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Bangkok Bombings: New Trend Emerging?

By Antonio L Rappa

Synopsis

The bomb blasts in Bangkok have resurrected more fears of widespread violence erupting the city. What do these blasts signify for the political climate of the Kingdom?

Commentary

WHILE THAI authorities scramble to get to the bottom of this week's twin bomb blasts in the heart of Bangkok, they reflect a trend emerging from the series of violent attacks in Thailand the past 18 months. A total of over 20 bomb explosions were reported between March 2014 and August 2015, including before, during and after the 2014 coup. On 17 February 2015, terrorists exploded a bomb on a Thai registered ship in Malaysian waters; another bomb exploded in Narathiwat Province on 20 February; and, a car bomb exploded on the tourist island of Koh Samui in April.

The series of bomb explosions indicate similarities of tactics, target choices as well as bomb components. All the bombs were home-made and weighed no more than four kilograms. All the perpetrators escaped. And no one came forward to claim responsibility. Those explosions were probably merely training for the latest Bangkok blasts. Clearly, a new set of bombers is developing even as we witness a fresh round of political violence in the Kingdom.

Possible sources

Several analysts and journalists believe that the blasts at the Erawan Shrine and Saphan Taksin point towards the Red Shirts and relatively deprived supporters as the probable perpetrators.

Red Shirts: There are disgruntled and angry Red Shirt supporters who are followers of Yingluck Shinawatra. She was unceremoniously removed from power on May 22, 2014 after becoming Thailand's first woman prime minister. There continues to be legal and political acrimony over the motivations of the military coup that evicted her.

Despite the ensuing protests, peace and stability were maintained by the Chan-o-Cha regime, but not for very long. The problems arose again when coup leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha appointed himself prime minister. He angered the polity when he postponed the general elections three times from 2015 to the following year and now says "no hurry till 2017". It is not clear how long the polity will tolerate Chan-o-Cha.

Despite being known for abject poverty in their northeast provincial stronghold, the Red Shirts have always fervently viewed the Shinawatras as benevolent, populist leaders who they treat with great respect. This has led to Palace sources reminding all and sundry of the need to preserve reverence for the monarchy and no one else.

Relative Deprivation: Most Thai people make a meagre living but wealthy Thais are among the wealthiest people in the world. Relative deprivation in the Kingdom is a grave source of unhappiness especially in the rural northeastern provinces. Some estimate that over 83% or about 53 million people live on less than 300 baht a day. This makes a sufficient hotbed for political protests as the gap between the richest rich and poorest poor widens at an increasing rate.

Thaksin Shinawatra: Latest intelligence reports suggest that local police are tracking individuals who are believed to have come from the northeast region of the Kingdom. The northeast is considered the stronghold of ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, brother of Yingluck. Some observers believe that Thaksin might be trying to make things difficult for Chan-o-cha who represents the traditional elite as he stews in self-exile.

Royal Factor: Crown Prince, Future King Rama X

Thaksin is known to be close to Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn. While both men have not appeared “officially” in public events together for over a decade, the eventual demise of the beloved King Bhumipol Adulyadej might see a union of Thaksin and the Crown Prince.

The 63- year-old Crown Prince remains in waiting for his father who has been on the throne for 69 years. Vajiralongkorn recently led over 300,000 cyclists for a 43 km bike ride in honour of his mother the Queen. The prime minister who joined them also said that that the country was still torn apart by the 2014 coup and “divided”. This was an allusion to the Red Shirt-Yellow Shirt divide that almost brought the Kingdom to its knees.

Ironically, the day after the prime minister’s comments, the first bomb exploded at the four-faced Buddha shrine at Erawan killing at least 22 people and injuring over 123 locals and foreigners. Then a second bomb was detonated about nine BTS train stations away along the Chao Phraya. No one was injured by the bomb thrown into the Chao Phraya – again popular as an embarkation point for tourists taking river tours as well as locals commuting to and from work.

Watermelon Soldiers

Another probable source might be what I refer to as the “watermelon soldiers”. These are soldiers who are career officers and other ranks as well as national servicemen with political sympathies for the Reds. They are watermelon soldiers because they wear green uniforms but have Red political inclinations inside. One of the most famous Red Shirt leaders was Seh Daeng, who was assassinated by a military sniper. A renegade senior commander, he was also a strong supporter of Prime Minister Thaksin and a fearless military leader in the fight against the Communists in the 1970s. Formally known as Khattiya Sawasdipol, he was perceived by the commanding general of the time, Anupong Paochinda, as a threat. Anupong subsequently humiliated Seh Daeng by appointing him as a military aerobics instructor.

Hundreds of Red Shirts have lost their lives in a decade of bombing Bangkok and not a single family has forgotten a son or daughter who died. Many remain imprisoned by the military regime. The treatment of the Red Shirts, the levels of poverty and environmental factors such as famine, typhoons and floods have contributed to a deteriorating political climate as many wonder what is going to happen next. However there is no cause yet to suspect foreign involvement in the current spate of bombings

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