# A Rude Homecoming

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It's funny how even a city as glamorous as Bangkok can lose quite a bit of its undeniable charm when you are told that you are indefinitely stuck there and cannot go home. That's the bizarre thing about humans, no matter how much fun they are having, at some point they just have to go back to where they belong. It is called getting back to reality.

I had gone to Bangkok in mid November for a relative's treatment and was all set to return on November 28 when I was hit by the strangest news. Thousands of yellow T shirted anti-government protestors had occupied Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport and were agitating against the government that they considered corrupt to step down. At first we were assured by local people that this was a temporary situation and we relaxed. *Surely they couldn't just take over the airport.*

But the uneasy feeling gave way to full scale panic as the protestors refused to budge and flights were suspended indefinitely, leaving thousands of foreigners stranded. It was the oddest feeling to be all packed and ready, to wake up each day, hoping against hope that the airport would be open, only to be horribly disappointed as the recorded message of the airport call centre announced that all flights were cancelled until further notice.

We were hooked onto BBC and CNN news but then the horrendous Mumbai terrorist attacks took place, completely predominating all news. Whatever little information we could gather from TV, the newspapers and local gossip, did little to make us feel hopeful. The airport siege was the culmination of months of conflict between the pro and anti government groups and one that was getting more and more difficult to resolve.

An elderly shopkeeper looked visibly stunned when I asked him if he liked Thaksin, the former prime minister who had been arrested and charged with wide scale corruption and whose brother-in-law had taken over from him. He explained that the country was divided almost 50-50 into the 'yellow party' (opposition) and 'red party' (pro-government). Now *that* I could totally relate to.

What bewildered me, however, were the rather jumbled up ideologies that had escalated the conflict. The yellow gang represented Thailand's elite and middleclass and they wanted to bring down the pro-Thaksin government that enjoyed the support of the farmers and blue-collar workers. For someone used to the traditional story of the suffering masses trying to fight against oppressive regimes backed by the rich, a government that the poor liked and the middle class hated and wanted to topple, seemed a little topsy-turvy. So was this a revolution of the elite against the oppression of the pro-poor? Well, judging from the number of huge, flashy shopping malls that sported the latest in designer goods representing the cult of consumerism, perhaps it wasn't such a far-fetched theme.

Newspaper articles stated that the army, the elite and middle class were all anti-Thaksin. No wonder those yellow T shirted people could get away with taking two airports hostage for one whole week without little resistance. Would it have been so easy, I wondered, if a few thousand peasants had come marching in and taken over the two most important airports of the country, paralysing international air traffic for days on end?

When a High Court verdict declared that the existing government had lost its legitimacy to govern, it seemed as if the political drama was about to come to an end, and so our agonising wait. But the yellow party members, though jubilant and apparently victorious, were still at the airports and, to make matters worse, furious pro-government red party had come to the airport to protest the court's decision.

The King's birthday on December 5, gave a glimmer of hope and sure enough by December 4, the airport was coming back to life. The Thai government, in an attempt to appease the grumpy, stranded tourists (who are the lifeblood of the thriving Thai tourist industry) arranged for accommodation and meal coupons at the numerous hotels all over the city. That was no small feat and with characteristic Thai efficiency and graciousness, the stranded were allotted hotel rooms. Many, however, were desperate to get out any way they could and hundreds of tourists drove off to a small naval airport where planes took them to another Thai city before their long-winded journey home.

For those of us who were still stuck, it was especially excruciating when Thai airways informed us that although the airport was up and running, it would be difficult to get a confirmed flight anytime soon.

Finally after hysterical outbursts and persistent calling, I managed to get two seats for my daughter and myself on a flight on December 5. We were stunned at how shiny and new the airport looked with not even the slightest hint that anything untoward had happened only a few hours ago. The only indication of the tremendous chaos that had ensued after the occupation were the long tables laden with free snacks and drinks and the