The Primary Colors of Political Dysfunction

Thailand is in the middle of a political crisis driven in large part by an entrenched rural-urban divide. But such civil unrest is nothing new for Thailand, which was once a major financial hub of Asia but has recently seen the cracks in its shaky democracy begin to shatter.

Since 2005, Thailand has suffered a series of major political disruptions. In 2006 then Prime Minister Thaksin Chinnawat was ousted by a military coup. Large street protests in 2008, 2009, and 2010 continued to produce political instability. In 2010, the demonstrations culminated in nearly 100 deaths and an estimated $1.5 billion in arson damage. Thaksin’s sister, Yingluck Chinnawat, assumed power after the 2011 general election. Though ostensibly Thailand’s head of state, she is widely believed to be a mere figurehead, with her brother Thaksin playing a major role in the government from Dubai, host of his self-imposed exile.

A legislative bill that floated in late 2013 sought to give Thaksin and many of his compatriots blanket criminal immunity led to another round of massive protests. Since then, Thailand has been gripped by dueling protests between regime supporters and proponents of reform. The so-called yellow-shirts seeking reform are representatives of The People’s Alliance for Democracy. They have solidified support among the middle-class and have since expanded their reach to labor unions and civil servants in the urban centers. Ironically camped out at the foot of the Democracy Monument, the yellow-shirts want to scrap the entire government and appoint an unelected “people’s council” to write a new system. When asked who would be appointed, the group’s leader merely says “good people.”

The so-called red-shirts are Thaksin supporters who come mostly from rural regions of Thailand and from the poverty stricken areas of Bangkok. Under the Thaksin regime, those groups received the bulk of state largesse. Thaksin improved the standard of living and emboldened a population that never dared to question the country’s elites -- the military, the monarchy, or the ever-growing multinational corporations entrenched in the capital. Though beloved by the rural poor, Thaksin is a billionaire whose wealth is thought to have derived more from corruption than business acumen. Yet he managed to divert more resources to the north from Bangkok where the government invests more than two-thirds of national resources. And for that, it appears, Thaksin has bought the north’s unyielding support.

Bangkok is nothing if not a city of contrasts. And that contrast is emblematic of the deeper rift in Thailand between the north and the south, between struggling farmers and free-market capitalists, between those fighting perceived corruption and such corruption’s benefactors.
Rubber trees line Khao Sok National Park in southern Thailand’s Surat Thani province.

Traditional style rooftops at the Panviman Resort overlooking a valley in the rugged Chiang Mai Province.

A baby elephant and his mahout, or trainer, in the Baan Chang elephant sanctuary near Chiang Mai in the northwest part of Thailand. Elephants are revered in Thai culture.
Yaowarat Road, the heart of Bangkok’s Chinatown. The neighborhood developed around Sam Pheng Market, but now covers a large area in southwest Bangkok near the banks of the Chao Phraya River.

Dusk view from the top of the Banyan Tree Hotel. The hotel is a stone’s throw from Lumphini Park, home to the famous Muay Thai stadium.

Sunset view of Bangkok’s financial district, one of the largest in South East Asia.