

UPI Outside View: Commentator

A Buddhist Tahrir Square?

By STANLEY A. WEISS

BANGKOK (UPI) – Before it became the focus of ongoing mortar exchange between Thailand and Cambodia, the ancient Preah Vihear Temple was most infamous for its role in the “Cambodian push-back.”

In June 1979, Thailand, frustrated at being overrun by Cambodians escaping from Pol Pot's death squads, announced it would expel a large number of refugees. The U.S., French, and Australian governments picked 1,200 refugees from among the thousands for resettlement. The remaining Cambodians were loaded onto buses and sent away.

Only later did the world learn that they were taken to Preah Vihear – known as Phra Viharn to Thais – a 1,000-year-old temple atop a 2,000-foot cliff overlooking the Cambodian plains. There, men, women, and children were pushed down the steep escarpment. The United Nations estimated that 3,000 Cambodians had been killed and 7,000 were unaccounted for.

Today, Preah Vihear or Phra Viharn is claimed by both sides along a disputed border. Since artillery fire between Thai and Cambodian forces flared in February – the latest round of a century-long dispute over ownership of the temple – two dozen people have been killed, scores have been injured and nearly 100,000 have been displaced.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which fears the conflict may lead to regional instability and threaten ASEAN's goal of economic integration by 2015, has had its offer to moderate the dispute rejected – sparking fears of a wider war.

But in Bangkok, a different question is being asked: Does the real threat to regional stability in Southeast Asia come from outside Thailand's border or inside it?

After three years of increasing political bitterness, Thailand is headed to the polls this summer for its first national election in five years. In the run-up to the July 3 election, one mayor was killed in March and two local politicians were seriously injured. Last week, a member of Parliament from Thailand's main opposition party, the Puea Thai Party, was shot.

Little wonder the International Crisis Group warned last month that “as the stakes are high, the forthcoming election could be violent.”

Many are wondering if this is the year, as Thai scholar Nicholas Farrelly has written, when “the battle for political power is forced out of the shadows and into public consciousness,” possibly with a Cairo-like uprising.

As with most things in Thailand, the answer is less black and white and more red and yellow. For the past six years, the color-coded politics of this Asian nation have been divided between the “Red Shirts” – largely supporters of poor, rural and urban working class Thais who make up about 70 percent of the population – and the “Yellow Shirts,” defenders of establishment Thailand, the influential business families, the military and the monarchy.

The lightning rod at the center is former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whose populist programs pleased the poor but, when he took on the establishment, the establishment fought back.

In 2006, street protests by the Yellow Shirts spurred a military coup that ousted Thaksin; in 2008, their occupation of Government

House and Bangkok's airports triggered the collapse of two Thaksin-aligned governments.

When the London-born and Oxford-educated Abhisit Vejjajiva was appointed prime minister – after Yellow Shirt-leaning judges banned Thaksin's “People Power Party” in a controversial court ruling – the Red Shirts rebelled.

Protests spilled onto Bangkok streets last year, as a violent military crackdown on Red Shirt demonstrators killed 91 people and wounded nearly 1,900.

Fearing more of the same this year, last week, Thailand's powerful military head, Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, dispatched nearly 160 hard-line colonels and lieutenant colonels to take over the command in Thailand's northern provinces, which are Red Shirt strongholds.

And since Abhisit's ruling Democratic Party reportedly didn't give the order to open fire on Cambodia, many believe Thailand's generals are keeping the border dispute in the headlines as a means to portray the military as the saviors of Thailand.

Some even wonder if the military is preparing to stage another coup – there have been 18 coups since 1932 – although as Sulak Sivaraksa, a social activist, said to me: “The military doesn't want a coup anymore. The last coup was the worst they ever had and they learned.”

Meanwhile, Thaksin, who is banned from politics in Thailand on corruption charges and lives in exile in Dubai, continues to play a central role. He still addresses supporters by video-link and appears on his party's billboards (one slogan reads: “Thaksin thinks, Puea Thai does”). Just last week, the Red Shirts nominated a candidate well-known to Thaksin to lead the party into the election: his younger sister, Yingluck Shinawatra, a businesswoman who has little political experience and is seen as a stand-in for him.

While Abhisit sees the election as a chance for Thailand to “wipe the slate clean,” Thaksin supporters see it as the final chance to right the wrongs of the 2006 coup. A decade after Thaksin won over voters by offering cheap healthcare and microloans to the poor, Abhisit is taking a page from the same book, offering to guarantee crop prices, offer free education and give cash handouts to the elderly poor.

Will it be enough? Polls indicate the race to be tight, with no party expected to win an overall majority, meaning a coalition is the most likely outcome. In 2008, the military reportedly twisted the arms of small parties to join with the Abhisit-led Democrats.

If Red Shirts defeat Yellow Shirts this time – as they have in the past four elections – will they be allowed to rule unchallenged? Or will the army get involved again?

As one long-time official here tells me: “The military establishment will not let Thaksin supporters come back to power. They are afraid of scenes like those in Egypt and Libya.”

Come July, the violence and democratic unrest we've seen in the Middle East might make the leap to Southeast Asia. If it happens, Thais might look back fondly on the days when the only fireworks witnessed in this region came in the skies around a 1,000-year-old temple populated by Buddhist monks wearing traditional orange robes – incidentally, the color you get when you mix red and yellow.