



## **Bangkok Protests: Where is the PAD going with this?**

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By physically shutting down Suvarnabhumi airport, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) has upped the stakes in Thailand's ongoing political polarisation. It has demonstrated the extent to which it will resort to mob violence to achieve its aims.

The PAD is bent on creating the conditions of ungovernability and then to demand the ouster of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat on grounds that Thailand is ungovernable. Its tactics have warped into a blatant street campaign of intimidation and fear, of coercion and force.

That the PAD has come this far in its thuggish ways is attributable to its powerful backing, without which its relative impunity in the face of flagrant violations of the law can hardly be explained.

The PAD's latest antic at Suvarnabhumi airport will likely narrow its support base, especially in Bangkok as the capital reels from the longer-term impact of the airport closure to business confidence, but its remaining columns will still be deep in their resolve to get their way.

What the PAD wants has not changed. After an unsuccessful bid under the guise of the so-called "new politics," it first demanded the ouster of former prime minister Samak Sundaravej earlier this year and it is now after Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat.

To reach its endgame, the PAD has to clear the slate of government, led by the People Power Party (PPP). As a result, the PAD has bayed for blood, openly inviting a military coup in order to bring up an interim arrangement. This would allow the PAD to either rewrite the current constitution or come up with an entirely new charter. Its ultimate objective is to fashion the rules of the democratic game to guarantee elite representation in the elected parliament through partial appointments.

Its logic is simple. A one-man, one-vote democratic system will indefinitely return the same parliamentary faces with a similar populist policy agenda that has appealed to the vast majority of the electorate in the Northeast and North, who voted for deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his disbanded Thai Rak Thai Party for six years and for Mr Samak and Mr Somchai and PPP more recently.

Unsurprisingly, the PAD has openly shown disdain for these rural constituencies as faceless and gullible vote-sellers

who should not be counted on equal terms with the PAD's urban minority in Thailand's electorate.

But the PAD faces a daunting uphill task in resetting the political environment and realising its anti-democratic agenda. Somehow it would have to dislodge the PPP and perhaps its successor Puea Thai party from elected power, and to keep them out.

The PAD would then have to force an interim period during which its cadres would assert themselves in charter alterations. In an age when democratic rule is an emerging norm of the international community, when information is more widely accessible due to new technologies, any anti-democratic movement will be hard-pressed to get away with elite dominance.

Yet the PAD has shown that it is willing to go all the way. It is willing to hold Thailand captive by disrupting airport operations, and to even cause an international embarrassment as Thailand gears up for its chairmanship of the Asean and East Asia summits in Chiang Mai next month.

Only its backers can pull the plug on the PAD but they may now be too insecure and paranoid to go back.

The longer this crisis goes on, the more exposed and compromised the PAD's backers have become. And the PAD is continually dragging them down to the cut-and-thrust of Thai politics to their own detriment.

While the stakes are high, with wide and deep longer-term damages, it is not too late for the PAD's backers to rein in this rabid and reckless movement or to pull its plug altogether.

The ultimate danger for the PAD on the one hand and for Thailand on the other is not from the government, army or police, but from the red shirts banded under the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship.

Capable of a corresponding sort of mob violence, these UDD red shirts have decidedly displayed patience, order, and restraint in their recent mass rallies, in deliberate contrast to the PAD's open incitement of violence and gross distortions of information. Widespread civil strife would be the outcome in the event the UDD turns on the PAD in full force.

A House dissolution, as proposed by army chief General Anupong Paojinda, is a release valve from such a UDD-PAD clash. Although it would not resolve Thailand's urban-rural structural crisis in the long term, a new slate through new elections would buy time for the various protagonists to come to their senses and for Thai voters to have a say after a year of turmoil and volatility.

It is an option which Prime Minister Somchai should not dismiss out of hand for self-righteous reasons, especially if he is confident of his party's – and successor party's – winning

policy platform. The same goes for the People's Alliance for Democracy – if it still claims to stand for the Thai people.

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