

Temple of confusion

Monday 29 June 2009, by [Chang Noi](#) (Date first published: 29 June 2009).

The government has locked itself into a stance over the Preah Vihear temple which is highly damaging to Thailand's interests. The Democrats have bound themselves with hoops of history and hoops of politics.

First, the history. The "nationality" of the temple is complex. Treaties between Siam and France in 1904-8 set the Thai-Cambodian border in principle along the watershed of the Dangrek range. But the French who then drew the map of this border put a wiggle in the line to include the temple in Cambodia. That was a bit naughty. But at that time the area was very remote, and nobody on the Thai side really noticed or complained until the 1950s.

In 1962, the nationality of the temple was decided by the International Court. The military-dominated government of the time whipped up nationalist fervour over the issue. People were asked to donate towards the costs of the case, and invested their emotions along with their cash. The Democrats were involved as their former leader, Seni Pramoj, led the Thai legal team. The government's nationalistic campaign made a loss seem unimaginable.

The announcement of the International Court's decision is one of those days of their youth that many Thais can remember precisely today—now 47 years later. It was a national tragedy because of the over-inflated expectations. It hurt to be "bested" by a country that Thailand looked down on as small, poor, jungly, and a dependent tributary for a long part of history. Many Thais simply refused to accept the validity of the ruling. They explained it away in terms of the politics of the different nationalities represented on the bench of the International Court at the time.

In the pit of their institutional stomachs, the key bodies involved – the army, the foreign ministry, and the Democrat Party — have never really accepted the ruling and always wanted to overthrow it. Of course nobody can say that outright. But that is what truly lies behind Thailand's disruption of Cambodia's application to UNESCO. This is the hoop of history with which the Democrats have bound themselves into an absurd diplomatic position.

Then there is the hoop of politics. By fate, the Preah Vihear issue reappeared on the scene just at the moment when the "judicial war" was launched against Thaksin Shinawatra. The foreign minister, Noppadon Pattama, became one of the targets in the campaign to overthrow the pro-Thaksin government, and prevent a revival of Thaksin's power.

On 18 June 2008, Noppadon agreed to sign a joint communiqué to UNESCO about the heritage application. He claimed this was simply an act of good neighborliness. Nationalists accused Noppadon of conspiring to give away Thai territory to Cambodia. Abhisit joined the chorus. PAD took up the issue, adding the accusation that this concession to Hun Sen and Cambodia was a quid pro quo for commercial concessions, including a casino project, for Thaksin on Kong Island in Cambodia. The evidence for this allegation was a stray sighting of a square-faced man on the balcony of a Kong Island hotel. The Administrative Court agreed to issue an injunction against the communiqué, and then the Constitutional Court ruled that the communiqué which Noppadon signed had the status of a treaty which, under the constitution, should have been submitted to parliament. Noppadon resigned as foreign minister to take responsibility.

The legal decisions have created some constricting precedents. More importantly, several Democrats including Abhisit and Kasit took a leading role in whipping up public emotions over Preah Vihear in order to overthrow Thaksin. In short, they have revived the emotions of 1962. If the Democrats now decided to cooperate with Cambodia over the temple, and make any agreement with the man they painted as a co-conspirator of Thaksin, it would be political suicide. This is the hoop of politics.

The border issue at Preah Vihear is messy because the International Court in 1962 clearly assigned the temple to Cambodia (largely on grounds that Thailand had failed to object to the French map for far too long), but was totally vague about the position of the border. Cambodia naturally claimed the old French map therefore remained valid. But Thailand, with US help, drew an alternative map in which Thailand claimed an extra 4.6 square kilometers of territory. Thailand has since resolutely blocked any final definition of the border.

Recent statements on the Preah Vihear issue by the prime and foreign ministers would be side-splitting if they were not so sad. They claim the International Court assigned the temple to Cambodia but not any land, as if the monument could float in free air. They claim their dispute is with UNESCO not Cambodia, though this is patently absurd. They claim the World Heritage project will prejudice the border issue even though the disputed territory is quite clearly separate.

And they come out with the usual brave commitment not to allow the loss of even a single square inch of Thai territory. In truth, over the last few years, Thailand has lost far more than 4.6 sq kms of territory to another hostile neighbour — the sea inflated by global warming. For consistency, perhaps Abhisit and Kasit could wade out waist-deep into the flooded fields of Bangkhunthian and demand the sea withdraw from its illegal encroachment.

Taking a more reasonable line of Preah Vihear would have many advantages. It would save the lives of soldiers. It would boost tourism which is desperately in need of help. It would particularly boost tourism and business in lower Isan and might even make it possible for a Democrat politician to visit this region some time in the next century. It would greatly improve relations with a key neighbour, and might save some Thai businesses from conflagration at the next (seemingly inevitable) clash. It would do a little to halt the plunge of Thailand's international image over recent years.

The costs of the Democrats' backward-looking and crudely nationalistic stance are very high.

P.S.

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