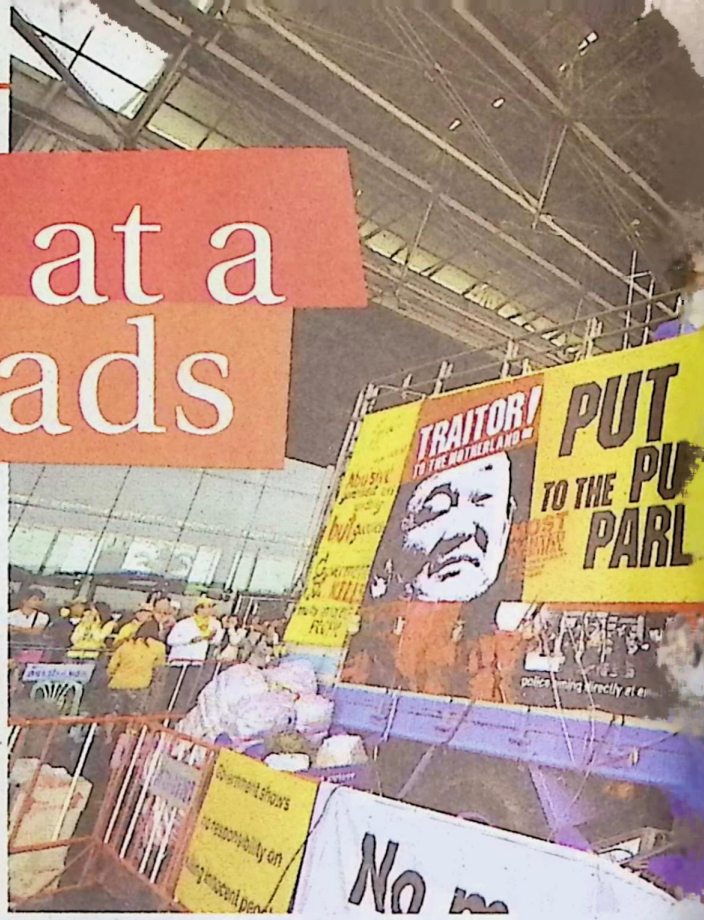
Thailand at a Crossroads



HO KWON PING

I'm stuck here in Bangkok with both city airports closed for over two days. This is a deja vu moment. I was stuck in Phuket when that airport closed a few months ago due to demonstrators, and it took me 13 hours to return to Singapore--a three-hour drive to the port of Surat Thani, a ferry ride to Koh Samui, then a flight to Bangkok and then Singapore. In May, I was trapped for over 12 hours inside an aircraft at Chengdu airport when the earthquake hit Sichuan province.

As a veteran of airport closures I'm rather sanguine about eventually getting out of Bangkok, and several contingency plans are already in play. But I am less sanguine about the present political crisis, and I suspect the people of Thailand will be trapped much longer in an intractable deadlock, which is slowly spiralling into class conflict.

As is always the case with Thai culture, what you see on the surface is not necessarily the reality. Behind the gentle wais, or traditional Thai greeting, and friendly smiles have always lurked deep-rooted social contradictions. A dynamic, burgeoning urban middle class looks down on a huge, poor rural class, which has been awakened by Thaksin Shinawatra's Peronist-style populism.

One of Asia's most vibrant intelligentsia and unfettered media co-exists with probably the world's most conservative and powerful monarchy. A fractious, corrupted political elite manipulating elections for its own gains co-exists with a military elite which has staged more coups than elections.

There is a game going on with the 'last stand' of the anti-Thaksin forces holed up in the airport. The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)--once hugely popular with the rabidly anti-Thaksin urban class--has steadily lost support with its increasingly illegal and thuggish tactics which have badly affected the economy. The PAD wants to force the hand of the players--the military to launch a coup, or the government to resign.

The fact that the well-financed and organised PAD--a shadowy, loose group of improbable allies ranging from a maverick, austerely Buddhist and celibate army general to an opportunistic media baron once closely allied with Thaksin--is even able to occupy airports and government offices with impunity is solely due to its patronage by what Thais euphemistically call "the highest powers".

The agenda of the PAD, however, is so audaciously anachronistic that one can only surmise which other 21st century anachronism will benefit from the PAD's demands: that universal suffrage via an elected parliament be replaced by appointed representatives of interest groups.

This new distrust of universal suffrage--one person, one vote--is because the rural class, once reverent of only the monarchy, has responded to Thaksin's populism with an almost frightening loyalty.

When Thaksin's party, Thai Rak Thai, was banned, the rural class resoundingly voted in a new proxy party. If elections were held again with the same rules, Thaksin's proxies will probably win again--such is his popularity in the villages.

The issue of the rural class' loyalty has fundamentally changed Thai politics, which had always been an almost ritualistic charade of revolving-door politics between the military and the politicians.

Politicians would play their games, buy their votes and endlessly form ineffectual coalitions; at some point the military would step in to stage a coup with such regularity that people would hardly blink an eye.

I remember as a schoolboy in Bangkok going to school on various coup days, with the only difference being the solitary World War II vintage tank sitting on some street corner to signal that a coup was in effect.