unfortunately not led to a way forward but to yet another dead end. It is a pity.

He is as well-intentioned a Thai as any Thai can be. The dual-nationality controversy is a result of poor judgement, not a lack of patriotism. His desire to come up to the top at all costs compromised him from the outset. He will have to answer for it, and Thailand may later suffer from it for having wasted such talent.

P.S.

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