

A Cambodian Temple Roils Thai Politics

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Opponents of the Samak government find a new cause in a border dispute with Cambodia

The censure debate against Thailand's ruling Samak Sundaravej administration is increasingly focused on a red herring — the government's support for Cambodia's application for World Heritage status for a ninth-century temple at the centre of a long standing border dispute.

While the Samak government can be accused of many sins, the controversy over the Preah Vihear temple is relatively minor in comparison. However, in intensely nationalist Thailand any perceived threat against national sovereignty and territorial integrity is sure to provoke an outcry, and opposition parties out to oust the Samak government have seized on the temple issue as yet another way to add to the pressure.

Samak's government is already in the hot seat due to allegations of corruption, an unnecessary attempt to amend the constitution, claims of proxy politics and especially its inability to deal with rising energy costs, inflation and economic issues, and particularly its perceived closeness to the opposition's bête noire, the ousted former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

Dissatisfaction with the government has led to more than a month of street demonstrations in Bangkok organized by the People's Alliance for Democracy, which was instrumental in Thaksin's ouster by the military in September of 2006. The current demonstrations begun on 25 May, were initially organized to protest proposed amendments to the constitution that were deemed as unnecessary and aimed only at allowing the reinstatement of banned politicians of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party.

The push for constitutional amendments was eventually dropped by Samak's People Power Party-led coalition government, but the street protests continued, escalating their demands to the ouster of the Samak regime. On June 20, the demonstrators broke through police barriers to surround Government House, the seat of the Thai government. They have remained there, setting up makeshift tents and vowing to stay until Samak and his cabinet step down.

Rising fuel and food costs have resulted in other protests across the country by farmers, truckers and others that have added weight to the PAD protests. However, as of yet, the PAD has received very little support from the middle class, especially in Bangkok. The middle class, who did come out in large numbers during the anti-Thaksin demonstrations, are deemed to be essential for the successful removal of the government, such as what happened to the Chavalit Yongchaiyudh government in 1997 following the Asian financial crisis of the same year.

The demonstrators have also received little hint of sympathy from the military or the royal family, also essential to their success. Samak appears to have come to some kind of an agreement with Army commander General Anupong Paochinda, who would prefer not to have to call the army out of its barracks. Samak also has strong ties to the royal palace, where his family has worked for generations.

In a nationally televised meeting between Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej, Prime Minister Samak and Samak's deputies on 19 June, the King appeared to give tacit approval to Samak's administration. King Bhumibol told Samak, "I expect that you will do what you have promised and when you can do that, you will be satisfied." The monarch went on to say, "With that satisfaction the country will survive. I ask you to do good in everything, both in government work and other work, so that our country can carry on and the people will be pleased." That was two days after the cabinet had ratified the Cambodian temple pact.

Samak, however, played into the opposition's hands when he allowed Noppadon to sign the joint communiqué on the temple. The opposition Democrats and the PAD are aware that the censure debate is unlikely to unseat Samak's administration without a break in his coalition government. They are also aware that the protests do not yet have the numbers or the crucial support of the middle classes, the military or the royal court to bring about the government's downfall. By stirring up nationalist sentiment and painting Samak and Thai Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama and by extension their government, as selling out Thailand to Cambodia, the opposition hoped to sway more people over to its side.

The day after the cabinet endorsed the Joint Communiqué, 18 June, the PAD latched onto the deal to whip up nationalist fervor, something that in ultra-nationalist Thailand is sure to win supporters. The opposition Democrat Party followed suite in the censure debate and made the issue a central component of their attack on the Samak government.

The Preah Vihear Hindu temple itself was built between the ninth and 12th centuries. The temple grounds lie astride the Thai-Cambodian border with the temple itself on the Cambodian side, but with the approach and a ceremonial pool on the Thai side. A high, steep cliff on the Cambodian side makes access very difficult making the only entrance through Thailand.

The area has long been contested by the Thai and Cambodian governments. After French colonial troops pulled out of Indochina in 1954, the Thai army occupied the site. In 1959, the Cambodian government protested the Thai presence and took the case to the World Court, whose 1962 decision said that the temple belonged to Cambodia. The decision was based on a map drawn up by French colonial authorities in 1907 as a result of a joint Thai-French border commission.

The map that showed Preah Vihear temple on the Cambodian side of the border was sent to the Thai government at the time. The World Court cited the Thai government's lack of objection to the map in the intervening 50 years as proof of their acceptance of the border demarcation. Thailand, while abiding by the court's decision, claimed it reserved the right to contest the issue. The court's decision did not, however, decide ownership of a further 4.6 kilometers of border to the west and north of the temple which remain in dispute.

The issue of ownership of the temple and the disputed border areas around it came to a head again in 2007 when the Cambodian government put forward the site to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization for World Heritage status. The attempt resulted in protests from Thailand, especially since the proposal included not only the temple but the 4.6 kilometers of disputed territory. The military-backed government of Surayudh Chulanont, in an attempt to diffuse any possible tensions over the area, suggested a joint application, but this was rejected by the Cambodian government.

Cambodia refiled their application this year and again courted the Thai government for its approval. This time Samak's government decided to support the Cambodian push for UNESCO registration. After negotiations in Phnom Penh a joint communiqué endorsing Cambodia's application was signed by Noppadon and Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sok An and endorsed by the Thai Cabinet on

June 17. UNESCO is due to consider the application at a meeting in Quebec on 2-10 July.

Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva invoked nationalist feelings in the parliament by telling lawmakers, "I hope that all Thai MPs will show distrust of the prime minister and the foreign minister. And I ask all Thai MPs to be open minded and listen to the opposition's information, so that they will realize what to do next." The loss of any territory is seen by most Thais as a grave affront to national pride. In recent years there have been several shooting matches between the Thai and Burmese armies over boundary disputes along Thailand's northern border. A brief border war was fought with Laos in 1987-88 over a boundary dispute in the northeast.

Preah Vihear temple, however, seems to be a non-issue. Samak certainly seems to think so. During Monday's censure debate he cited Article 61 of the World Court's regulations which states that, "No application for revision may be made after the lapse of ten years from the date of judgment." He further argued that Thailand already lost the case in 1962 and it is time that Thais come to terms with it. Samak and Noppadon have also claimed that both the Army and the Survey Department have looked at the Cambodian map, compared it to their own maps, and have agreed that the deal did not infringe on Thai sovereignty. The army has yet to make a public statement on the issue.

This is something Thais are obviously not yet ready to do. Over 300 distinguished Thais, including several senators, artists and academics, submitted a letter of protest to UNESCO over the decision on 24 June. A petition was also filed with the Administrative Court by opponents of the deal on the same day. The Administrative Court was slated to hold a hearing yesterday to consider an injunction against the cabinet's decision.

The opposition claims the decision should have been put before parliament first since it could be deemed an international treaty. Article 190 of the constitution calls for treaties to be deliberated in parliament before being agreed to. The opposition alleges that Samak and Noppadon bypassed parliament and the Thai people in agreeing to a deal that could affect national sovereignty.

At issue for some is why did the Samak government rush into the deal and not press for a joint application like the previous government? A joint application, it is reasoned by some Thai academics and politicians, would be advantageous to both sides and defuse land disputes around the temple. Samak and Noppadon argue that the only thing they have agreed to is that the temple is owned by Cambodia and that no Thai land has been given up. Instead they have called for a buffer zone be created out of the disputed 4.6 kilometers around the temple.

The PAD says they have the answer. They allege that the temple was "sold" to Cambodia in exchange for gas deals in the recently found gas fields off Cambodia's coast and for a deal to construct a casino on Koh Kong Island adjacent to Thailand's eastern Trat province. Although no real concrete evidence has been presented to back up these claims, the lack of trust in the Samak government is enough for most people to believe it is possible.

Rather than argue about more relevant issues, like the economy, inflation, rising fuel prices, the continuing insurgency in the South and allegations of the PPP government functioning as a proxy for Thaksin's banned Thai Rak Thai, all of which the government has done almost nothing about, the opposition and the PAD have resorted to stoking the fires of nationalism over an ancient Khmer temple whose ownership was decided 46 years ago and is perched on about seven kilometers of land that has almost no relevance to the lives of the majority of Thais besides those who run tours to the temple or own shops selling food, drink and souvenirs in the area. The ploy is unlikely to work.

P.S.

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