



Thailand's Opposition Democrats Go Rogue

Thwarted at the ballot box, the Democrats set out to use the violent tactics of the Yellow Shirts

Written by Our Correspondent

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Thailand's opposition Democrat Party, having tasted success in stopping a blanket amnesty that would have allowed fugitive former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to return from exile, are turning to the violent tactics of the Yellow Shirt movement that brought the country to a standstill in 2007 and 2008.

A Thai banker told Asia Sentinel the opposition, led by the Democrat Party, intends to push the government to react with violence. Indeed, supporters of the Democrats today seized the government's Finance Ministry and the Budget Bureau, marching on 13 other locations, echoing the pro-royal Yellow Shirts' tactics beginning in 2008, when they seized Government House in a bid to drive a Thaksin surrogate government from power. Later they also seized airports in Bangkok, Phuket, Krabi and Hat Yai and blocked major roads and highways, bringing the country to a near standstill and driving away tourism, although business and commerce, strangely divorced from the chaos, continued to function without hindrance.

"I have no intention to resign or dissolve the House," said a defiant Yingluck Shinawatra, the prime minister and Thaksin's sister. "The cabinet can still function." Indeed, the parliament, even in the face of the continuing violence, was able to push through a US\$2.2 billion financing measure to upgrade the country's creaking infrastructure.

More than 30,000 protesters chanted "Get Out!" as they spread across the city, marching on military and naval bases, state television channels and other government offices.

“Eventually, the police have to get them out,” the banker said. “That will result in violence. And when that happens, people always blame the police. The original idea was to throw out the amnesty bill. The number of people who came out to protest was larger than they thought. The Democrats said ‘this is something we can use to throw out the government.’ They have been upgrading the protest. Now what they want to do is clean out the entire Thaksin system, the cronies, clean out the government, have the family flee from Thailand. That is the endgame.”

The attempt to bring down the Pheu Thai government now has been underway for 26 days, roiling central Bangkok. It must intensify before Dec. 5, the birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the ailing and revered monarch who will turn 87 on that date, if the protesters are to win. Tradition demands that peace reign during the king’s birthday and, sources say, at that point the demonstrations could lose momentum.

The opposition movement's opportunity came with a major miscalculation on the part of the Pheu Thai government to push the amnesty bill through the Parliament, which it did in a marathon session that culminated in it being ramrodded through at a 5:30 a.m. vote on Nov. 11. In doing so, the government not only managed to outrage middle class and royalist supporters in the capital, who detest Thaksin, but to alienate their own Red Shirt followers who have continued to demand punishment for the leaders of the May 2010 bloodshed that began when the army, ordered by Democrat Party Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and led by Army Chief Prayuth Chan-Ocha, cracked down on demonstrators. Some 90 people died on both sides, most of them protesters, and a major shopping complex in the center of Bangkok was put to the torch.

Whatever the political temperature in Bangkok, the Democrats, their royalist allies in the People’s Alliance for Democracy and the alienated middle class have been unable to oust the political coalitions put together by the former prime minister, who was kicked out of power in a royalist coup in 2006. A later move to charge him with abuse of power in procuring a land deal for his wife ended with an order for a two-year jail sentence and forfeiture of a large part of his fortune, at which point he fled the country again. Despite his conviction for corruption, he has remained the most powerful figure in the country from his exile perch in Dubai*, with successive surrogate governments convincingly trouncing the opposition in elections deemed to be free and fair, only to be removed through judicial or other actions.

Thaksin and his advisors put in place a comprehensive social scheme for the long-ignored rural poor that included scholarships, welfare housing, health plans, insurance, company incubators, a Bt-1 million investment fund for individual villages, and many more, something no politician in Bangkok had ever done. The countryside had been ignored for generations. Those programs have guaranteed the former prime minister and his succeeding surrogate governments political primacy in the form of overwhelming success at the ballot box ever since despite charges of massive corruption, cronyism, threats against the press, pay-for-play bribe demands from corporations, and much more. After Yingluck's election, the government put an ill-advised rice-pledging scheme in place in which farmers were paid 50 percent over market prices for rice, resulting in a public debt of US\$23 billion and growing, and millions

of tons of rice rotting in government warehouses which are unsellable on world markets.

The Democrats have been paralyzed by their lack of success. They lost the July, 2011 general election to the Pheu Thai party that installed Thaksin's inexperienced sister, Yingluck, as prime minister. They had been largely defeated in almost every tactic ever since. From a pure political standpoint, Pheu Thai today is in an unassailable position in the parliament, with a 252 vote majority in the 500-seat lower house plus a healthy coalition to back it up. They also have a lock in the upper house.

On Sunday, 100,000 anti-government protesters led by former Democrat Party deputy prime minister Suthep Thaugsuban took to the streets in Bangkok, demanding the ouster of the government. Some 50,000 pro-government protesters gathered in the city as well. So far, however, the police have been able to keep order until the invasion of the government buildings. In 2007 and 2008, failure to react to the seizure of government house was a major mistake. The People's Alliance for Democracy ended up holding the building for months, and decided to escalate their protest from there. The Red Shirts, an observer told Asia Sentinel, "have stayed in their cave. If they come out, we will be back at it again."

The problem for the Democrats and their Bangkok elite supporters is that even if they succeed in driving the government from power, it is likely – not as likely as before, given the conflagration started by the failed amnesty bill – but likely still that the government's popularity in rural areas would return yet another Thaksin surrogate government to power.

"The underlying problems will remain unsolved," said a western banker. "Will Thailand ever mature? Thaksin really screwed up this time, so the government probably deserves to fall. The problem is that the 'million' on the streets probably really believe the opposition rhetoric that Thailand's problems would go away if they could just get rid of Thaksin. The truth is that the other side is equally corrupt, and is devoid of any ideas about how what reforms they would implement, or how they would get the nation on track. They accomplished close to nothing in the three years that Abhisit was in office, other than start a totally unnecessary conflict with Cambodia. So we await a white knight to rescue us."