

The Man Who Leads Bangkok's Mobs

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Suthep Thaugsuban, the current mob leader seeks to divert attention from his own crimes.

Suthep Thaugsuban, Thailand's current mob leader, has reinvented himself from villain to national hero, at least in the eyes of his supporters, because he has dared to challenge what is characterized as the evil regime of the Yingluck government, backed by the long-ousted former premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

The entire planet must know who Thaksin is: Thailand's most popular prime minister since the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932. But for Suthep, he has earned the title of villain. Suthep was serving as deputy prime minister in the Abhisit Vejjajiva administration in charge of launching deadly crackdowns on red-shirt demonstrators in 2010, leading to more than 90 people being killed, most of them protesters, and more than 2,000 injured.

Today Suthep is leading anti-government forces to bring down the elected Pheu Thai government, just as his party—the Democrats—helped the yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) remove the Thaksin government from power in 2006. Starting off with a protest against the government-initiated amnesty bill which could potentially free Thaksin from his corruption charges and more importantly and ironically pardon those behind the May 10, 2010 killings of the Red Shirts at the Rachaprasong area of Bangkok, Suthep's determination to topple the Yingluck regime is unwavering.

But the legitimacy behind Suthep's street mobs evaporated following the government's forced willingness to put the controversial bill back on the shelf. Suddenly, Suthep lacked valid reasons that could be used against the government. The reinterpretation of the 1962 International Court of Justice verdict on the Preah Vihear Temple dispute failed to ignite nationalist sentiment. Without any credible motivation, Suthep returned to the old tricks, exploiting the ghosts of Thai politics in defying the government.

One is to continue to condemn the "Thaksin regime" as the sole source of today's political crisis. In painting a picture of Thaksin as the enemy of the state, it provides Suthep with justification for his street protests which can now be perceived as necessary and moral.

The other is to drag the monarchy into the political mess once again. Fighting against the Yingluck government and Thaksin together is now equated with the protection of the royal institution. This kind of political game, which draws the political fault line at the monarchy, is dangerous. The massacre at Thammasat University in the 1970s, in which as many as 100 students were murdered and others were beaten and brutalized, demonstrated how the manipulation of the monarchy ended up in political violence.

Now, let's analyze why Suthep has been so desperate to topple the government. Certainly the Democrat Party has been unable to compete with Thaksin in the game of electoral politics as shown in its failure to win a majority since 1992. Thus extra-parliamentary tactics are preferred. Also, Suthep's desperate action unveils his personal problem. Suthep has successfully highlighted the

issue of amnesty in order to obscure his own alleged crime behind the deaths of the Red Shirts, downplaying the charges brought against him while re-injecting what is known as “Thaksinophobia” among the Thai middle and upper classes in Bangkok. The transformation from killer into a national hero has begun; and in this process, Suthep has risen to become the new face of “moral protector” in Thai politics. Again and again, Thais are witnessing the deep irony within the domain of Thai politics when immoral politicians themselves enjoy preaching about morality.

With no sign that the government has been weakened by the protests, Suthep has intensified the pressure and at the same time worked closely with his Democrat Party. With Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva filing a no-confidence motion against Yingluck in the parliament, Suthep has upgraded his protests, in the past few days ordering his anti-Thaksin supporters to occupy a number of key government offices including the Ministry of Finance, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the National Budget Bureau in order to disrupt the functionality of the government and surely to create the situation of ungovernability so as to invite intervention by the military and possibly the Thai court.

Yingluck declared a state of emergency and handed greater authority to the police to control the situation. She also vowed not to use force against demonstrators, acknowledging that such use could destroy her party’s standing, given the condemnation of political violence in 2010 at the hands of the Democrat government.

Also, use of force would inevitably bring in the military into the conflict—something that the government will be reluctant to do so.

So far, the military has remained silent regarding the current round of political provocations. This could be explained in two contexts. First, the military must fully realize that intervention this time is not tenable. The 2006 coup produced a series of unfavorable effects on the part of the military and its position in politics. It also gave birth to the Red Shirts whose key agenda has been to reject a coup.

The fact that a large number of Red Shirts are now gathering inside a Bangkok stadium seems to send out a strong signal that they are willing to protect the government from any intervention from the army.

Second and crucially, the military has never worked alone in the maintenance of its interests in politics. It has worked intimately through the so-called network monarchy, in creating a particular kind of politics whereby civilian governments must be kept vulnerable or otherwise they could be toppled. But since the monarchy has been weakened by its long years of self-politicisation and the ill health of the King, the military may find that making no move to be the best option for its survival.

Lastly, it is all about the monarchy too. The Thai crisis has partly echoed the anxiety of the Bangkok elite as Thais are approaching the sunset of the Bhumibol reign. This shift of political landscape will cause an impact on their wealth and social status. The anxiety has served as a driving force behind the hatred campaign against Thaksin, seen as an adversary of the monarchy.

Many in Thailand wonder why the King, often intervening in the crises in the past, has also remained silent. This might be because the monarchy has never been above politics or neutral, and has actively engaged in conflict. Whatever the King will say now may not be taken seriously by many in the Thaksin camp.

Recently, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn, heir to the throne, conveyed a message through a Thaksin proxy, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Pol Lt-Gen Kamronvit Thoopkracharn, about his concern

over the escalating political situation and urged all sides to talk to each other.

Vajiralonglorn's choice of messenger is interesting—someone so close to Thaksin thus confirms the rumor of a sort of relationship between the Crown Prince and the former prime minister. It remains to be seen if his concern will be responded positively by Suthep's side whose members also identify themselves as another kind of royalist—loyal to the King but ambivalent about his son.

Another important point is that the Crown Prince has become increasingly vocal in politics. This also signifies that the process of royal transition within the walls of the palace has already begun. His active role will answer a question of whether he will be enthroned after the King passes from the scene. Surely, the faction identified with the more popular Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn would rather not want to hear such an answer.

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P.S.

* Asia Sentinel. WED, 27 NOVEMBER 2013:

http://www.asiasentinel.com/politics/thailand-protest-suthep-thaugsuban-monarchy/?fb_action_ids=10151859783884217&fb_action_types=og.likes&fb_source=aggregation&fb_aggregation_id=288381481237582

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