

Farmers set up protest “village” in Bangkok

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It is often said that Thailand’s political destinies - its coups and constitutions - are decided by the Bangkok elite while the rural masses stand at distant sidelines to cheer, boo or yawn. Until now.

The countryside has come to the city, both figuratively and in a very physical, gritty way with thousands of protesters. And Thailand will never be the same.

Angry, often impoverished farmers want change, and they are willing to tangle with the country’s Bangkok-rooted elite and put up with harsh and alien urban surroundings to get it.

For the fourth week, thousands of so-called Red Shirts are living in a village-cum-political commune they have set up in the shadows of Bangkok’s palaces and high-rises. They’ve transplanted their own food, music, sharing spirit and hardships.

How the mass protest will end - whether the demonstrators retreat or force dissolution of the government - is still guesswork. But there is widespread agreement that rural people, a backbone of the national economy, will no longer accept second-class status, humbly deferring to purported superiors in the traditional hierarchy.

“Even if the movement is busted, Thailand will never be the same again. Political awareness and the love for rights have become unprecedentedly high. It’s not easy to switch off the quest for freedom and justice,” says Chairat Charoensin-o-larn, a political scientist at Bangkok’s Thammasat University.

Most immediately, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, the Red Shirts, wants to oust the ruling Democrat Party, saying it came to power via a 2006 military coup which deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thaksin, convicted of corruption and abuse of power, remains popular with the demonstrators, having enacted programs to aid the poor during his six-year tenure. His cheap medical and debt alleviation schemes, along with frequent visits with farmers, raised expectations and mobilized a rural constituency.

Now a fugitive abroad, the telecommunications tycoon is said to be funneling funds to sustain the Red Shirts whose numbers have at times swelled past 100,000.

But they appear to be moving beyond merely a pro-Thaksin movement with some within their ranks even viewing the ex-leader as a long-term liability, given his corrupt ways and concerted effort to shore up his own power by gutting democratic institutions the Red Shirts say they champion.

The UDD has not put forward a concrete political platform, but voices from its rank-and-file are clear enough. They want to narrow the yawning income gap between urban and rural areas, to end the siphoning off of their resources for the benefit of city folk and to receive equal treatment before the law in a country where the have-nots are often harshly punished while sons of the powerful literally get away with murder.

Bangkok residents also have expressed resentment and prejudice against the darker-skinned farm people, especially from the northeast, Thailand's poorest region, calling them "buffaloes" and claiming they came to the Thai capital only because they were paid by organizers.

"It's a shame that people think we're stupid. If you look like you come from the northeast, people think that you're just here for the money," said Thananan Promma, a protester selling coffee in the Red Shirt encampment.

"I want a better future for my two young children," he said, as bystanders and customers nodded in unison, some insisting their hard living conditions are proof that they are passionate about their cause.

"I've been sleeping, eating and living on the pavement. The concrete is hurting my back. I do believe in democracy. That's why I am here," said Chalermporn Thanatak, a 58-year-old fruit trader, resident of an urban village which has sprung up along nearly 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) of roadside in Bangkok's historic core.

The protesters have been bedding down on bamboo mats or tents pitched atop sun-scorched pavements, using fire hydrants to wash their children and vegetables and stringing up skimpy plastic around makeshift toilets.

In the evening, a village fair atmosphere pervades, with folk music played and strangers sharing the staples of the northeast - green papaya salad, grilled chicken and sticky rice.

Dusting off vocabulary last used during the era of absolute monarchy, protest leaders have cast their struggle as one between "phrai" and "amataya" - commoners versus elite power-holders. "Class war" is a key slogan in what so far have been peaceful protest marches and rallies.

William Klausner, an American scholar who has tracked rural Thailand for more than half a century, notes that the country is not burdened with a rigid class structure, that considerable upward social mobility occurs.

The fight, he says, is really against unjust and corrupt officialdom, began some time ago at the grass roots.

"But what has dramatically changed, is that villagers are no longer uneducated, provincial and most importantly no longer adverse to direct confrontation to redress their grievances," he said.

Television, community radio stations, mobile telephones, the Internet, job mobility and the work of activists in the countryside is sweeping away the subservient peasant, he says.

Many have even broadened their horizons while working abroad. Thananan, for example, said he was impressed how South Korean farmers united effectively to fight the government's lifting of a ban on U.S. beef imports.

"Governments can no longer ignore or just pay lip service to reducing economic, social and political inequalities and to assuring social justice under the rule of law," Klausner says. *"Whatever government is in power will have to deal with the reality of a society rent with divisions rooted in inequality."*

P.S.

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