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THE CONFRONTATION GAME: “New Politics” and brinkmanship in Thailand

Marc Askew

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The recent street clashes in Bangkok launched by the People’s Alliance of Democracy (PAD) has a pattern of confrontation and crisis. The PAD’s goal is to escalate the tensions with the government and topple it. But who exactly does the PAD represent?

THE OCTOBER 7 clashes in Bangkok between protesters of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and the police are the predictable outcome of a game of brinkmanship. It is aimed at toppling the current government, whose tenuous legitimacy is steadily eroding. The selection by the ruling People Power Party (PPP) of the mild-mannered Somchai Wongsawat, the brother-in-law of Thaksin Shinawatra, as new prime minister, to succeed Samak Sundaravej did not mollify their opposition.

The Strategy of Violence

The street clashes are the result of a calculated PAD tactic to escalate confrontation. Unfortunately, the metropolitan police fell into the trap and Prime Minister Somchai did little to avoid it. The PAD supporters’ march to block the entrance to parliament was a reaction to the weekend arrest of key PAD leader Chamlong Srimuang on charges of insurrection following the PAD’s seizure of Government House on August 26. It was also in opposition to the government’s scheduled declaration of its policies before parliament on that day.

The police denied claims that Chamlong’s arrest was an attempt to scuttle mooted negotiations between Deputy Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and Chamlong, his friend and former classmate. Chavalit has since resigned. Police said they were simply applying the rule of law. This hardly rubbed with the PAD, who, though citing “constitutional rights” in justifying their own activities, vehemently deny the validity of other laws on the claim that the government has no legitimacy. There is little doubt that Chamlong was aiming to be arrested.

In the wake of the casualties that followed PAD-police confrontations, the media have fervently condemned violence as a means of resolving conflict. But the PAD strategy to topple the incumbent government cannot be effective unless violence breaks out. It is simply a matter of laying the blame on

the authorities as aggressors, so as to widen popular opposition to the government and thus hasten its demise.

The trend of media reports indicates that they are succeeding, despite evidence advanced by the police that members of the PAD crowd have used guns and home-made bombs. It should not be forgotten that the PAD has its own thug cadres, fully capable of sowing chaos, as exemplified by the groups that vandalized the offices of the government's NBT television station on August 26 and the killing of an anti-PAD protester. So far, however, most media reporters are sticking to the simple diagnosis that the police are the main cause of the injuries.

To make matters more confusing, bullets were fired during the standoff in front of parliament, apparently from the walls of the nearby Dusit public zoo. An explosion in a vehicle parked near the Chart Thai Party headquarters killed its occupant, a man who has now been identified as a PAD member. Police claimed that he was carrying a bomb.

The police are now being accused of negligence in not following proper warning procedures in the use of teargas (an erroneous claim, in fact), and in firing gas canisters directly at people rather than firing them into open areas. The jury is still out on the causes of the death of two PAD supporters, but the PAD is busy promoting these victims as martyrs for their cause. Meanwhile, the PAD has accepted no responsibility for the stabbings and other attacks committed by its members against the police.

A Third Hand?

Suggestions of a "third hand" are now rife in Bangkok. The army commander-in-chief, General Anuphong Phaochinda, has so far affirmed that the military will not intervene in the situation. But he has earned the wrath of PAD leader Sonthi Limthongkul, who has accused Anuphong of allying himself with the prime minister and becoming a potential danger to the royal family. This rhetoric is standard in Sonthi's menacing witch-hunting repertoire. Chulalongkorn University academic, Suchart Bamrungsuk, has dubbed the PAD's attitude, exemplified by Sonthi, as "fundamentalism", combining paranoid nationalism and reactionary populism. Violence is just what the PAD needed to take the pressure to a higher level.

The PAD's goal is to purge Thai society of the scourge of Thaksin's political minions and to "free the country" from enemies that would "sell the country". But although united in the face of a common enemy personified in Thaksin, the PAD has failed to come up with any coherent or feasible blueprint for Thailand's political future. Its leadership's proposal for a "new politics" to replace the existing party-based parliamentary system has been heavily criticized by many Thai academics as regressive and dictatorial.

In turn, the PAD stump orators have branded academic critics as "stupid" and out of touch with "the people". The PAD leadership damns any of its opponents as enemies of the nation and the monarchy. Sonthi has appealed for the appointment of a non-elected "virtuous" prime minister and explicitly approves of military intervention to topple the PPP government. The key question remains, however: how legitimate is the PAD itself as a representative of the "people?"

PAD's ambiguous constituency

Just a week before the October 7 confrontation, the Foreign Correspondent's Club of Thailand (FCCT) hosted a discussion on "Reforming Thailand's Politics" and the PAD proposal for "New Politics." The PAD speaker was Kasit Piromya, a leading PAD supporter and also member of the Democrat Party's shadow cabinet. When asked about the characteristics of the PAD's "New Politics", he answered that the Thai people could no longer tolerate the abuse of democratic norms and practices under Thaksin's rule, and were now impatient for change. However, he could not define adequately just which

“people” the PAD represented. He was reminded by another speaker of the opposition to the PAD by many people in Thailand’s north and northeast. Yet another speaker spoke of the repeated electoral triumphs of Thaksin’s Thai Rak Thai (TRT) and its successors in five elections, indicating mass support for the “one-man-one-vote” system of democracy.

The PAD leadership constantly denounces the parliamentary system as rotten — a product of “influence” and vote buying. The PPP, as the incarnation of the TRT, won a convincing parliamentary majority in the election of December 2007. This was despite the fact that the election was strictly overseen by an Electoral Commission appointed under the aegis of a military junta committed to eliminating TRT influence in the electorate. The PAD continues to deny the legitimacy of these election results. Kasit remained fixed in assertion that “the Thai people” wanted a new “moral politics”.

PAD’s New Politics

A keystone of the so-called “New Politics” proposal is an interest-based system of representation, with professional groups being selected and somehow elected within their own groups. The original proposal of 70 per cent of representatives to come from various professions, and 30 per cent from politicians, has been changed to a 50:50 ratio.

The greatest ally of the PAD is the Democrat Party (DP), which is standing in the wings to take advantage of a government collapse. Officially, the DP presents itself as distinct from the PAD, but this distance is a convenient fiction. Kasit, as already mentioned, is a member of the DP’s shadow cabinet, and the DP has never opposed his continuing involvement in PAD activities. More significant is the active participation of ordinary Democrat members and supporters in PAD rallies, conspicuously those from the south. The core plank of the Democrats’ much-touted “ideology” (*udomkan*) has always been to uphold an electoral parliamentary system, but the DP’s tolerance of the PAD’s semi-legal street tactics reveals the flimsy nature of this commitment.

Since Thaksin’s first landslide victory in 2001 the Democrats have failed miserably to devise competitive policies and to make any inroads into the north and northeastern strongholds of the former Thai Rak Thai Party. The Democrats have no chance of winning the majority and forming the government on its own, or increasing their parliamentary numbers by expanding their electoral base beyond the south and Bangkok. Their only chance to gain power is to find a way to head a coalition administration should the current government’s collapse. This is why, when a new national election was mooted several months ago, the Democrats opposed it, knowing that it could not form the government through this means.

For all the rhetoric, the tactics of both the DP and the PAD in this game are supremely pragmatic, founded on the politics of confrontation and crisis. As for Somchai and his party, there seems to be no future under the shadow of Thaksin. And for the millions of north easterners who work in the factories of the metropolis, drive the taxis and build the condos, they continue to view the PAD as a bunch of elitist Thaksin-haters who are bent on disenfranchising them.

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