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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Thai Balance of Power: Pi Ta Khon, Spirit Houses, and Political Nerve**

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*The Abhisit government continues to hold sway despite the haunting by Thaksin's Red Shirts. Both camps are wrestling for power although Abhisit appears to hold the upper hand. Will the masses be able to tilt this delicate balance of power?*

THE THAI GHOST FESTIVAL or Pi Ta Khon is rooted in Isan culture but celebrated throughout Thailand before and after the Songkran. Pi Ta Khon participants wear red masks and play loud music that can wake the dead.

However, the Red Shirts want to resurrect Thaksin Shinawatra and eagerly await his return. Since he was deposed by a bloodless coup in 2006, Thaksin has had his foreign assets frozen, become divorced, convicted for graft, and had his money divided in two unequal halves. He has also been named “an honorary citizen” of Cambodia, bought and sold an English football club, and remains in self-imposed exile in Dubai. Why does Thaksin remain a critical player in the political balance of power, and why do hundreds of thousands willingly protest on his behalf?

### **Moral authority**

Protesting in Thailand is a means of showing dissatisfaction. The people never assemble to show love, except for their king. They rally against prime ministers appointed by fiat. While the current prime minister lacks moral authority, his majesty, the king, is full of it. Thai people adore their king despite the presence of punitive *lèse majesté* laws. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is supported by the army, the Bangkok economic elite, and the Privy Council. Therefore, the longer Abhisit retains power, the weaker Thaksin becomes.

Several factors keep Thaksin airborne. First, Abhisit will be deposed if the Thai economy comes to a halt for more than a month. Second, the military may stage another coup if Abhisit loses political nerve. Thirdly, if the king withdraws his support for the government, there will be radical political change.

The military has a mind of its own. Generals come and go like last year's rice harvest. Once the generals get wind of royal disaffection, they will take flight. One colonel I interviewed recently said that it is better not to be a general until the political situation is clear.

### **Rural Power Bases**

What can Abhisit do to remain in power? War with Cambodia will incur the wrath of the Vietnamese, the Chinese and of course, the redoubtable rhetoric of ASEAN. War with Myanmar will make Thaksin a hero. A full scale military operation in Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani will worsen the insurgency. Abhisit would do well to retain the support of the king, the army and the economic elite.

However, Thaksin has massive support in the rural areas. The peasants have not forgotten his genuine help as prime minister. Sunday's planned protest organised by Jatuporn Promphan comes with a warning to Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Suthep Thuagsuban. The DPM has to "find a new home" if the Internal Security Act is invoked against the rural masses.

### **Balance of Power**

Civil disobedience by Thaksin's ghost warriors will not disappear overnight. If Abhisit is not careful, the balance of political power will shift in favour of Thaksin. Abhisit has one foot in the grave and the other on a slippery Thai mango skin. One wrong move will plunge the Oxford-educated leader into the cemetery of political history. History has not been kind to Thai prime ministers who ignore the writing on the wall.

Internal squabbles among Abhisit's army generals are an indication of internal dissent. In late January 2010, Major General Khattiya Sawasdipol, popularly known as Seh Daeng, was suspended and charged for illegal possession of weapons in an alleged plan to attack Army HQ. An armoury of an Engineer Brigade was looted. Over 3,000 rounds of ammunition and small arms were stolen from an area under the command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army Region. Bombings occur across Bangkok itself. When I lived near the government quarter of the city last year, a bomb explosion ripped off the arm of an army staff sergeant in a bloody mess just outside my house.

In a city of 11 million people, the government estimates that 100,000 people will protest soon. The protest leaders predict over 500,000 will change the course of Thai politics. Angry rice farmers will protest because of the falling rice prices. An Ayutthaya Farmers' Association representative Kwanchai Mahachuenjai says that they will have their own protests. There are also close to 20,000 unhappy Buddhist monks who are known to have a multiplier effect on public protests in this predominantly Buddhist nation.

### **Spirit Houses**

Pi Ta Kon participants often wear red to strike fear in their enemies. If Abhisit cannot overcome the Red Shirt onslaught, he will lose political power, and there will be another military coup. Thaksin will only return to the country if the army openly supports him and the relatively neutral courts allow him a fair trial. The other possibility is that the security forces will adequately manage the mass protests but not without incident.

Thai people construct ornate "spirit houses" in their front yards where ghosts can live. This is to prevent spirits from bothering their residents. The problem today is that the owners of Thailand have neglected their spirit houses. And the ghosts have nowhere to live. Much depends on whether Abhisit is superstitious and if his lieutenants are afraid of ghosts. The outcome of the protests will, in the end, be a test of political nerve.

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