

Thailand's Battle of Attrition

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For nearly three weeks now, tens of thousands of disenfranchised and disillusioned supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra have demonstrated in the streets of Bangkok, calling for a dissolution of the lower house of Parliament and new elections to reset Thailand's troubled democracy.

The demonstrations have been peaceful, and though the authorities have invoked a security law that allows the military to restore order, the need has not arisen. Bangkok, after all, has seen similar protests fizzle and come to nothing. But this time, the government is facing one of the biggest demonstrations in decades, fueled by the rising resentment and newfound political consciousness of the country's rural and urban poor. The powers that be would be wise to deal fairly with their grievances.

Thailand's political roller coaster began in 2006 when Mr. Thaksin was deposed by the military in a bloodless coup. But Mr. Thaksin's supporters, who today are known as red shirts, could not be put down; they won control of the government in the elections that followed.

This elected government was ousted by the judiciary, paving way for the rise in 2008 of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. He tried to restore and maintain a kind of pre-Thaksin status quo, but things never really calmed down.

Although Mr. Thaksin's five years in power were tainted by official corruption and catering to special interests, his government promoted polices aimed at helping the have-nots that raised the expectations of many ordinary Thais. Instead of adopting Mr. Thaksin's popular policies while discarding his excesses, the establishment that ousted him continued to cling to the past, vesting the balance of power with the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the military and the monarchy at the expense of the Parliament, elected politicians and political parties favored by the red shirts.

The protesters now demonstrating on the streets of Bangkok are angry because they feel their demands for social justice and a greater redistribution of wealth have been dismissed out of hand. It appears the pro-Abhisit, royalist-conservative coalition — which includes the army, palace insiders, governing-coalition parties, the yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy and Bangkok's civil society and middle class — have closed ranks and hunkered down for the long haul.

The stage is set for a battle of attrition.

While the odds may be stacked against the red shirts, Mr. Abhisit and his supporters are mistaken in their belief that the protesters can be worn down and pacified through a series of half-hearted social programs.

A generation ago, the current rulers would have gotten away with this. But pressure for political and economic change is growing and the long-neglected have-nots appear unwilling to return to silence and passivity. While protests in April of last year ended ignominiously, the fact that the red shirts are back in the streets suggests broad and deep-seated resentment against what is widely seen as an unjust hierarchy intent on preserving its privileges.

Mr. Abhisit apparently believes that he can respond to popular grievances by including free

education programs, subsidies to the elderly and other measures in his government's fiscal stimulus launched in response to the global economic crisis. But as political tensions mount, the onus is on the prime minister to accommodate the red shirts' demands for democratic rights and access to economic opportunities.

Despite Mr. Abhisit's agreement to negotiate, talks will produce little unless his coalition agrees to enact constitutional reforms to promote reconciliation and lay out an expeditious timetable for new elections. Mr. Abhisit has insisted on nine months, hoping to stymie the opposition's momentum, while the reds have been pushing for a 15-day timetable. The red shirts' demands may be too ambitious, but the sooner change comes, the better.

Despite the odds, the protesters have won support from Bangkok's underclass workers in labor-intensive services and some sympathy among Bangkok's more prosperous elements who feel that something is not right in Thailand. But the red shirts cannot dislodge the government as long as Mr. Abhisit's coalition remains intact.

The government's allies have deliberately fixated on the corruption and abuse of power during the Thaksin years because they fear that the reforms demanded by the red shirts can only be detrimental to their interests. This political brinkmanship may not culminate in the red shirts' favor. But if this vicious cycle of protests continues the current political system cannot endure.

Though they are insecure and fearful of what change might bring, the forces behind Mr. Abhisit must come to terms with Thailand's transformation. Concessions need not be limitless. They can still keep much by letting go some. The risk of trying to keep all is that they may end up with very little at the end of the day.

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P.S.

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