

The ties that bind Thailand's Burma policy

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When Abhisit Vejjajiva slipped through the back door and into the prime minister's seat in Thailand late last year, exiled democracy advocates from Burma welcomed him. Over a week after reports broke of the Thai navy forcing boatloads of people from Burma back into the ocean to die, they should be thinking again.

Abhisit's maneuvering into the leadership spot - made possible only after military and royalist intrigues and the three-month illegal takeover of the offices that he now occupies - prompted lots of excited talk about nascent change in Thailand's policies on Burma.

That was never going to happen. At no point in the last two decades has there been a meaningful shift in Bangkok's approach to dealing with the generals to the west, neither under Abhisit's Democrat Party or any other. There have been a few changes in style, but none in substance.

This is because the strongest ties binding Thailand's policies on its neighbor are not from ministerial offices, but from military bases. And as the prime minister owes his job to the people that decide those policies, rather than the electorate, there is no advantage to him if he tries to do things differently.

The strength of these ties could not have been more apparent than in the handling of news that perhaps thousands of people from western Burma travelling to southern Thailand in boats have been repeatedly forced back out to sea since last December.

Hundreds are believed to have died, and those who have made it through have alleged that naval personnel starved and assaulted them. At least one said that sailors murdered some of his companions by tying their arms and legs and throwing them overboard.

Others who received more sympathetic treatment in Indonesian waters confirmed that Thai sailors had boarded their vessels, thrown their food out and destroyed the engines before pushing them away, but that they had managed to survive by making sails from plastic sheets. Those whom Indian vessels lifted from the sea gave similar accounts.

According to some journalists, the revamped Internal Security Operations Command is now handling the hundred or so survivors who are still in Thailand. An Agence France-Presse webpage carried a photograph of the powerful agency's local commander, Colonel Manas Kongpan, standing on the beach alongside one group.

Manas, a few people may recall, was among three army officers that a court in 2006 found responsible for the deaths of 28 young men at the Krue Se Mosque two years earlier. By law he ought to have had criminal charges pending against him, but instead he is at the forefront of the new government's response to an international crisis.

One of his other two co-accused in the Krue Se case, Manas' superior officer General Pallop Pinmanee, has been in and out of the ISOC apparatus for years. The former death-squad commander was close not only with the 2006 coup group, which had favored Abhisit's unsuccessful bid in the 2007 polls, but also with the ironically named People's Alliance for Democracy that brought Abhisit

to government at the end of last year by shutting down Thailand's airports.

Meanwhile, navy and army chiefs have been quick to deny all the accounts about the boatloads of people from Burma and have insisted that no inquiries are necessary. The Foreign Ministry has said that it is "verifying the facts." The prime minister met with human rights defenders and had reportedly promised that events would be investigated, but then quickly back-pedaled, saying that they might have been exaggerated.

When has there ever been a government inquiry into a case of forced repatriation from Thailand? The forcible sending back of people from neighboring countries, in recent decades mostly from Burma, has gone on for a long time with guarantees of impunity for the likes of Manas and the navy personnel involved this time around.

Most incidents have taken place not at sea but on land, often in jungles and remote valleys, far from the beaches where horrified tourists took photographs of the abuse meted out on some of the victims in the last few weeks.

Human rights groups have for years documented cases of villagers - here dozens, there hundreds - being forced back into combat zones, into hunger, disease and danger. Often soldiers have moved these people in trucks from where they have crossed the border to a few miles north or south and then told them to go back. At other times they have simply been told to leave.

One such incident that did attract publicity was the forced repatriation in 1994 of thousands of people from Sangkhlaburi back to a temporary camp on the other side of the border from where they had fled after Burmese army troops had attacked.

Ashley South, a humanitarian aid worker present on the scene, recalled, "Within three days of the attack, Thai authorities were already telling the refugees to return to Burma, which they refused to do." Eventually, in desperate circumstances and with threats and promises of help if they went away, they were coerced and cajoled into crossing over again.

Defending the de facto policy of forced repatriation, the chief government spokesman said at the time that, "Thailand will provide the necessary humanitarian aid (for asylum-seekers), and we would not send people back across a border if we felt it was not safe for them to go back."

That was a Democrat Party government. Its chief spokesman? Abhisit Vejjajiv

P.S.

From Rules of the Lords.

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