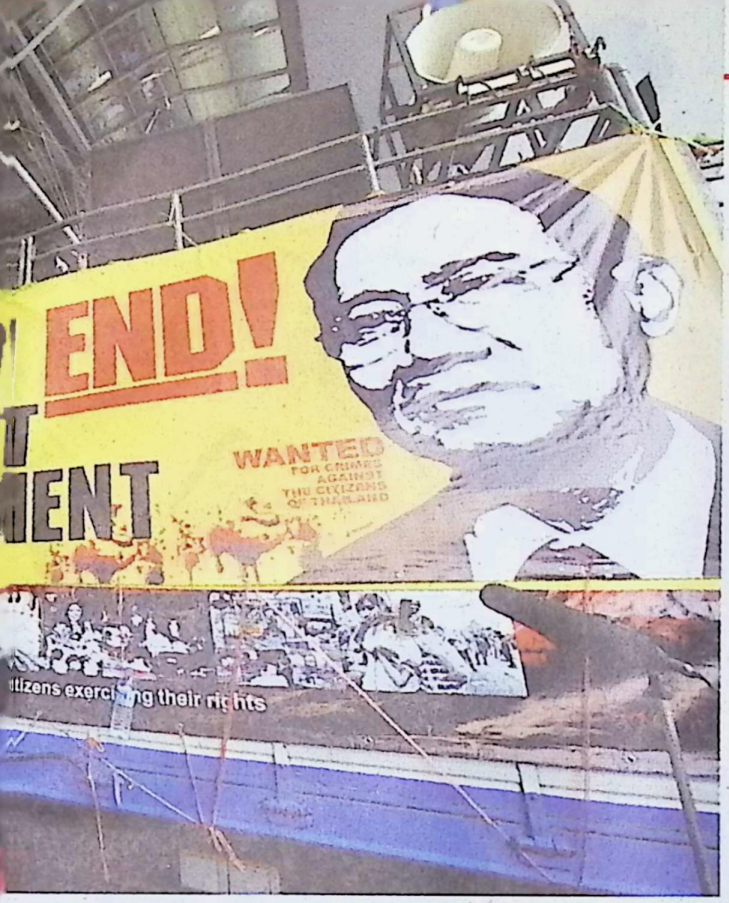
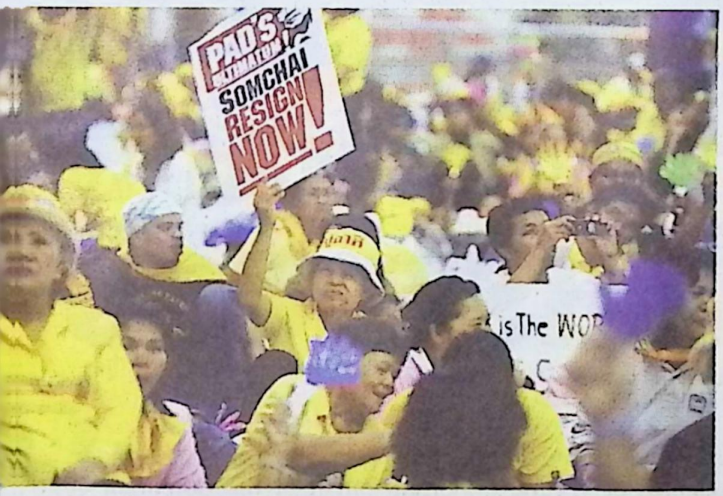




Thousands of passengers have been stranded in Thailand.

But the unspoken rule was that these games would be played largely in Bangkok, and the rest of the country would be stable in its steadfast allegiance to only the monarchy.

Therefore, one fundamental change is the awakening of the rural class to Latin American-style populism, and the emergence of Thailand's first Juan Peron.

This is a fundamental threat to the monarchic institutions, which gradually and carefully grew from powerlessness since the 1932 abolition of absolute monarchy to the pre-eminent role in Thai culture and society today.

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 second fundamental change is the antipathy of the Thai urban class to military coups. Once a ho-hum event, coups are now not acceptable to the younger middle class, which clearly prefers even a corrupted and imperfect parliamentary democracy to the effective authoritarianism of martial law. The military also knows that in the complex, modern Thailand of today, it cannot rule without the consent of the Bangkok urban class.

And that is the dilemma unfolding today. The military and the PAD both swear allegiance to the forces, which are threatened by Thaksin's populism, and therefore the military will not take action against the demonstrators, regardless of the illegality of their actions. But it also does not want to declare a coup.

The elected government is pushing the military to take action against the PAD. The military is asking the government to resign and call new elections, which is an odd thing for an arm of a government to do. All the while, the emboldened PAD is fast becoming reminiscent of the proto-fascists in Germany and Italy before World War II.

How will all this play out? Thoughtful Thais who do not take sides are very worried. On the one hand, the genie of Peronist populism, let out of the bottle by Thaksin, can quite possibly lead a once-stable Thai society rooted in reverence for the monarchy down the road to Latin American-style politics--especially since the monarchy itself is facing an impending succession transition.

On the other hand, the solutions provided by the anti-Thaksin forces--rule by the military, or an effectively appointed parliament--are seen by many younger, modernised Thais as a throwback to the past, and anathema to their vision of a democratic Thailand.

For many decades, Thailand was one of South-east Asia's most stable and cohesive societies. There was always a final arbiter, a source of moral authority which stood high above any politics and which could intervene at pivotal times of peril.

If that authority ever became politicised and a player in the game, rather than a referee, the fundamental nature of Thai society would change irrevocably. Whether this might occur is the biggest question my thoughtful Thai friends are asking themselves today, even as the rest of the game is played out on the streets and in the airports of the country.

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