

Thailand: A great smacking sound

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The unmistakable sound heard over the last two weeks has been the simultaneous smack of many lips newly moistened by a saliva of expectancy after a long spell of drought.

There have been three general elections within three years. Elections Thai-style are expensive for candidates, for parties, and for patrons. There has been little time for recovery. On top, political chaos has disrupted budget spending. Under Thaksin rather few Cabinet posts went to MPs. Most were taken by outsiders. The Samak government is expected to be a welcome return to business as usual. Cabinet portfolios were shared among party financiers and the nominees of key faction heads in the time-honoured fashion.

Many newly anointed ministers were so overcome with excitement that they blurted out plans which have “gimme” written all them, even before they had got through the ministry door. Reverse compulsory licensing. Declare the eucalyptus tree an environmental marvel and plant thousands of hectares. Haul back the Bangkok mass-transit plans so that the specs can be changed and the whole bidding process restarted from scratch. Re-activate computer purchase schemes which are already mired in corruption charges. And refloat the irrigation fantasy which will require mega-volumes of earth moving, mega-kilometres of piping, and mega-tons of concrete without any popular demand or any calculable benefit.

If the landscape seems familiar that is because we have been here before, around a dozen years ago. No fewer than twelve of the current ministers or their nominators were members of the famous Cabinet of Banharn Silpa-archa. There is a photo of the heads of that coalition on the steps of Government House just after their alliance was formed. Samak, Thaksin, Banharn, Snoh, Sudarat, and Chalerm are all there. Banharn is trying to get them to link hands in the tableau popular at international conferences. But it isn't really working. They look as if they don't want to touch one another.

This similarity to the Banharn Cabinet signals a structural reversal too. This is a return to a government of small capital. Thaksin brought together a cabal of some of the biggest and most modernized corporate interests in Thailand. Several were directly represented in the Cabinet. Others were clustered close outside. Lesser businessfolk were excluded. The career path from local boss through MP to minister was suddenly disrupted. Over the last five years, several political families deserted national politics for the new and more accessible opportunities in local government. But now we are back to the old days. The tycoons are nowhere to be seen. The Cabinet is again the property of contractors, construction magnates, property dealers, and hauliers.

This means old-style feeding habits will return too. In the Thaksin era, the big corporations were less interested in crude old ways of looting the government budget. They collected their reward through increases in their profits or share prices brought about by government actions. This was sleek and even legal, most of the time. But we will be back now to the politics of loot, of padded estimates and percentage deductions.

There are two other reasons why the smacking of lips last week was especially enthusiastic and expectant. Both of these are gifts from the coup government, for which the new ministers should be

truly grateful.

First, there is a lot of money around and a pressing need to spend it quickly. The coup ministers dedicated themselves to doing as little as possible. In truth, public investment has been low ever since the financial crisis over a decade ago. There is clear rationale for spending on public infrastructure and public goods of many kinds. The mega-projects have been dangling for three years, stymied by political conflict. There is money in the coffers and clear directions for spending it

Second, the total failure of the coup regime to nail anyone for corruption is an invitation to plunder with impunity. Recall that the coup regime made corruption one of its four key tasks. Look at the pitiful result.

The inability to catch big businesses for profiting through conflict of interest is perhaps not so surprising. But the total failure to prosecute anyone for the massive mining of Suvarnabhumi Airport is gob-smacking. The case over the CTX scanners has dissolved into thin air, even though it was reported months ago that the US Department of Justice had provided the names of those involved. Khunying Jaruvarn estimated that contracts were padded by 40 percent on average, but not one case has been launched. It is well established that King Power occupied far more retail space than its contract allowed, blocked safety exists, built a whole building without permission and without rental, and prejudiced airport security. Yet all attempts to bring the company to justice have been sandbagged. If these massive bits of plundering are safe from the law, then more modest piracy should be fine.

So it was not surprising that the first week of this government was dominated by a great smacking sound. And it was not surprising that the other sound of the week was a lot of snarling aimed at the media.

The old hands in this government will easily recall the problems which free media can cause. The press played a key role in exposing the multiple corruption which brought the Banharn government down after only sixteen months. The short period in the late 1990s when ITV was truly independent brought evidence of corruption to the attention of a wider swathe of the public than ever before. Thaksin's government was doomed after it lost control of the media in mid 1995.

We can expect a return to the methods of controlling media used by the Banharn, Chavalit, and Thaksin governments: oversight, manipulation of advertising, and intimidation. Most of all, intimidation. Probably this time it will be faster and nastier. Chirmsak Pinthong was thrown off the airwaves by both Banharn and Thaksin, but this is the first time he lasted no more than a week.

P.S.

* From <http://www.geocities.com/changnoi2/smacking.htm>