

Thailand: No victory, no medals, no heroes

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The last sixteen months have seen an epic battle to rule Thailand. Once the outcome of such a battle becomes certain, there's a tendency to imagine it was inevitable all along. But, at this transitory moment, it's worth looking back to review what happened.

After the coup in September 2006, the junta set out to obliterate Thaksin's political leadership. A special taskforce of soldiers paid with public money was sent into the villages of the north and northeast on a hearts-and-minds mission against pro-Thaksin thinking. The tactics were based on the campaigns which mopped up the last traces of the communist movement in the 1980s. By brandishing their weapons, the soldiers would persuade people to transfer their allegiance.

By decapitating TRT, the junta expected the alliance of MPs supporting Thaksin to fall apart. Many factions had joined the Thaksin camp since 2001 because that was the way to gain access to power. Now that TRT had been disbanded and Thaksin was in exile, faction leaders would peel away and wait until a new power centre arose. Some did indeed follow this route.

Now fast-forward to the referendum on the new constitution in August 2007. This was not really a vote on the charter, since few understood or cared about its intricacies, but an opinion poll on the junta's performance. Again state funds were mobilized on a large scale to secure the yes vote which the junta wanted, and state power was used to search-and-destroy the opposing campaign. This mobilization was a dress rehearsal for the general elections that would follow. The junta seemed sublimely confident of success. General Sonthi predicted 90 percent support. Army polls estimated 70 percent. A junta spokesman cited 60 percent as the minimum imaginable.

The result was a shock. Only 58 percent voted in favour. The upper north and northeast was virulently against. Most strikingly, many people had lied to the opinion pollsters, and to the exit pollsters on referendum day. Some enterprising journalists probed this widespread deception. They found that many people in the northeast resented the junta's attempts to manipulate opinion using state machinery and intimidatory tactics. They lied to the pollsters in part because they were afraid of possible consequences, and in part as a way of snubbing their noses.

Meanwhile, TRT had failed to fragment as the junta hoped. Thaksin was outside the country but not off the screen. By purchasing Manchester City, employing an experienced political PR consultant in the UK, and exploiting the potential of the internet, Thaksin kept alive the thought that he, rather than the generals, might be the future focus of power. While some factions defected, the core lineages of the TRT stayed together (Chaturon, Sudarat, Yaowapha, Newin).

Once the constitution referendum was concluded, the path to a general election was clear. The junta debated delaying the polls, but finally decided against. Instead it concentrated on orchestrating a desired election result. Sonthi believed there was still time to change people's minds by using the ammunition of government money. The main strategy was to herd the defecting factions into a new political third force which would lure promising election candidates away from the pro-Thaksin camp. Sonthi prepared to launch himself into politics as the leader of this third force.

But this battlefield proved to be a minefield. The party proposed for Sonthi's entrance into politics

went down with the crash of an aircraft owned by the party's chief sponsor. The faction heads fell to stabbing one another rather than carrying out the junta's mission. Prachai had delusions of becoming Thaksin reincarnate. Instead of a single third-force party, there were six of them.

At this delicate point Sonthi had to stand down as army chief. With so much uncertainty, he abandoned the idea of party leadership and instead took direct charge of orchestrating the election result. With the generals' position crumbling away, their thinking became more desperate. They drew up a strategic plan which described TRT/PPP as the historical extension of the communist movement and justified the continued use of state resources to fight the elections and manipulate the result. One of the action plans to implement this strategy was a campaign of anti-PPP publicity and deliberate disinformation, using state-owned media. Probably there were parallel action plans for deploying other state machinery to manage the election.

But by now TRT/PPP had regrouped and begun to concentrate its fire on the junta's embattled position. The junta tried to tie three major anti-PPP parties into a pre-poll alliance which would act as a draw for other candidates. At first the parties seemed to agree, but then they disengaged and retreated to neutral ground. Probably there were salvos of money influencing these troop movements.

The election result again dashed the junta's hopes. People had again either lied to the pollsters or abandoned the third-force parties when they came to vote. The PPP won more seats than the junta hoped or feared. Orchestrating an anti-PPP victory would now require major manipulation by the Election Commission. When the Commission withheld approval of 80 seats, this still seemed possible. Sonthi went on record that he had not lost hope. But in practice, the only option was a carpet-bombing campaign that would invite international condemnation. Sonthi ran up the white flag.

The junta's attempts to resurrect the divisive thinking and intimidatory methods of the 1980s has failed. The attempt to orchestrate an election using public money and public resources has failed. Even though the Cabinet is a time-warped thirteen-year regression to the 1995 line-up dubbed the 7-Eleven administration (seven parties, eleven factions, open for business 24 hours), and includes many of the same faces among ministers or their nominators (Samak, Chalerm, Thaksin, Banharn, Snoh, Sudarat, Suwit, Somsak, Anusorn and Newin), this is a victory for the principle of electoral democracy.

The lesson from this debacle is already in the old manual on the Art of War (*Phichai Songkhram*): do not fight a war when other methods are appropriate

P.S.

* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/novictory.htm>