

From bloodless coups to 'live fire' zones - whither Thailand?

by Lee Kim Chew
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Thailand's embattled Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has called for national reconciliation after the bloody army crackdown on anti-government red shirt protesters but this is unlikely to mend the deep rifts exposed by the political crisis in Thai society. What ails Thai politics is the end of a political consensus to eschew violence and resolve conflicts within parliamentary institutions. It threatens to become more unstable with blood on the streets unless the trend is reversed. Even for a country inured to military putsches, the latest bout of political violence which left more than 82 dead is a harbinger of things to come.

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, ousted in a military coup in 2006 and now in exile, will continue to plot his return to power but it is unlikely he can ride back on the chaos in Bangkok without stiff opposition. Still, he is not finished yet. A large chunk of his wealth has been confiscated by the government but the billionaire tycoon still has considerable resources to finance his political comeback. He remains a game-changer as long as his supporters in the impoverished provinces in north and northeast Thailand, which make up one-third of the seats in parliament, remain loyal to him and his allies. His populist policies have turned him into a saviour among the urban and rural poor.

Throughout the crisis, the silence of King Bhumibol Adulyadej was a significant void that raises troubling questions about his ability to influence the country's politics and what comes after him. The revered monarch is above politics and in previous conflicts; the king had used his personal authority to restore calm in his role as stabiliser, if not arbiter, of the nation's fate. This time he kept his counsel as red shirt protesters set up barricades in the streets outside Chitladr Palace.

ASEAN countries to watch helplessly as the Thais self-immolate in their domestic politics. The regional grouping is hobbled to the extent that a key member is incapacitated and cannot act in concert with its partners. But the bigger setback is Thailand being reduced to an ungovernable state. Its economy damaged and democratic credentials severely dented, the

Thais have lost their moral authority to pontificate about political non-violence to military regimes such as Myanmar's.

Thailand's red shirt phenomenon highlights the growing gulf between the poor and Bangkok's political elite, which dismisses the contention that this is a class conflict. Instead, the traditional alliance of royalists in the bureaucracy, military and political establishment say the unrest is fuelled by ambitious politicians in their quest for power and wealth. The rift in Thai society has widened with the fractured political system. Thaksin's populism and money politics had proved too much for the entrenched ruling class. The extra-parliamentary tactics of the anti-Thaksin yellow shirts and the response of the militant red shirts have radicalised Thai politics and led to the breakdown of government authority.

Public faith in the state institutions has been badly battered in the political manoeuvrings over the past four years when the yellow shirts used every means at their disposal to drive Thaksin and his allies out of power.

Despite his olive branch, Prime Minister Abhisit has refused to call early elections, a key demand of the red shirts. Thaksin had warned of an insurgency if the red shirts are driven underground. This sounds ominous in the light of the attacks against government buildings in the northeastern provinces. With or without Thaksin, the red shirt movement is driven by a deep sense of social injustice and has taken a life of its own as a nascent political force. The spectre of violence haunts Thailand and its political development has reached a dangerous crossroads. All its political institutions, including the revered monarchy, are being severely tested and the outcome of the current conflict is far from clear.

The writer is a former foreign editor and chief regional correspondent of The Straits Times.