

# The rage before the rampage

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In the red rally from the 8<sup>th</sup> at Government House to the blockade of Victory Monument, we heard a passion and venting of rage that rarely rises above the surface. By breaking the taboos, by naming names, Thaksin broke other mental shackles (how easy it was). Of course some protesters parroted the talk of “real democracy” from Thaksin and other leaders. But in interviews, vox pops, and video clips people repeatedly talked about unfairness, injustice, privilege, double standards, and their sense of utter frustration. This was a moment of terrible clarity. Such thoughts acquire new meaning when they are spoken out loud and shared.

The rampage that followed was both appalling and pathetic. From the moment it was clear that a scrappy, nasty, and obviously fated attempt to provoke urban disorder was under way, the red crowd began to melt away. The planned rallies at provincial halls drew a fraction of the numbers there a few days earlier. The crowd at Government House thinned to a few thousand by the time of the surrender.

But who were this crowd at its height? We have to guess from the faces and other facts. They seemed mostly in the age-range of 25 to 45; mainly male (perhaps 3-to-1); more Thai than Chinese in features; jeans and sneakers as standard dress. On the 8<sup>th</sup>, the crowd swelled to 100,000, then dropped to 25,000 overnight, before rebuilding on the following day, suggesting most had a home nearby. Many had vehicles—taxis, motorcycles, songtaew trucks. The best guess is that the core were migrants who had moved to the capital to work at easy-entry occupations like hired motorcycle and taxi driver, vendor, construction worker, and other casual labor.

The rage is not difficult to understand. The motorcycle driver lives his working life in the exhaust fumes of air-conditioned saloons. He is constantly harassed by the corrupt police, while watching the Benz owners break the law with impunity. He is only in Bangkok because farming has declined over a generation of persistent government neglect while public funds were poured into the highways that wreathe Bangkok.

One surprise in the red rhetoric was the appearance of amathiyathipatai. Forty years ago, the word was invented to translate “bureaucratic polity,” a term used by an American scholar to label Thailand’s military dictatorship. It had been confined to the world of academia, and almost forgotten. But someone unearthed it to mock the military-backed Democrat government as a retreat into the distant past. Thaksin picked it up. Red orators repeated it. By the 8<sup>th</sup> it was emblazoned on the backdrop of the Government House stage, pared down to “amat”, preceded by a single ringing call, “Overthrow!”

Of course almost none of the audience could parse the word’s Sanskrit-Pali roots, or know its obscure academic history. But clearly they responded to its feel. Amat joins a list of terms (patronage system, privilege, double standard) that grope to convey the gut feeling of being victim of multiple injustices.

Thaksin’s populism was not only about what he gave to people (cheap health care, micro loans) but also how he gave it. His personal style was hot, active, open. He made people feel they had some power. He made them sense they had a leader they could own. He gave them an inkling that their vote could matter, and a hope that it could be a tool to gain a lot more.

The trashing of democracy over the past two-and-a-half years has blasted those hopes. The coup not only removed Thaksin, but announced a U-turn in leadership style. In person, General Surayuth can be warm and amiable. As prime minister, he chose to play the ultimate bureaucrat—body closely controlled, face devoid of expression, eyes drained of emotion, coolant in the veins. Abhisit of course is almost frenetic in comparison. But his carefully controlled speech, aloof manner, and failure to look through the camera into the eyes of his audience still give him a bureaucratic aura. He reminds us that the Democrats are famous for telling people not to protest but wait in their villages until the benevolent government has time left over from the arduous task of saving the country to attend to them.

Many are now clamouring for Abhisit to reach beyond his faithful fans. Perhaps it's better to look at the situation from bottom-up.

Over the last three years, Thailand has developed two social-political movements, red and yellow. They represent different parts of the population, and have different ideas about change. Up to now they have been fighting on the streets with buses, golf clubs, and cooking gas, holding the national economy as hostage. Parliamentary democracy was developed so that such conflict between people and ideas may be resolved under peaceful conditions. Here, it has not been allowed to perform this function — for many reasons. “Money politics” gets in the way. Some people want to believe there is no conflict. Some with a Cold War mentality and training in manipulation cannot resist playing puppet masters in the background (Panlop is a great example). Many are just scared they will lose.

This is a delicate and desperate moment. If the red and yellow movements can be translated into parliamentary politics, they could begin to drive out money politics. If they cannot, the prospects are dire. Building a Great Wall around Bangkok won't work. The Trojan Horse is already inside.

Embrace the proposal to return to the 1997 constitution with some fixes on its few well-known failings. Amnesty the 220 banned politicians. Don't try to stifle the red voice; listening is better. Punish the yellow on par with the red or others will do the job for you. Stop worrying about the Nicaraguan special ambassador. Bring back a properly elected parliament and government as soon as possible. Accept the result and let the system work. Never again give the puppet-players the support they don't deserve.

Don't use the rampage as an excuse for ignoring the rage.

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