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RIVALRY FOR POLITICAL CHANGE IN THAILAND

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The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) seems determined to confront the People Power Party (PPP) government and to pressure it to resign. The PAD seems to be seeking political change in Thailand from a democratically-elected parliament to an appointed one with partially-elected representatives. What will this all mean for Thailand?

SOME 4000 People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protestors marched to Thailand's Parliament House on 6 October 2008 to seal it off with trucks and barb wires. Their goal was to prevent legislators from attending Parliament the next day to hear a policy speech by Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat. The police told the press that 6000 more PAD supporters have been camping at Government House since late August.

“Final Chapter”?

The PAD has been demanding that the elected People Power Party (PPP) government should step down. They accused the government headed by PM Somchai as a proxy of former premier Thaksin Shinawatra whom they accused of corruption and nepotism. They opposed the PPP government's intention to amend the Constitution that was adopted during the military rule following the September 2006 coup. The PAD claimed that they were protecting democracy and the monarchy. PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul, who led the demonstrators, threatened that “the final chapter” was at hand and that the government would only have hours left to survive.

On 7 October, day-long violent clashes broke out between police and PAD demonstrators, resulting in one PAD protestor dead and more than 400 injured including eight police officers. According to media reports, the police had fired tear gas at the protestors to clear the way for the prime minister and legislators to enter Parliament. After his policy speech, PM Somchai, who had to climb over a fence to escape the PAD mob, insisted that he would not step down. This was the worst violent clash since 1992. Although the PAD has been claiming that its protests were peaceful, many PAD supporters were in fact armed with baseball bats, steel pipes, bamboo batons, sling shots, guns, home-made ping pong ball-bombs and iron rods.

Role of Military

Army Chief Anupong Paojinda has been saying that the military will not launch any coup to end the political standoff and would stay neutral. After the 7 October clashes, the military had criticised the police for being too harsh in maintaining law and order and using tear gas. Deputy PM Chavalit Yongchaiyudh was negotiating with a PAD leader retired General Chamlong Srimuang for a solution when the clashes erupted. Chavalit had since resigned to take responsibility for ordering the police to enforce law and order and for the clashes with the demonstrators. However Chavalit told the Bangkok Post that a military coup was the only way to resolve the political strife and General Anupong should not be afraid. Chavalit stressed that after the coup, an interim government should be installed to tackle the political problem. General Anupong responded that he could think for himself and was in full control of the situation.

However on 16 October, General Anupong accompanied by the Navy and Air Force chiefs, told the press that PM Somchai should resign. His remark was made in the wake of the National Counter Corruption Commission's finding that PM Somchai has been found guilty of neglecting his duties eight years ago when he was in the Justice Department. As General Anupong was accompanied by the Navy and Air Force chiefs, this led to speculation that the military may launch a coup. However General Anupong denied this.

Queen at Cremation Ceremony of PAD Demonstrator

Queen Sirikit's attendance at the cremation ceremony of PAD demonstrator Angkhana Radappanyawut on 13 October in the outskirts of Bangkok was a rare and unprecedented act by the monarchy. The Queen was accompanied by her youngest daughter Princess Chulabhorn and General Anupong. Opposition Democrat Party Leader Abhisit Vejjajiva also attended the cremation. The media reported that the Queen had offered "hundreds of thousands of baht to cover the expenses of those injured in the clashes". Angkhana's father Jinda informed the media that the Queen had told him that his daughter "was a good woman since she has helped the nation and preserved the monarchy". Jinda also revealed that King Bhumibol Adulyadej was behind the one million baht donation to treat those injured in the clashes. The Queen's presence at the cremation and the donation for the injured were seen as the monarchy's support for the PAD at a time of tension between the PAD and the government. The event also gave some indication of the alignment of parties in this political conflict.

Constitution Court

The Constitution Court, which arose from the Constitution of the military coup in 2006, has been asked by Thailand's Attorney-General to rule on whether to dissolve the PPP. The move was made in view of the Supreme Court's conviction of Deputy PPP leader Yongyut Tiypairat, then the House Speaker, for electoral fraud in July. The Attorney-General also threatened the dissolution of two other coalition partners of the six-party PPP-led government over a vote-buying scheme.

On 10 October, the Constitution Court granted 100,000 baht bail each to seven of the nine core PAD leaders including Sondhi Limthongkul, who surrendered to the police on charges of inciting unrest and illegal assembly. Two other leaders who were arrested earlier, Chamlong Srimuang and Chaiwat Sinsuwong, were also released on bail. The PAD called for more rallies against the government, raising fears of mounting turmoil.

PAD and Supporters pushing for political change

The PAD and its supporters seemed determined to bring down the PPP-led government and to replace the democratically-elected government with an appointed one, with only 30% of the representatives

being elected. The PAD's proposed move has been viewed by some academics as a regressive step for democracy.

The coup of September 2006 leading to the general election of December 2007 has not been able to prevent the PPP from being elected. The PAD, which viewed the PPP as a proxy of Thaksin, is concerned that the PPP government may amend the Constitution to continue the democratic process.

Thaksin had during his premiership effectively used the democratic process to gain popularity and support of the rural masses in North and Northeastern Thailand. His policy of providing assistance including small loans, scholarships and better health care, had been welcomed by the rural people which made up 65–70% of the population. Thaksin's popularity and support in North and Northeastern Thailand had not been viewed favourably by certain sectors, including the monarchy which traditionally has influence over the rural masses.

Some upper class and business elites and intellectuals in Bangkok felt that Thaksin had gained much from the globalised economy during his premiership. During the military rule after Thaksin's ouster, the government favoured a more self-sufficient economy. Although the PAD and its supporters said that they were for democracy, they were actually representing only the Bangkok business elites, intellectuals and union activists. Bangkok has about 10% of the country's population. They have been challenging the PPP government to resign.

The Thai people are divided not only between the PPP supporters in the North and Northeastern Thailand and the PAD in Bangkok, but also in Bangkok itself between the people and bureaucracy. A Bangkok University poll of 1,180 people in the capital recently showed that 55% disapproved of the police action against the demonstrators while 44.9% supported it.

Partial Democracy?

The leaders of the September 2006 coup have used the King's name to support their coup. Since then, the PAD and its supporters have been saying that they were protecting the monarchy. The Queen's attendance at the cremation of the PAD demonstrator was seen by analysts as an unprecedented open show of support for the PAD. With the Constitution Court being lenient to the PAD leaders and its threats to dissolve the PPP and its two coalition partners, as well as General Anupong's call for PM Somchai to resign, it appears that the stage is now set for more pressure on the PPP government to resign.

This also indicates the determination of the PAD and its supporters to initiate political change -- from a democratically-elected Parliament to an appointed one with partial elections. So far PM Somchai has insisted that he would not resign as he has a mandate as a duly-elected government. In the meantime, law and order seems to have broken down with the PAD supporters continuing to camp at Government House. The PPP government is unable to rule and unable to deal with the prevailing financial crisis affecting all countries including Thailand. If the political confrontation between PAD and its supporters and the PPP government drags on, it could adversely affect the Thai economy.

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