

Feet to the fire

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New Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva received royal endorsement on Wednesday and immediately announced he has a “grand plan” for reconciliation, revival of the economy and a renewed image abroad.

For those who have tracked Abhisit Vejjajiva’s career with high hopes since his meteoric rise to the political limelight in March 1992, when the 28-year-old upstart out-debated political veteran Samak Sundaravej to the point of frustration and bluster on national television, his premiership has arrived in less than ideal circumstances.

It is an outcome of military meddling in politics, political reconfigurations in the aftermath of judicial decisions, a virtual blackmail by the People’s Alliance for Democracy, and an emblematic embrace of old-style politicians of Newin Chidchob’s ilk.

Lest we forget, Mr Abhisit and his Democrat Party have committed repeated misjudgements, demonstrated poor political skills and exploited myopic opportunism over the past three years. Yet much will be forgiven and forgotten if he can deliver Thailand into the 21st century on a solid footing, healing deep-seated rifts and reconciling the raw urban-rural inequality at the root of Thailand’s crisis.

When Thailand’s protracted political crisis began in late 2005, Mr Abhisit and the Democrats understandably sided with civil society groups that stood up to the corruption and abuse of power by ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. During the crescendo of the anti-Thaksin protests in early 2006, Mr Abhisit called for royal intervention with the invocation of Article 7 of the 1997 charter. When a snap election was called shortly thereafter, Mr Abhisit, as opposition leader, boycotted the polls, setting in train the topsy-turvy electoral environment that induced unprecedented judicial activism and eventually brought on the military coup in September 2006.

The coup was a cue for the Democrats to take charge by providing an alternative leadership and policy platform. It was not rocket science. All the Democrats needed to do was to adopt some of the pro-grass-roots policies that won elections for Thaksin and his allies time and again, while keeping corruption and abuse of power at bay. But the now-governing party dithered and trapped itself into an anti-Thaksin box, invariably deploring the Thaksin programmes and his rule without proclaiming what the Democrat party actually stood for.

An entire year under the coup-appointed government elapsed before the Democrats found themselves in a military-endorsed election in December 2007 only to ape Thaksin’s populist programmes. When they resoundingly lost the election, the Democrats reverted to their comfortable anti-Thaksin box. The party’s disregard for the pro-poor policy planks suggested that they emanated not from outlook and conviction but expediency and opportunism. The Democrats then spent much of 2008 just as they did in 2006, going after Thaksin, his proxies and allies, whose best political talents have been disqualified and banned from politics. In doing so, Mr Abhisit and the Democrats developed a symbiotic relationship with the PAD. A number of PAD organisers and advisors ran under the Democrat banner in the election, while a number of Democrats were regular speakers and

visitors to PAD-occupied sites.

Not once this year has Mr Abhisit laid out his vision for Thailand and the attendant policy ideas to move Thailand forward. It is still not rocket science. Some of the Thaksin-era policies for rural uplift, industrial upgrading, cluster-development projects and competitiveness-boosting structural reforms should be considered to bring Thailand firmly into the globalisation age. Mr Abhisit also will need to provide policy directions on mega-infrastructure projects, bilateral free-trade agreements in view of the stalled global trade talks, and privatisation of key state enterprises. Here is where the new prime minister's mettle will be challenged the most. The Democrats' implicit alliance with conservative forces may come back to haunt them if pressure for a more inward-looking Thailand builds.

More critically, Mr Abhisit will be tested by both the red shirts under the United Front of Democracy Against Dictatorship and the yellow shirts under the PAD. For the UDD supporters, the new prime minister radiates yellow, complicit in what they see as the PAD's highway robbery of their election victory. Mr Abhisit will have to exercise magnanimity and restraint when the red shirts mobilise and protest in much the same way the PAD has done. For the yellow shirts, Mr Abhisit, as the scion of the Establishment, ironically may not be yellow enough, as the PAD leadership still calls for an extra-parliamentary and extra-constitutional way out of the crisis. Mr Abhisit's worst spot is to be caught between this rock and that hard place, between red and yellow shirts that will be unhappy and unsatisfied irrespective of the PM's response.

Beyond this seemingly dialectical conflict, Mr Abhisit will have to keep unruly coalition MPs in line. That the coalition partners, with half of the strength of MPs compared to the Democrats', have garnered almost as many cabinet seats indicates disproportionate leverage. In this rough-and-tumble coalition jockeying and jostling, Mr Abhisit and his handlers should start making inroads into the opposition Puea Thai party for potential defections to impose a prisoner's dilemma on Mr Newin's and other wayward factions.

Economic adversity and foreign policy are obvious challenges. As the triple crises of global recession, domestic crisis-induced economic slowdown and airport closures intensify, the Abhisit government will be under pressure from a bewildering array of pent-up groups from farmers and industrialists to labourers and urban dwellers. A pump-priming stimulus package is imperative, and should be geared to have immediate effects. The imperative of fiscal expansion and deficit-financing should be explained and substantiated. Thailand's standing in the international community is in tatters. The Asean summit requires focus, and relations with the major players in the region and beyond need immediate revival and reassurance. These two broad policy fronts are the Democrats' forte.

To be sure, Mr Abhisit deserves every opportunity to set things right. He has to find a way to wriggle out of the Faustian bargain his party has struck. His political instincts will ultimately set the tone and content of his rule. Whether his Eton and Oxford grooming can overcome the elitist trappings of his Chulalongkorn Demonstration school and Sukhumvit road upbringing will have much to say about his premiership prospects. Many of his critics and detractors near and far are willing to take a pause while the jury is out on his rule.

P.S.

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