

The last whistle and PAD's 'Final Battle'

Last time my column appeared was Tuesday, Aug 26, the day the People's Alliance for Democracy broke into NBT television station and Government House. I had written how it was time the gloves were taken off against the government. I wrote about how the government was ignoring normal rules of engagement and was in breach of all decency in the process of pursuing its self-serving goals.

I concluded that we needed to pursue all attempts to convict members of the government, their political party as well as the government itself. Unless we succeed in doing so, the ruling party and their co-conspirators would simply continue to abuse the majority vote given to them by the Thai public.

That same day the PAD decided in their different ways, to take the gloves off too, and it was eerie and disconcerting.

The change in PAD's strategy and identifying the real threat

Public reaction to the PAD was swift — an opinion poll that day showed 70% public disapproval of this course of action. I wasn't polled, but I would have agreed with the majority.

I was concerned. Let's be clear — I am a PAD sympathiser. I attended the very first Thammasat "seminar" organised by Sondhi Limthongkul back in 2005. I remembered thinking at the time that something special was happening, not because of what he said, but more because of the passion of the packed house responding to it.

I was right. I sporadically observed other meetings, first at Lumpini Park then at Makkhawan Rangsan Bridge.

As a Democrat Member of Parliament, there isn't much that is new in what is said on stage, but the growing momentum of the movement was obvious, boosted in early 2006, by the sale of Shin Corp by the Shinawatra family to Temasek Holdings of Singapore.

Although I had never once attended

the PAD's second series after the general elections late last year, I retained reasons to remain a sympathiser of the movement.

No point shying away from the obvious — after all, it is a well-known fact that one of the PAD leaders, even if he is acting on an individual basis, is a Democrat MP.

Many other key speakers were our candidates in the recent general elections. Almost all of the tens of thousands of the attending public are Democrat voters. Most importantly, the PAD and their supporters make similar arguments with us that the government has lost its way and lost its legitimacy, given breach of both law and ethics. Recently, the government has also lost its authority.

It is remarkable and bitterly ironic how much damage the emergency decree has caused, relative to the protests that went before it. International perception, when they heard of the announcement, was swift: government bond yields jumped almost 50 basis points, the stock market collapsed — after having withstood even the increasing level of violence the week before. Foreign tourists cancelled their holidays, already disrupted earlier by the closure of Phuket airport.

Coming to terms with the new PAD, coming to terms with old politics

Did everything change as a result of the illicit acts? Not for me. Put simply, I do not have to agree with the action of the PAD leaders to remain in league with the democratic spirit of the bulk of the supporters. I disagree with those who say that the whole movement is undemocratic — even if some of their demands appear to be less democratic than what is the perceived wisdom.

Many observers say that it is undemocratic for a crowd to call for the resignation of an elected government. I find that to be absurd. It is true that a government should only be removed

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through parliamentary process, but not true that this implies the general public cannot voice their desire for a change in government.

I also believe that, like it or not, the Democrats could not on our own have resisted the PPP or the government from abusing their powers in the seven months of their rule. I think that without our parallel efforts, it is likely that the Constitution would by now have been amended and protection given to both Thaksin and PPP itself.

I believe the government would have approved 6,000 hugely expensive buses rather than the 4,000 they are trying to get away with.

I believe we would have lost future claim and current territory at the Phra Viharn temple.

The day after the Government House break-in was a strange one for me. I was saddened by the PAD decision to cross the legal line. Yet I understood it from the perspective of strategy. Like many school boys, I have always been interested in war strategies and the PAD, with Maj-Gen Chamlong as their strategist, certainly think in those terms. Their move on Government House fits what is called

the "Death Ground" strategy — putting yourself in a situation where you have too much at stake to lose.

Of course, once they decided on a strategy, they moved at lightning speed — Blitzkrieg; they kept their opponents on their heels, they shifted the battlefield and, most importantly, through all this, they compelled their opponents into making mistakes — the heavy-handed police reaction and, disastrously, the announcement of the emergency decree that was ignored by the army and highlighted the government's lack of authority.

The problem, of course, is that, in their thirst for victory, so much damage is being caused. Is this the only way? Is the PAD's victory a good thing for Thailand? Indeed, what defines "victory"? The PAD's goal-post seems to be constantly movable. Mr Sondhi might want to choose to quote Abe Lincoln next time he's asked what the PAD wants: "My policy is to have no policy."

My father, the Parliament and the future of Thai politics

But on that day, we had lost a peculiar vote in Parliament. The House was considering a bill on the National Counter Corruption Commission as required by the Constitution. It had already passed the first hearing (agreement in principle) as well as the second hearing (approval of draft) but then in the third hearing the bill was inexplicably toppled by the PPP (which had effectively written the agreed draft). This, in our view, was pure cynicism and was an attempt to undermine both the NCCC and the Constitution itself.

I wasn't in the House — I was taking my children to visit their grandfather, knowing it was going to be for the last time, as he was dying of cancer. My daughter and her niece played the piano for him and my brothers and I touched wine glasses in a toast with our dad one more time. We had our own Last Whistle.

At nine o'clock my thoughts turned to Parliament and the PAD, and I simply thought, screw the opinion polls, the people attending the rally don't deserve to be vilified as criminals and I decided to go visit them.

An emotional night became more so as I realised that my visit and its timing had touched a nerve. People were moved, as was I. I made it a point not to enter the grounds of Government House and certainly not onto the stage. In my mind I was clear: I was visiting the people, not the movement or its leaders. I see the people as heroes — pure in their beliefs, certain in their desire to see positive change in the country, and willing to be active citizens. Is this not the seed of true democracy? Call me a romantic — but if you're not, you shouldn't be in politics.

I do not have all the answers, but I do not think this brinkmanship is good for the country. However, a week after that night, my father passed away. One of the last things he said to me was: "Like them or not, the PAD is forcing change."

Many would dispute whether this "change" was positive. For me, it at least reflects the sentiment of a man from a generation that had seen Thai democracy from birth, with not much to show for it. My own grandfather fought against "the rebels" in 2475 (1932). He was in charge of the police and lost out against the conspirators, one of whom was Democrat Party founder, Kuang Aphaiyawongse. That time the rebels won, so they are not called rebels but are called democrats. My dad and his generation frankly never believed Thais were "ready" for democracy. I feel different, or at least I feel we have no viable alternative. The next few days and weeks will show whether we politicians can save it before, once again, we self-destruct.

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