

That sinking feeling in Bangkok

Behind the headlines by **Bunn Nagara** 

Former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra is still at the centre of a crisis, for all the wrong reasons.

THE latest political upheaval in Thailand, or more specifically Bangkok, had been predicted for close to a year already.

But it had been expected in August this year, when a controversial “amnesty Bill” was due to be debated in Parliament and possibly passed.

If approved and made into law, it could have permitted the “safe” return of self-exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra – who jumped bail to avoid a prison sentence for corruption – and wipe the slate clean by exonerating him from all charges.



A Thai opposition protester blows a whistle during a rally against the controversial political amnesty Bill, in Bangkok's financial district last week. — AFP

The very thought of that would have driven royalist, anti-Thaksin yellow-shirted protesters onto the streets again. Their massive demonstrations in previous years had paralysed parts of Bangkok.

Counter-demonstrations by pro-Thaksin, red-shirted protesters could also have been mobilised. Their massive demonstrations had shut down major Bangkok thoroughfares and led to deadly violence.

But August came and went without incident. To the uninitiated, Thailand was at peace with itself again.

Yet seasoned observers, like virtually all Bangkokians, knew that more trouble was only a matter of time.

Abroad, Thaksin was still active, ambitious and itching to return – and to overturn his conviction. He also had enough funds for a luxury lifestyle and several political schemes.

At home, his sister Yingluck Shinawatra as Prime Minister heads a government packed with his loyalists. To many Thais, Thaksin is the de facto leader of a nominee government.

Given his extraordinary drive for self-fulfilment, it did not take Thaksin long to press home the point. The amnesty Bill was not annulled, just postponed for three months.

To critics, the Bill was rushed through Parliament early this month in a most unseemly manner. Using its parliamentary majority to advantage, Pheu Thai brokered haggling in Parliament until 4am on Nov 1.

Next stop for the Bill was the Senate, where a rougher passage had been expected. But Thaksin's camp had apparently seen to that contingency too.

A notion was floated that the Bill would offer amnesty only to those charged with violent street demonstrations. It would not provide amnesty for those convicted of corruption, like Thaksin. That created a lull in widespread reservations, but not for long. Self-interest would intrude yet again, brusquely and conspicuously.

Thaksin himself spoke openly in interviews in support of an expanded amnesty Bill that would exempt people like him from corruption convictions. Suddenly, the matter for tabling was an expanded Bill for a "blanket amnesty".

Sure enough, some of Bangkok's streets began to fill with angry protesters again. Throughout the week, thousands of office workers, students, petty traders, service providers and others poured onto the streets to march to express their disgust.

Furthermore, it was no longer a simple "Yellow Shirts versus Red Shirts" affair either. By now that familiar dualism seemed so restrictive, so yesteryear.

From the start, the Bill divided Red Shirts by also exempting some anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts from protest charges. Also eligible for amnesty was Thaksin's nemesis, former Democrat prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, accused of causing unnecessary deaths among protesters in a 2010 government crackdown.

Opponents of the Bill also came from a broader cross-section of a public, fed-up with corruption in general, than previous anti-Thaksin rallies. Either critics of the government had become more varied and sophisticated, or their concern over core issues like corruption exceeded their sense of colour-coded identity.

The rift between Pheu Thai and some Red Shirt factions has since plunged to an all-time low. Thaksin and his loyalists now have to contend with these elements in their ranks besides conventional foes like Democrats and Yellow Shirts.

The extended parliamentary session on Nov 1 had been a watershed moment for the Bill. The overpowering sense of opportunism accompanying the prospective blanket amnesty drove a wedge between ordinary Red Shirts, who are typically petty bourgeoisie, and privileged government leaders as in the Pheu Thai elite.

On balance, those opposing the Bill were more vocal, more visible and larger in number than those endorsing it. Thaksin, Yingluck, their Pheu Thai party and the government seemed to have painted themselves into a corner with steadily diminishing room for manoeuvre.

By mid-week, the anti-Bill camp had become so emboldened as to present the government with an ultimatum: withdraw the Bill by Monday (tomorrow), or face the wrath of the people. There was a whole weekend for officials to huddle and reach some definable position. There would even be time to solicit advice, recommendations and instructions from Thaksin.

Yingluck wavered, intimating that the Bill was not a done deal. In a bid to placate critics, she also pledged not to violate the people's wishes. By Friday she announced that the contentious Bill had been withdrawn. All Bills related to amnesty, she said, had been pulled from the legislature.

Would Thaksin have persisted in pushing the Bill through the Senate had he been the prime minister instead? Such speculation now seems academic, as he is left to mope the problems of governing by remote control.

Realists expect this to be a temporary setback for Thaksin, not a decisive defeat. He still harbours thought of returning to Thailand a free man and able to enjoy all his accumulated wealth from various controversial deals.

But for him and Yingluck, there is now another problem – the credibility of her government and the Pheu Thai party has suffered as a result. This seems to be a depressing moment in a long-running soap opera, where few Thais empathise with the self-inflicted victims.

Some protesters who began by demonstrating against the Bill are now expanding their campaign to reject Yingluck's government as well. Meanwhile, some Red Shirts oppose the Bill because they want Thaksin to return with dignity, not on the basis of a sordid and pathetic piece of legislation.

Surely there are important lessons to be learned here, just like any other bitter educational experience? Lessons abound, but whether the Pheu Thai elite led by Thaksin would deign to learn them is another matter.

First, the political sentiments and sympathies of the Thai populace cannot be determined simply by coloured categories. Their diversity and group identities have evolved as never before.

Second, the Red Shirts are not synonymous with Pheu Thai and may become even less synonymous with the party. Similarly, Yellow Shirts, Democrats and the People's Alliance for Democracy were never really synonymous either.

Third, Thaksin and his cohorts can no longer count on the Red Shirts for automatic electoral support. Red Shirt leader Nattawut Saikuar, the Deputy Commerce Minister, declared as much at a Red Shirt Rally during the week to much applause from supporters.

As the government meltdown proceeds at its core, Yingluck is liable to call a snap election for a clearer sense of renewal. Whatever happens after that, all bets are off with what her government has done or tried to do.

That includes Malaysia-brokered peace talks over Thailand's southernmost provinces, widely seen as a means to assist Thaksin in regaining lost credibility and a return to Bangkok. Prospects of its success had cooled even before the November 1 watershed.

Since Bangkok's fortunes remain pivotal for the south as ever, two perspectives stay prominent.

Critics allege that the talks have been going nowhere quickly, while cynics insist the talks have quickly been going nowhere.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.