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Thailand: Politics of Continuity and Change

Antonio L Rappa

2 December 2009

Thaksin Shinawatra continues to plague the Abhisit government since the 2006 bloodless coup. Thailand is in tension as the threat of protests from Thaksin's Red Shirts loom in what appears to be another attempt to overthrow the government as 2009 draws to a close.

A SPIRIT OF FORGIVENESS prevails in Bangkok as many Thai elites offer prayers for the passing of former prime minister Samak Sundaravej. An outstanding lawsuit from 2008 against the late Samak by Raluek Leekpai, the younger brother of former prime minister Chuan Leekpai, has been dropped so that Samak's spirit can rest in peace.

But another kind of ghost haunts Abhisit Vejjajiva's coalition government. The former democratically-elected prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, remains a spectre that does not want to rest ever since he was deposed by the military. To add insult to injury, the ghost of Thaksin's past has helped irritate Bangkok-Phnom Penh relations since the Preah Vihear Temple incident. Prime Minister Hun Sen recently appointed Thaksin as a personal consultant to the Cambodian government. Hun Sen himself is unpopular with the Thai elites in power with political baggage that dates back to the Khmer Rouge. For some Thai political scientists, Thaksin's actions border on state subversion; others believe that Thaksin is dabbling dangerously in murky Mekong politics, which will eventually weaken his own bid to return to political power.

The Four Hundred Million Dollar Man

After the state froze Thaksin's local assets in early 2007, he was left with only US\$400 million, a pittance if one realises that his family's net worth was estimated at over US\$2.5 billion in 2008. The Shinawatra Towers in Bangkok are functioning monuments to his administration. He sold his overseas assets to sustain his local campaign. He divorced his wife to save her from further legal entanglement. A prominent political scientist from university in Phitsanulok, however, believes that Thaksin's days are numbered. His funds are running dry and his supporters are beginning to wonder if he will ever return. Knowing his unrelenting political personality, he will not bend easily, like Thai bamboo, to political pressure.

Despite his fugitive status, Thaksin has significant influence in Thailand. He single-handedly prevented another Red Shirt protest, ahead of His Majesty the King's birthday celebrations, on 5 December. This was a wise move as it shows respect for the King. Indeed, Thaksin cannot realistically stage a political comeback without the support of the monarchy. If Thaksin receives a royal pardon, it will unleash a whole new political ball game. But this is unlikely. The events that follow 5 December will determine Thaksin's political fortunes.

The Internal Security Law

The state will use the internal security law against violent demonstrators. The military, to its credit, will remain well-behaved and cloistered in their barracks. But it is only a matter of time when the army will flex its military power. A special military unit in Bangkok awaits mobilisation to quell violence. The Abhisit government is likely to stay in power as long as it retains the support of the army, the Bangkok economic elite (who are diametrically opposed to Thaksin) and the monarchy. Armed with the internal security law, the government will certainly subdue protests after the king's birthday celebrations. The triumvirate of the army, economic elite, and monarchy are currently more than equal to Thaksin wily ways.

But if the government uses the internal security law against protestors, they will antagonise and worsen the security situation. This is because even if Thaksin is defeated, there are sufficient capable leaders among the Reds to continue their political agenda. These potential leaders include highly capable and influential Thai individuals who themselves are disenfranchised with the political system. Thaksin's Reds have created a new political platform for democracy in Thailand.

A Spirit of Forgiveness

Abhisit is increasingly popular with many Thai people. But for democratic political continuity to take root, Abhisit must call for a general election. If he wins the hearts and minds of the people, it will legitimise his party's prospects for continuity. Ironically, a general election will polarise the Thai polity. Thaksin may eventually be defeated, but the split between the Reds and Yellows go much deeper. The spirit of forgiveness that prevailed at the funeral bathing ceremony of the former prime minister Samak Sundaravej is the best way to avoid violence in a country where political change continues to remain the only constant.

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