

Thailand: Amphon's death challenges both red shirts and the govt

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The death of lese majeste detainee Amphon "Akong" Tangnoppakul, also known as "Uncle SMS", inside Bangkok Remand Prison Hospital on Monday has re-ignited hopes of amending the draconian lese majeste law.

Some 300 people attended the controversial placing of his body in front of the Bangkok Criminal Court on Wednesday and vented their anger against the law they perceived as an obstacle preventing them from attaining a basic right to freedom of expression.

Well-known red-shirt writer Wat Wayangoon asked the gathering if Thais were not being treated like humans when it came to freedom of expression about anything critical of the monarchy.

At the same venue, red-shirt Pheu Thai MP Jaruphan Kuldiloke talked about legally protected rights in England and how Thailand has yet to achieve anything similar. And political scientist Paungthong Pawakapan, a key member of the Public Campaign Committee to Amend the lese majeste law, announced in front of Amphon's body that enough signatures had been collected to push the proposed amendment before Parliament.

It must not be forgotten, however, that Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has insisted repeatedly her administration will not touch the lese majeste law.

Even Jaruphan was soft, almost apologetic on Wednesday, in front of the crowd of angry mourners wondering why this government was not doing anything - meekly suggesting they should try again to convince government MPs.

It's no secret a large percentage of the red-shirt movement is opposed to the draconian law, ever since the military coup on September 19, 2006, which ousted Thaksin Shinawatra. Many Thaksin supporters who subsequently became red shirts question the role of Privy Council President General Prem Tinsulanond in the coup, and more.

In private conversations, some-red shirt leaders try to defend Yingluck's position that the government won't touch the law - saying the government can't start a war on too many fronts, or by saying the government doesn't really have the power to push for such change and it could risk a military coup by insisting on it.

In public, however, there's a visible attempt to forge a truce between the old and new elites as well.

Nevertheless, yesterday, the red-shirt movement, the Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship, sponsored the first night of the funeral rite for Amphon at Wat Dan Samrong in Samut Prakarn province. And at least two key red-shirt members, Somyos Prueksakasemsuk and Surachai Sae-Dan, remain in prison under the lese majeste law.

The continued vocal opposition to the law by a small but significant and active section of the red-shirt movement could be used by the Yingluck administration to remind the established elites that

some form of accommodation might be needed.

But if the government will not touch the law, the loyalty of progressive red shirts to Yingluck (and Thaksin) - and the loyalty of Yingluck and Thaksin to these red shirts - will be severely tested.

The government cannot indefinitely buy time and expect no backlash or a meltdown in trust and expectation among the so-called progressive reds who oppose the law.

If no progress is seen in the near future, the time will come when these progressive red shirts must choose whether to continue to accommodate a government which does nothing to make the law less draconian.

Many reds will face the question whether they continue to support a government that allowed to Amphon die under their watch, a government privately telling them it would have loved to do more but just simply couldn't afford to.

With prisoners of conscience like Somyos and Surachai still in jail and the Public Campaign to Amend the law seemingly ready, that time is approaching sooner than later. And if the death of Amphon cannot make a difference, nothing will.

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P.S.

* @PravitR May 11, 2012 1:00 am

<http://www.nationmultimedia.com/politics/Amphons-death-challenges-both-red-shirts-and-the--30181714.html>