

The slow-motion revolution

Thailand has been spared its Tiananmen moment, says Eric Ellis, but Thais now know what civil war looks like

Murderous though May and the months before it were in Bangkok, this was not 1989 as it spontaneously rose in Beijing. Casualties were measured in Thai tens not Chinese thousands. Unlike the People's Liberation Army, the Royal Thai Army was quick, professional and exercised considerable restraint in its purge, just as it did when seizing power (again) in 2006, the most recent major milestone precipitating this drama.

Nor is there a vermilion-hued Thai 'Tank Man' to rally international sympathy around. Absent the defining media image of oppression these events usually highlight, the royalist establishment is winning the propaganda war, mostly because the venal billionaire scheming in the not-so-distant background of this strife presents much more a clear and valid demon to dehumanize than China's nerdy, naïve — and unarmed — student democrats ever did. And, save a few clueless foreigners such as the Australian Conor David Purcell, it's hard for the 'land-rights-for-gay-Tibetan-whales' crowd to get touchy-feely about 'freedom fighters' who are hate-spewing homophobes who vow to kill foreigners as they torch the city (but only the parts of it not commercially connected to the reds). The clinical removal of the red barricades is a battle won for Thailand's royalist *amart* — Thai for the elite — but it will require profound trust, skilful politics and behavioural adjustment to win the war or, more to the point, avoid plunging Thailand into a very nasty one.

But Tiananmen does provide useful instruction — and an opportunity — for Thailand's powerful gathering of brass, aristocrats and the monied to resolve the deep social and economic fissures that the red-shirt revolt against them reveals. The Chinese Communist Party's response to the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests was brutal and absolute; thousands massacred and survivors purged as the state machinery neatly obfuscated events and language to the point that many of today's debates over Tiananmen, often waged against the backdrop of China's world-insuring economy, are — remarkable, this — launched with discussions of where, when and whether something now reduced to 'an incident' took place at all.

But the communist sledgehammer masked a later pragmatism toward its opponents — and ultimately neutered them — that Thai leaders could do worse than at least note. Many of the student demands (wider economic reforms and deeper prosperity, person-

al liberties, a containment of corruption, even a democracy-of-sorts) were actually introduced in China in the post-Tiananmen years, and are evident today in rampant China. As for their critical demand — for actual power — Deng and his Politburo were never going to allow it. This differs little to what skilled politicians do anywhere, even in democracies: condemn opponents, purloin their better ideas, manipulate the polity and placate the constituency. The happy outcome is often prolonged rule and stability. Singapore's Lee family is an arch-exemplar of this.

While he sent the tanks in, Thailand's Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva began selling a five-point roadmap to peace. Most of its language is woolly twaddle, but it boils down to an election on 14 November, from which some of his allies are already backing away, saying the country is not ready for it. This is not good, but Abhisit, and that shady tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, knows that his government is reviled outside Bangkok, and is fragile, a big reason why Abhisit was so reluctant to acquiesce to red demands for a poll. His coalition hinges on two dozen parliamentary votes of a floor-crossing parliamentary faction headed by a former Thaksin crony. When Abhisit's Democrats, which had either badly lost or boycotted four previous elections, finally got power in December 2008, the educated rumours sweeping Thailand was that it cost about \$US23 million (\$US1 million per parliamentary vote) to deliver the best government money can buy.

And then, as always in Thailand, there's the question of the monarchy. The yellow-hued, royally-advantaged *amart* argues that it's not for questioning: the first of Abhisit's five points is to 'uphold the monarchy'. The yellows would like the world to believe that even the hardline reds honour the Buddhist throne of Bhumibol Adulyadej, Rama IX of the Chakri Dynasty. But that's simply not true, not in a country where slabs of the neglected south is ethnic Malay Muslim and has been allowed to fester to the edges of insurgency, while swathes of the backward north, now licking their Bangkok wounds, more than ever openly question the throne's usefulness, at clear personal risk.

In the latter years of his premiership, Thaksin virtually became the de facto shadow Bhumibol, mimicking the King's grand charitable gestures.

That Thailand fails as the reclusive Bhumibol ails is no coincidence. Underpinning all this is the fear of the unknown: what happens when the 83-year-old King dies. As goes the

Bangkok-based foreign media euphemism to avoid the world's most draconian *lèse majesté* laws, his notional heir Vajiralongkorn 'carries less of the personal prestige than his father', who after 61 years is the world's longest-ruling monarch. Despite popular entreaties, the forever-young Bhumibol wasn't the direct calming player in this crisis as he was in 1992, the last time the military killed Thais in Bangkok, probably because he's medically unable to. And if Bhumibol does know Thais as well as his courtiers insist, and he's physically able for conscious, rational decision-making, he'd know that his sudden public intervention would shock, his wizened appearance more alarming than soothing.

The *amart* will also struggle with Abhisit's evocation of 'civil society' in his plan. The Thai elite are imbued with generations of belief of their own self-worth, regarding their societal primacy and privilege as a celestial birthright, one endorsed by the semi-divine monarchy. The feisty reds chose the wealthy commercial and residential heart of Bangkok for their stand as a class statement, one expressed not just by the ritzy locale but in the self-description triumphantly emblazoned across red-shirted chests — *prai*, Thai for 'serf'. It wasn't ironic.

Whether Abhisit has the political moxy to pull off his plan or, more to the point, even believe in it, is quite another matter. He's accused — not unjustly — that he's a puppet of the palace and the military. 'Mark', as he was known at Eton and in his PPE years at Oxford, presents as a very clubbable chap; polite, urbane, the type of bloke you'd be delighted your precious daughter brought home and married. If there's a rod of steel embedded in his backbone, it's not evident. Indeed, Abhisit and his fellow England-born Oxonian, finance minister Korn Chatikavanij, boast pedigrees better equipped to be running England than a country aflame: Cameron-Clegg prototypes most comfortable transacting power in discreet corners of the Athenaeum Club. Of the two, Korn is the more impressive, with a hardness infused by white hot dealmaking — he ran JP Morgan in Thailand before becoming a pol. He knows what he is doing, one reason why the economy has been relatively unbruised through all this. For all the turmoil since the 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin, the biggest bruising came from the establishment's own protest, the unpunished 2008 airport shutdown when billions' worth of trade, never mind the hapless tourists that obsess the media, couldn't make it through the pickets.

It's too glib for the *amart* to say the peasantry is manipulated by a billionaire's black hand. Thaksin's influence is exploitative, but to blame him entirely betrays the Thai elite's cultural arrogance and ignores the genuine grievances of the impoverished countryside which Thaksin exploits. Such attitudes have to change for Thailand to be saved from itself, from its slow-motion revolution.

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