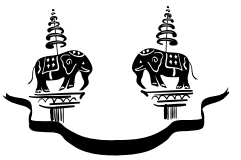

Thailand in Tatters, Democracy Delayed

by Bertil Lintner

THE CONSTITUTION court's decision on Dec. 2 to disband Thailand's ruling People's Power Party and two of its smaller coalition parties may have defused some of the tension that has prevailed in the troubled country for several months. But the crisis is not over. The anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy has agreed to end its occupation of Bangkok's two airports, but pledged to continue its campaign until the entire government has resigned. PPP leader and prime minister Somchai Wongsawat has stepped down, as he has been banned from politics for five years; however, of 36 cabinet members, 22 are not affected by the disbandment and can carry on as a caretaker government.

And if and when new elections are held, it is likely that the PPP will remerge under a different name—and win again, which is exactly what happened when the Thai Rak Thai party of Mr. Somchai's brother-in-law and former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, was dissolved in May 2007. Its members simply shifted to the PPP, a party that had been set up in 1998. The PPP swept the polls in December 2007, but irregularities during that election led to the court action that, in the end, had the party dissolved. And despite the fact that there is a warrant for the arrest of Mr. Thaksin—and that he has fled the country—he remains the main adversary of the PAD and its allies. Whatever government or party that consists of former TRT or PPP members will be considered by the PAD as a proxy for Mr. Thaksin, who the PAD says represents forces opposed to the monarchy.

Meanwhile, Thailand's international reputation is in tatters after the occupation of the airports. How could a mob armed with sticks and plastic clappers take over Suvarnabhumi, the country's new, international airport? The security guards appear just to have fled the scene when the protesters arrived—having driven past numerous tollgates and checkpoints between the city and the airport. Then, a day later, they took over Bangkok's old international airport at Don Muang, which now is used for some domestic flights—also seemingly without

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any resistance from its security personnel.

The cost of the occupation—and of the government's ineptitude—will be astronomical. According to a study by the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, the financial damage could range between 134 billion baht and 215 billion baht ($3.8 billion to $6.1 billion). Suvarnabhumi is one of the busiest airports in the region, and the 18th busiest in the world. It handles 700 flights and 100,000 passengers a day, in addition to tons of cargo. Thousands of farmers who are dependent on fresh food trading will not be able to take the losses the occupation will mean for them. But still, the PAD believes it is worth it to get rid of a government it considers a puppet of Mr. Thaksin.

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The PAD has pledged to continue their campaign until the entire PPP-led government has resigned.

In a radio broadcast on Oct. 1, 1939, the late British statesman Winston Churchill famously described Russian foreign policy as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." The same could be said of Thai politics today. The PAD has "democracy" in its name—as does a group of Mr. Thaksin's militant followers, who call themselves the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). But despite their names, neither side in the conflict could be described as democratic. The simplistic explanation is that it is a social conflict, with the PAD representing the urban elite on one side, and poor northeastern farmers, who support Mr. Thaksin and his camp, which includes the UDD and the PPP, on the other. Or genuine democracy versus the PAD's "new politics," according to which the elected parliament should be replaced by an assembly consisting of elected and appointed members. Much of the rural population are not sophisticated enough to take part in general elections, the PAD argues.

The PPP-led government, and the TRT, which ruled before Mr. Thaksin was ousted in a September 2006 coup, may have won all the general elections they participated in, but that does not mean that they adhered to democratic rules once in power. Nor is it a battle of rich against poor. According to one Bangkok-based analyst, it is a power struggle between two different political cliques and their respective followers. The regional divide is also much more important than the social differences: "This is not a class war but a regional conflict pitting Mr. Thaksin's supporters from the north and the northeast against the PAD and the affiliated Democrat Party in Bangkok, the central plains and the south—which is exactly how the election last December broke down, along regional lines."

Thailand has one of the highest Gini coefficients in Asia, the analyst points out, and that inequality is distributed across the entire country, not concentrated only in areas where Mr. Thaksin is popular. There are rich and poor in both camps, and it is often forgotten that Mr. Thaksin is a multibillionaire who primarily represents ethnic Chinese business interests, not poor farmers. But he cleverly marketed his rural development policies, which won many votes in the north and the northeast, although he failed to win Bangkok and the south, traditional strongholds of the Democrat Party.

This divide is perhaps the most serious issue facing Thailand today. According to the Bangkok-based analyst: "People from

different parts of Thailand actually come from different ethnic stock and cultures. And after years of nation-building and establishing a universal sense of Thai-ness, that is now breaking down. The protagonists are playing on and accentuating this regional divide in a risky manner."

So what about democracy? The PAD certainly does not want it, but, on the other hand, says a former equities consultant in Bangkok: "There seems to be a collective amnesia on the part of the foreign media reporting on Thailand as to just what kind of government Mr. Thaksin led." He attacked the media, tried to silence critics and, in 2003, launched a bloody and controversial "war on drugs," which claimed an estimated 2,500 lives in extrajudicial killings.

Says Shawn Crispin, Southeast Asia representative of the Committee to Protect Journalists: "Any claims Mr. Thaksin makes now to be a defender of democracy are completely undermined by his press-freedom record while in office. No Thai prime minister worked so assiduously to manipulate and control the news message as his government did, and he did this through strong-arm and hidden-hand tactics."

The most famous case was a lawsuit brought by the Shin Corporation, then owned by the Shinawatra family, against Ms. Supinya Klangnarong, a media-rights advocate, for writing in the Thai Post, a Thai-language daily, that the company had benefited because of favorable politics by the Thaksin government. The company demanded 400 million baht (then roughly $10 million) in compensation. Eventually, in early 2006, the courts threw out the lawsuits, saying the article in the Thai Post was presented in good faith and in the public's best interest.

On Feb. 13, 2007—after he had been ousted—Mr. Thaksin gave an interview to Time magazine, claiming that he had never "intervened" in Thai media activities. That statement prompted the Thai Journalists Association to write a letter to Time, saying that "Before he [Mr. Thaksin] came to power, the Thai press was considered one of the freest in the world, ranking 29th in the survey done by Freedom House in 2000. During his reign until Sept. 19 [2006] the Thai press freely fell to the depressive 107th position. . . . Thaksin constantly interfered with the Thai printed media and broadcast media using advertising revenues and stock acquisitions as key strategies. He shut down community radios, Web sites and TV programs critical of him."

The 2006-07 military appointed government set up a panel to look into the extrajudicial killings during the 2003 war on drugs—and found that over half of those killed had no links to the drug trade. Some were community organizers and others innocent villagers; the police had been instructed to meet certain quotas and killed at random. This has been documented by Human Rights Watch in its 2004 report "Not Enough Graves: The War on Drugs, HIV/AIDS, and Violation of Human Rights," and by the Asian Center for Human Rights, which released "Thailand: Smiling on Rights" in July 2005.

But the panel's findings were watered down for political reasons. According to Mr. Sunai Phasuk, a researcher for Human Rights Watch, "The original report named the politicians who egged on the gunmen. But after the PPP won the December 2007 elections, those names were omitted."

Whatever the outcome of the crisis, it is not looking good for Thai democracy. And all is not what it seems. The conflict in Thailand today has become not only dangerous but also extremely complicated, precisely a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.