

Good People?

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Once the main gateway to Thailand, Bangkok's old Don Mueang airport has been little used since the city's new international hub opened in 2006. But Don Mueang's VIP terminal is these days the unlikely refuge of an elected government struggling to retain control in the face of an extraordinary challenge to its rule.

In hastily refurbished offices previously occupied by airline executives, Somchai Wongsawat, Thailand's new prime minister and brother-in-law of the exiled Thaksin Shinawatra, his predecessor but two, is trying to keep the wheels of state turning - and steer the economy through the current global financial turmoil - even as the coalition led by his People's Power party fights to survive.

The coalition, dominated by Thaksin loyalists, took power in February after winning a general election with strong support from rural voters still devoted to the former telecommunications mogul. But in a stand-off that this week entered its third month, ministers and officials have been shut out of the sprawling Government House compound - the jewel of which is an Italianate palace - by thousands of protesters who reject the legitimacy of the Thai electoral system and the PPP-led administration it has produced.

Calling themselves the People's Alliance for Democracy, the protesters, drawn mainly from Bangkok's middle class, are demanding a new political order to replace the one-person, one-vote parliamentary democracy that they say permits poorly educated rural voters repeatedly to deliver power to corrupt politicians unworthy of leading the Buddhist kingdom. This month, protesters trying to prevent Mr Som-chai's government from unveiling its programme in parliament clashed with police in some of the worst political violence Bangkok has seen since 1992.

The PAD, whose followers mainly wear royalist yellow, insists its proposed "new politics" will improve Thailand's democracy. But critics say the PAD - and its powerful behind-the-scenes military, bureaucratic and palace backers - are seeking nothing less than a rollback of hard-won democratic gains so as to restore the political influence of traditional Bangkok elites.

"It's just a power grab," says Thiti-nan Pongsudhirak, a political scientist at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University. "The PAD is the vanguard of the establishment. This is a counterrevolution to the right. It's a disguised manipulation of democratic rules to preserve and retake the prerogatives of the establishment."

The struggle, which along with the global financial crisis is taking its toll on the export-oriented Thai economy (see below), will reverberate well beyond a country long seen as a model for developing economies gradually transitioning towards democracy. Any rollback - or even the widespread embrace of the idea that democracy has failed - could embolden traditional elites elsewhere to resist or even reverse democratisation. "If the old guard can roll back the clock and reclaim lost prerogatives, it will set a bad example for other transition countries," says Mr Thitinan.

A loose grouping, the PAD has yet to define fully how it would achieve its aim of reducing political corruption. It has backed away from its first idea of a parliament in which 70 per cent of members would be appointed. Instead it is proposing a voting system with indirect elections based on occupational groups. PAD leaders "want to destroy party politics in Thailand and reduce the power of the population to vote", says Giles Ungpakorn, author of a book critical of the 2006 military coup that removed Mr Thaksin.

The tycoon, who had served more than five years as prime minister and now lives in the UK, was last week sentenced in absentia by Thailand's supreme court to two years in jail for abuse of office in a family land deal.

Chaturon Chaisang, a former deputy prime minister in Mr Thaksin's government, says the Bangkok showdown reflects the "fundamental political conflict" that has haunted Thailand since the abolition of its absolute monarchy in 1932 (see right). "It's a question of whether a tiny group of 'good people' should run the country or do people have the legitimacy to choose their own leaders."

Yet the battle is unlikely to end quickly. Supavud Saicheua, a Phatra Securities economist, predicts that the conflict could take three to four years to play out - with the economy suffering plenty of collateral damage. "The crux of the issue is the ability for political power to be shared amicably between the elites and Bangkokians on the one hand, and the more united rural based voters on the other," he wrote in a recent report.

"If one-man, one-vote cannot produce an acceptably trusted government, then many in Bangkok would support judicial activism to check and balance the government, or resort to appointed leaders."

During 18 months of military-installed government, Thailand adopted a new constitution that replaced the elected senate with a half-appointed upper chamber and strengthened judicial and bureaucratic power while diluting elected officials' authority. The strong mandate the primarily rural electorate gave to Mr Thaksin's loyalists last December prompted PAD leaders' agitation for further such curbs. "Thaksin excited such animosity that their hatred of him has evolved into hatred of the system that brought him to power," says Chris Baker, a Bangkok-based historian and analyst.

The number of PAD protesters besieging Government House is far smaller than those who joined the 2006 marches against Mr Thaksin. But they have shown a willingness to adopt confrontational tactics, such as forcing the closure of airports including Phuket for several days in September.

The PAD also appears to have strong financial support - and protection - from elite forces. Not only has the military refused to remove the protesters from Government House by force, or even to put pressure on them by restricting the flow of food and people into the compound, but serving officers have been training PAD guards on how to resist any eviction effort.

Queen Sirikit, wife of the revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej, attended the funeral of an anti-government protester killed in this month's violence, a gesture Thais interpret as a display of support for the PAD cause. The continuing political role of the military was meanwhile in evidence when Gen Anupong Paochinda, the army chief - flanked by the heads of the navy and air force - in a televised interview called on Mr Somchai to resign to show responsibility for the violence. Surayud Chulanont, the privy councillor who served as prime minister after the 2006 coup, has urged the PPP to negotiate with the PAD on its demands.

"The distinguishing features of the movement are its wealth, its explicit and its implicit use of violence, and its magical protection against threats, including police action, court orders, and legal process," Chang Noi, the pseudonym for two acute observers of the Thai political scene, wrote recently in The Nation newspaper. "These are the politics of class and privilege."

Mr Somchai, who became prime minister last month after his predecessor was removed by a court for hosting a cookery show while in office, is trying to reduce tensions, avoiding any provocation that might trigger further disruption or violence that could be used to justify a new military coup. He has suggested that he is open to negotiating with the PAD.

Yet even as Mr Somchai tries to defuse the PAD challenge, his administration faces another threat to its survival: charges of electoral fraud brought against his party at the constitutional court. The court has the power to dissolve the PPP and ban its leaders from political life, by invoking draconian laws imposed after the 2006 coup that provide for the punishment of an entire political party, and its leadership, for the misdeeds of a few.

That such laws exist at all - and are so readily invoked - highlight what a long way Thailand still has to go in building sustainable democratic institutions, even if the PAD elite fails to win further legal changes. Says Mr Ungpakorn: "Whatever the outcome, it doesn't look very good for democracy."

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