

Red Mist

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Thailand's political crisis has gone on for so long now, with such a baffling succession of factions and street battles, that it is tempting just to shake one's head and think about something else. This would be a grave mistake. For Thailand's agony has the potential to become a headache for countries far from South-East Asia, and to bring dangerous instability to one of the world's most strategically important regions.

Thailand matters, and not only for the 800,000 British tourists who travel each year to its beaches. Since the Vietnam War, it has been a zone of stability in a tense and unreliable neighbourhood. If Thailand sinks into civil war, as many Thais fear, the consequences will be disastrous — more illegal logging, more Burmese heroin on Europe's streets, and more secure bolt holes for the kind of terrorists who inflicted such misery in Bali and Mumbai.

The current crisis illustrates a lesson that should have been learnt in Thailand long ago — the unpredictable and self-defeating consequences of military coups. Four years ago, the country was led by Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire populist who was twice re-elected. A deeply divisive figure, loved by the rural poor and loathed by the country's elite, Thaksin was forced from power by the army, after weeks of street protests by yellow-shirted protesters. The generals promised to reform the Constitution, restore democratic rule and rebuild Thailand's sense of national unity.

They kept their first promise, but disastrously failed to honour the second and third. The disorder that prompted the coup was mild compared with the anarchy that has recently overtaken central parts of Bangkok. The present Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, has qualities of a promising leader — charm, education and cosmopolitanism (he was born and educated in Britain). But from the beginning he has been undermined by a simple and devastating fact — that his party has lost every election under his leadership and achieved power only as a consequence of military force.

This is the genuine grievance driving the Red Shirt protesters who have shown remarkable forbearance despite Mr Abhisit's flouting of democratic norms. A growing number are urban, middle-class Thais motivated not by love of Thaksin, but deep disquiet about the manner in which he was ousted. This anxiety was kindled into rage when, a fortnight ago, 25 people were killed in a clumsy attempt by soldiers to disperse protesters.

More, and probably worse, bloodshed is a certainty if the Government clears the Red Shirt stronghold by force. A political settlement is the only acceptable solution, and it will require compromise by both sides. Mr Abhisit must accept the Red Shirts' proposal of new elections in three months, a wholly reasonable proposal that he rejected out of hand in a nationwide broadcast yesterday. He must acknowledge that he has become part of the problem, and step down immediately — not for exile, as the Red Shirts demand, but for an honest fight at the ballot box.

More importantly, all sides must resolve that this will mark the end of Thailand's era of mob politics. Reds and Yellows must make a covenant to respect the outcome of the election and never again to resort to illegal means of protest. Above all, the army must stay in its barracks, and reflect on the way that, in attempting to heal Thailand four years ago, it succeeded only in opening deeper, and now festering, wounds.

P.S.

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