

THAILAND IN 2008: A YEAR LONG OF PROTESTS

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Abstract

A review of the major events and politics of Thailand in 2008 points glaringly to a year that was filled with protests- from the post-election appointment of Samak Sundaravej, a Thaksin proxy as PM, leading to a battle between pro (PPP) and anti (PAD) government camps besieging the government house throughout 2008 in a divide, seen as many as, between pro-royalty and pro-Thaksin camps to the “rather expected” guilty verdict on the ousted “first couple of Thailand”- Thaksin and Pojaman. In between there was plenty of witch-hunting (sackings and removals), diplomatic slurs (Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple), and heightened and at times ‘misplaced” sense of Thai nationalism (again over the Preah Vihear temple). There were moments of sorrow (the passing of Princess Galyani, the revered King’s sister) and rejoice (at the recovery of the HM King Bhumipol from his illness). There were waves of red and yellow- colours associated to the political camps in Thailand which the Thai people gleefully adorned and displayed. There was plenty of drama too- from Thaksin seeking amnesty in the UK and his “abrupt” decision to divorce his wife and long-time “partner-in-crime”. Indeed, Thaksin continued to receive media and national attention throughout 2008 despite being away from the country. This paper will outline and discuss some of the major events in Thailand and its implications on Thai politics and economy.

Keywords: Post-election, conflict, Thai nationalism, Thaksin, and Thai politics

Introduction

The year 2008 has indeed been a roller-coaster year for Thailand and its people. The year began with a promise of a new government elected after the year-end elections of Dec 2007 to replace the army led caretaker government which ousted former Premier Thaksin in a bloodless coup in 2006. The swearing in of the new PM, Samak in March was condemned from the beginning to be a proxy of ousted Thaksin and his continued presence in Thai politics. Not long after there was yet another PM, this time brother-in-law of Thaksin, Somchai Wongsawat, came to the position after Samak’s dismissal following a court decision of Samak’s “wrong-doing” appearing and receiving payment for a cooking show he hosted on television while serving as the PM. Somchai’s term as PM was numbered from the start with loud and at times violent protests leading to the anti-government camp (the PAD) seizing the nation’s two main airports- Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang in the midst of a global economic crisis. Somchai and his PPP led government were eventually sacked following a court verdict implicating the PPP party of election fraud and wrongdoings. Outlining recent key events in Thailand could be seen in the chart 1.

Chart 1: Recent Key Events in Thailand

Sept 2006	PM Thaksin ousted in a military coup
Dec 2007	People Power party (PPP)- a reincarnation of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party – wins first post-coup election
Jan 29 2008	Samak Sundaravej becomes PM
Feb 2008	Return to Civilian RuleThaksin returns from exile
June 2008	The Preah Vihear Temple issue blew up into a Thai-Cambodia bilateral standoff. On June 22, 2008, Cambodia closed the border crossing to Preah Vihear as a result of Thai protests, at the border crossing. The protest led by Thaksin's arch-rival and key opposition figure, Sonthi Limthongkul, alleged that the government of Samak Sundaravej received business concessions in Cambodia in return for ceding Thai territory to Cambodia when negotiations on the Preah Vihear site map were undertaken before submission to UNESCO.
July 2008	Thai Criminal Court finds Pojaman Shinawatra, adopted brother Bannaphot Damapong and her personal secretary Kanchana Honghern guilty of tax evasion. Pojaman and Bannaphot get a three year jail sentence.
Aug 10 2008	Thaksin and Pojaman flee Thailand after failing to return to Bangkok from the Beijing Olympics.
Aug 10	Subsequently Thaksin and family seek refuge in Britain pending their court hearing for corruption charges.
Sept 2008	Clashes between pro and anti government demonstrators, viewed largely between pro and anti-Thaksin camps (PPP versus PAD or People's Alliance for Democracy)PAD "occupies" government house.State of emergency declared as a result of the clashes.
Sept 9 2008	PM Samak Sundaravej dismissed by Constitutional Court for violating conflict of interest law as a result of hosting two TV cooking shows while in office. Thaksin's brother-in-law, Somchai Wongsawat, chosen by parliament as new PM, replacing Samak.Anti government protests continue. Government house remain under the control of PAD protestors.
Oct 2008	PAD demonstrators moved from the Government House to the Parliament. In the ensuing clashes between PAD and PPP camps, two PAD protesters were killed and many others injured. The Queen and former Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun later attended the funeral of one of the dead victims, a subtle indication of the palace's support for the pro-royalist PAD protestors. Thai Supreme Court convicts Thaksin (in absentia) to a 2 year jail term over the Ratchadapisek land deal. The UK subsequently cancels both Thaksin and Pojaman's visas.

- Nov 25 The PAD forces closure of the Suvarnabhumi Airport
- Nov 26 Army's calls for elections rejected.
- Dec 2008 Dec 2: Thai Constitution Court dissolves the PPP and two other coalition parties. Somchai Wongsawat loses his post.
- Dec 4: The much anticipated annual birthday speech by HM King Bhumipol did not take place because the King was ill with fever and sore throat although there were indications that the palace would rather remain silent at that point of political uncertainty in the country.
- Dec 6: Former members of the disbanded PPP switch support, rather unexpectedly, to the Democrat party led by former Thaksin loyalist and Isaan politician, Newin Chidchob. Pictures of Newin and his Friends of Newin Club in the company of Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Democrat candidate for Prime Ministership leads much to speculate that the end of the Thaksin reign may happen sooner than later. Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the Democrat party sworn in as PM of Thailand (the third PM in 2008).

Source: *the Sun* (Malaysia), Nov 28, 2008, p. 10. *The Nation*, "12 days that Chart 2008", 26, Dec 2008.

The Yellow and Red Armies

Thailand's highly polarized and faction-ridden politics is best demonstrated by the 2 camps of pro- and anti government protestors donning yellow and red shirts respectively. It was indeed a sea of yellow and red in Thailand for the most part of 2008. There was a brief period of "Pink Fever" in between to show joy and support for HM King Bhumipol who was photographed wearing pink on the day he left a local hospital after a brief illness.

Generally, the red and yellow camps represented two opposite sides, one a strongly pro-Thaksin and his TRT/PPP party; the other a conservative royalist or the higher echelons of the old political elite group, comprising the PAD, military, judiciary who are strongly anti-Thaksin and in turn tend to support the Democrats. A close scrutiny however reveals that both groups share common characteristics- both are elite capitalist as well as nationalist groups, some of whose leaders have record of corruption.¹

The PAD may also be viewed as a step backward towards democracy for it has favored military coups and proposed appointments over elections of bureaucrats. In other words, suggesting the reduction in the number of elected MPs as opposed to the PPP which is for winning by elections albeit through money politics!

The blockade of the Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang airports lent a blow to the PAD and its supporters- it was construed a selfish and irrational act leading to a near collapse effect on the economy. The international image of the nation particularly vis-à-vis the tourism sector was tarnished beyond immediate repairs. In the end, the yellow camp with the hand of the judiciary, through the Thai

Constitutional Court dismissed the Somchai government after finding the party guilty of election fraud and wrongdoing. This in turn forced a change of government from the PPP to the Democrat led coalition government.

All About Thaksin and Beyond?

From a brief return to Bangkok (Feb) and then fleeing the capital on the pretext of attending the Beijing Olympics, followed by attempts to seek asylum in the UK to the eventual guilty in absentia verdict, 2008 was in many ways the year of "Thaksin on the run". Despite being on the run, Thaksin remained very much in the centre of attention and media prominence both inside and outside the country.

The inevitable "political king-maker" was very much in the "thick" of the political events unfolding on the streets of Bangkok. Through his telephone call-in to the rural folk in north and northeast (Isaan) Thailand and via his nominee PMs, Samak and Somchai, Thaksin continued to exert his influence in Thai politics and in the process complicated government matters in Bangkok.

The question is why is Thaksin- still the "king-maker"- and why is he so loved and at the same time so hated? Understanding Thaksin and his political motive is crucial to understanding the political stalemate in Thailand. Thaksin came to power at a time when Thailand was still reeling from the 1997 financial crisis. He had no initial interest in politics except to use it to further his business interest, in particular to secure a monopoly from the state for his mobile phone company (which he later transformed in a billion dollar telecommunications business!). Thaksin belonged to a new class of Thai elite- the new rich whose involvement in Thai politics was a welcome change from Thailand's old ruling elite of technocrats. He ran the country like a CEO (Thailand Incorp.), had a circle of close business associates and cronies and tended to change the law to advance his family business empire. At the same time to remain politically relevant, he was, to borrow Thai economist Pasuk Phongpaichit's words, "transformed from a pro-business modernist into a rural-leaning populist".²

Thaksin was loved by the rural masses as a result of his hugely welcomed populist policies. His sudden exit from Thai politics angered many especially in the rural north and that explains the prolonged protest despite clear evidences of corruption, greed and nepotism, e.g. purchase of premium land in Ratchadhapisek, sale of Shin Corp without tax liabilities, etc. People remember his good deeds at a time when they needed it most.

But somehow the crisis in Thailand is now beyond the Thaksin factor. The global economic crisis, the factions within the PPP, the failure of his proxy nominees to return stability to Thailand has created greater divisions within the Thai society. Thaksin's own dwindling wealth and his refusal to face court charges on cases with clear evidences of wrongdoing have only further weakened his stature and position. Notably, some of his former allies and loyalists have in recent times switched teams; indicating the growing divisions within the now defunct PPP.

Thaksin will remain an "issue" in Thai politics- if he chooses to return to Thailand to face his jail term, there will be a resurrection of support towards him, and if he chooses not to return- there is no telling what the man would do to remain in the memory of the Thai people. After all, he had made it very clear that only two forces can bring him back- the monarchy or the people. Clearly, Thaksin's

signature “divisive politics” remains for now and poses a big challenge for the new government to tackle in the coming years.

The Preah Vihear Temple Protest: Nationalists or Political Opportunists?

Dispute over ownership of the ancient Preah Vihear Temple situated in the area bordering northeast Thailand and northern Cambodia reemerged when Cambodia, unilaterally, attempted to register the temple as a UNESCO Heritage site without consulting Thailand. The Preah Vihear constructed between the 9th and 11th centuries by Khmer Kings Suryavarman I and II has long been a revered shrine, initially dedicated to Lord Shiva but later converted into a Buddhist religious site. Located on a disputed piece of land, between Thailand’s northeastern province of Sisaket and Choam Khsant district in Cambodia’s northern province of Preah Vihear, the temple has been a point of contention for over a century between the two neighbours.

A ruling by the ICJ in 1962 recognizes the temple as located in Cambodian territory. Thailand claims that while the temple belongs to Cambodia, the surrounding complex however, sits on the Thai side of the border and as such belongs to Thailand. In particular an area of about 1.8 square miles (4.6 km) of the disputed area was not included in the 1962 ruling, creating a prolonged source of conflict. The problem is further complicated because the temple which is located at the top of a 1640 foot cliff, is inaccessible from Cambodia whereas reachable from the Thai side by land.³

Numerous incidents between June and October 2008 over the Preah Vihear UNESCO listing intensified bilateral tension, prompting heightened nationalist sentiments in both Thailand and Cambodia. Increasing numbers of troops and weapons mobilized to the border area posed a looming threat of both sides going to war over the issue. The month of July witnessed the most frequent times that troops were deployed and additional reinforcements dispatched to the border area. Fear of a Thai-Cambodia war prompted ASEAN to intervene by offering to mediate, it was also reported later that Cambodia sought the United Nation’s help to resolve the matter much to the criticism from Bangkok. By October 2008, increasing troops built-up in the border region escalated to clashes and exchange of fire resulting in deaths (about 2 Thai and 3 Cambodian soldiers) and injuries among soldiers.

There were also opportunities for both sides to manipulate the temple issue for domestic political gains; this was most evident in the case of the PAD in Thailand. Its leader and chief Thaksin opponent, Sonthi Limthongkul claimed the PPP government had received considerable business concessions in Cambodia in return for “ceding Thai territory” by agreeing to the Preah Vihear site map proposed by the Cambodian government for submission to UNESCO. Initial strong reactions on the PPP’s handling of the issue led to the resignation of its Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama. However, not all Thais were convinced by the PAD claim; many including academics decried the PAD and Democrat Party’s use of the issue as a ploy to topple its opponent - the PPP government - rather than a genuine protest of lost territory.⁴

Historian and social critic Thongchai Winnichakul reminded Thais of the dangers of extreme nationalism vis-à-vis the Preah Vihear controversy. In an editorial referring to the Preah Vihear as a time bomb, Thongchai explained:

Losing territory has been common among thoughtless nationalists in the region. Lao nationalists talk about losing the Isaan region to Thailand. Cambodian ones talk about losing territories to Thailand and Vietnam. They produce maps of lost territories like Thai nationalists did for generations. Thais have been taught their territories were lost as well. Every country lost territories. **The idea of loss is a powerful tool used to whip up nationalism,** especially in domestic politics. The dark side of nationalism is dangerous as ever. It has now become a weapon in today's Thai politics. Nationalism is like fire and it can be destructive.⁵

There were political gains to be reaped by local politicians on the Cambodian side as well. The Preah Vihear heritage case peaked at about the time when Cambodians were going to the polls to decide their new-elected government.⁶ It was an "opportunity" for PM Hun Sen and his team to win a huge mandate by portraying themselves as champions of Cambodian rights and pride. In summing up the Preah Vihear case, Thongchai succinctly states that it "has gone beyond technicalities... abused to arouse delusion that the temple belongs to Thailand and a desire to revive the claim."⁷

Majestic temples, ancient ruins and monuments are a huge source of national pride in Southeast Asia; they demonstrate past grandeur and great historical legacy. Similar to battles that had to be fought, temples and monuments ought to be defended for it was a crucial part of a nation's history. In the words of historian Charnvit Kasetsiri, however, The Preah Vihear temple is "part of a wounded history of Thailand and Cambodia". And that wound will take a long time to heal for as long as constant aggravation is prescribed by all parties concerned.

Thai Economy Besieged by Nation's Political Woes

The Thai economy has suffered much in 2008. The protracted street demonstrations have reduced the numbers of tourist arrivals into Thailand, an important sector that contributes to the national income. As if that wasn't enough, the airport seizure by the PAD threatened to push the economy into a slump, especially timed amidst the global financial crisis. Albeit conflicting estimates, the airport drama must certainly have damaged the nation's economy and it was this impact that drew criticism from among the PAD camp members as well, especially those who had business and national interests at heart.

According to estimates, the stock market fell about 2 percent and the Baht hit a 21 month low of 35.36 to the dollar following the airport seizure. The overall forecast for economic growth for the country was expected at a low of about 4.5 per cent, it's lowest in the last seven years.⁸ Needless to say, the airport seizure aggravated the growing adverse impact on the nation's economy as a result of the three-year long political crisis in Thailand, i.e. since the coup of 2006 that removed Thaksin. Particularly damaging was the impact felt by the tourism sector, Thailand's major income earner.

In her analysis, Hannah Beech writes on the continuing impact of the political crisis in Thailand on the economy which is tied closely to the tourism sector. Should the street protests persist, she points out that tourists apart, the impact would also be felt by Thaksin supporters alike.

... protestors again flooding the streets unnerves not only foreigners, on whom Thailand's economy depends, but also the majority of Thais who have supported Thaksin and his proxies in the polls.⁹

In sum, the street protests and the political uncertainty in Thailand have without doubt affected all parties, either pro or anti- Thaksin camps. The farmers in the rural northeast from where Thaksin draws his largest support too are vulnerable, the global forces at work amidst a global economic slump spares no one and an unresolved crisis at home will only be harmful in the long run.

Of Defectors and New Alliances

Towards the tail end of the year, as the PAD ended its 192-day protest (Dec 3 2008), newspapers displayed pictures of long-time allies of Thaksin, handing flower bouquets and hugging Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Democrat leader cum Thailand's 27th PM. Leaders of the smaller coalition parties of the disbanded PPP such as the Matchima and Puea Paendin were also seen posing with the Democrat leader indicating their willingness to close ranks with the Democrats to form a majority in parliament.¹⁰ The biggest surprise among the well wishers was Newin Chidchob, Thaksin's long time confidant who hails from the northeast. His splinter unit (from the PPP) known as the Friends of Newin (FON) group have unanimously shown their support for the new Democrat led government.¹¹ This development can be read as either the beginning of the end of Thaksin or the possibility of "new Thaksin-like" politicians emerging on the Thai political landscape. Again this poses a huge challenge to PM Abhisit and his team who have acknowledged the need to deal with the huge divisions in Thai politics and society. The Democrats whose support base is strongest in the south and Bangkok will now have to reform and rethink ways of winning the hearts and minds of the rural north and northeast in order to unseat Thaksin's support as well as to reduce the huge socio-political division within the country.

Thaksin's populist policies effectively bought over the hearts and minds of the Isaaners. Although Thaksin comes from a very different background (4th generation Chinese of rich elite family), his ability to change and embrace the poor has proven to be his biggest advantage and a position that is hard for fellow Democrats and other Bangkok based politicians to emulate. In fact, Newin's early advice to new PM elect Abhisit has been precisely on this issue; to win over the large rural voters, the die-hard supporters of Thaksin through populist policies. In a way, schemes such as the 30 baht for all healthcare scheme was a winner in every sense; both politically and economically- it proved that the old TRT/PPP were committed to building a welfare society as opposed to PAD/royalist call for a "sufficiency economy". The latter encourages living by ones' means, in other words, limits spending but in the end it widens inequality as income redistribution is weak.¹²

There have been reports of Abhisit converts in recent times. The story of Grandma Niam, from the northeast who welcomed Abhisit into her home during his campaign trail and presented him with a gold ring which Abhisit proudly wears on his fingers, is just one of the stories of the likelihood of Abhisit "warming" his

way into the hearts of the northern people.¹³ Perhaps Isaan will come to the Democrats and that way, the political divisions can, at least, become less glaring.

Conclusion

The street demonstrations and protests throughout 2008 clearly points to the weak political culture prevalent in Thailand since the Thaksin era. The large rural electorate is easily swayed, and encouraged by money politics. They tend to be faithful to the point of irrationality in showing their support and, this is one reason for Thailand's persistent problems. Thai leadership on the other hand, lacks the political will to face and address the nation's domestic problems. The problems have moved beyond politics to encompass the social space of the people, made complicated by the constant involvement of the royalty and military in Thai politics. And now populist policy is the *mantra* of all politicians, if carelessly implemented may lead to further divisions and inequality.

In a way Abhisit is a refreshing face in Thai politics- one without the "corruption-cronyism-nepotism" baggage, although his first 100 days in office (if he survives it!!) will not be without the usual protests and demonstrations.

.... Even the faithful (Buddhists who believe in the cycle of suffering before salvation) must be tiring of the **farical** merry-go-round of Thai politics.¹⁴

Merry-go-round, indeed best explains Thailand and its politics in 2008!!

Endnotes

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