

Understanding the Bangkok protests

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The series of anti-government protests in Bangkok since the end of 2013 is the longest in Thailand.

The current protests began in November 2013 when Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government attempted to pass an amnesty bill to dismiss almost all of the post-coup political charges, including those against her brother, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Unfolding the Thai political crisis is a complicated task. To shed some light, I talked to the former director of National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, Supattra Limpabandhu, during my recent visit to Bangkok.

Unlike the protests in 2010, which saw most of the Red supporters turning out in force, the protest this time is led by Suthep Thaugsuban, a former deputy prime minister, from the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), supported by the private sector, some government officers and the Democrat Party.

Curious about their tagline, "Reform before Elections", I asked her view about the strategy of election boycott.

Election boycott is not new in Thailand, as the Democrats have in the past boycotted elections in 1952 and 2006.

"I think it is about time. The Thai politics is like a business system. We see that many politicians, they get rich very quick... So we think that it is about time to do something. I



think most of the Thai people are aware about this but they have been silent for sometime.

"Then suddenly the government proposed to pass an amnesty bill and there is a leader [Suthep] emerged. He and his group resigned from public office and started to protest against the government. But some Thai people are hesitant, because Suthep is a politician himself. Moreover, in the past, he has been accused of corruption charges," said Supattra.

Thailand's current political turmoil is nothing new. Since 1932, Thailand has experienced 18 coups. However, the worrying trend now is the increasing polarization among the Thai people.

Basically, the media paint the situation as Red vs. Yellow. However, according to Supattra, in Bangkok itself, the Red population is relatively small. Most of the "Bangkokians" are mostly PDRC supporters, who also include students and members of the universities.

Nevertheless, the reality is that the unaligned and neutral Thai people form the majority, she said.

Supattra is uncertain of the fate of her country. There are many uncertain scenarios being mapped out but no one knows how this 'battle' would end.

Military coups are not new in Thailand, the most recent one in 2006 which finally led to the ouster of Thaksin. In the current atmosphere, Supattra said the Thais are against such coup.

I must say it is very intriguing to observe how the protestors in Pathumwan intersection and Asok train station, for

Anti-government protesters camp at Pathumwan train station.

example, have made these places their homes for months.

Famous tourist spots including Siam Square, MBK Centre and Silom have turned into “tent cities” as part of the protestors’ attempt to shut down the capital. Plenty of merchandise such as t-shirts, carry the phrase, “Shutdown Bangkok, Restart Thailand”.

So I asked Supattra, why are the protestors so persistent and what actually drives them?

Her answer is that, “For many Thai people, they are not quite bothered about the protests because they know that there is a need for change in this country.”

At this stage, I guess it is a fair question to ask; will this Land of Smiles ever smile again?

Regardless of the debates whether the PDRC is for or against democracy, it is captivating to see what political disagreement looks like in Thailand, compared with our own country. – February 24, 2014.



** This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insider.*
