

This document is downloaded from DR-NTU, Nanyang Technological University Library, Singapore.

Title	Thailand's reconciliation forum : how to do it better
Author(s)	Fuadi Pitsuwan
Citation	Fuadi Pitsuwan. (2013). Thailand's reconciliation forum. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 172). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2013
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/20136
Rights	Nanyang Technological University



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 172/2013 dated 20 September 2013

Thailand's Reconciliation Forum: How To Do It Better

By Fuadi Pitsuwan

Synopsis

The Thai government recently held a reconciliation forum that involved some high-profile international figures such as Tony Blair and Martti Ahtisaari. Not surprisingly, key players were not involved. There is a better way of doing it the next time.

Commentary

THAILAND HAS been caught in a political deadlock since 2006 when the "Yellow Shirt" protesters, representing mainly the urban middle class and the conservatives, paved the way for a military coup against then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin's camp then responded with their own people's armies, the so-called 'Red Shirts', made up of newly empowered rural middle class and the poor.

Since then, power has alternated between the two sides with each accusing the other of violating the spirit of democracy. Both groups have also made attempts to reconcile, while hewing to their own version of justice.

Role of high profile international figures

The latest attempt to resolve their differences was made on 2 September 2013 by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government, who is also the younger sister of the ousted prime minister. Together with Chulalongkorn University, it invited international figures such as former British prime minister Tony Blair, former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, and transitional justice expert Priscilla Hayner to take part in a panel discussion on "Uniting For the Future: Learning from each other's experiences."

However, despite the event's cordial atmosphere the conference was less than successful in bringing about any reconciliation. For a start there was no participation by representatives of the opposition groups, namely the Democrat Party and the People's Alliance for Democracy, the so-called Yellow Shirts. These opposition groups boycotted the event because they felt that this was merely a public relations stunt designed to give legitimacy to the government's effort to unwind the political deadlock in which key supporters of the current government have played important roles.

How to do it the next time

Independent observers felt that Mr. Blair, Mr. Ahtisaar and Ms. Hayner could have been more helpful in bringing

the opposition groups on board. They could have set pre-conditions for their participation to ensure that the forum truly contributes to Thai political reform. Interestingly Mr Kofi Annan, the former United Nations Secretary-General, had refused to participate. Should such a forum be convened again, these distinguished personalities could set a few ground rules to make such a reconciliation effort more effective:

Firstly, they should insist that the host of the forum be a neutral international entity, such as the Geneva-based Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. The HD Centre has ample experience in conflict resolution in the ASEAN region as it was instrumental in mediating in Aceh in Indonesia and Mindanao in Philippines. Southeast Asia's own Bali Democracy Forum could also serve as a platform for the reconciliation dialogue. If the parties involved insist on the forum being held in Thailand it would be more important that the neutral organiser be respected and accepted by all sides to the conflict.

Secondly, the funding for the forum and, most importantly, the honorarium for these international mediators, should not be from the current government's coffer, or Mr Thaksin's pocket. Many private companies and trade associations in Thailand should be ready to fund this forum if approached.

Thirdly, invited international figures must advise the current government to halt any effort that would further widen the rift in Thai society. For the 2 September event, the major sticking point was the Amnesty Bill that is being rushed through the parliament. The Bill, according to the government, aims to bring about reconciliation by providing a blanket amnesty to all those convicted or are to be convicted on politically - related charges.

Need for more inclusiveness

In reality, however, the Bill has already deepened the crisis as many groups in the Thai electorate view this as a blatant attempt by the government to wipe out Mr. Thaksin's contribution to the current political quagmire. In future, the government would need to show more sincerity by pausing any ongoing activity that would create more tension.

Lastly, future international mediators must ensure that the leadership of the opposing camps, including the Democrat Party, the People's Alliance for Democracy or even the military, participate in the forum. Those on the opposing side must be given sufficient room to air their concerns and the international mediators must have full control of the forum's agenda. If the conditions outlined are met, the opposing camps would have less ground to avoid participating in the forum.

Future attempts by high-profile international figures to help with Thailand's reconciliation process need not be so futile as the one-sided dialogue on 2 September. If these international demands cannot be met there is no point for the prominent figures to waste their time getting involved in the Thai political crisis.

Fuadi Pitsuwan is a Fellow at Harvard University's Asia Centre who contributed this specially to RSIS Commentaries. The views expressed are strictly his own.