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No. 176/2010 dated 21 December 2010

Power and Culture in Thailand: Three Issues, Two Realms, One Kingdom

By Antonio L Rappa

Synopsis

The Abhisit government receives top marks for maintaining the peace. But there remain three pressing issues in Thai politics today. How are these issues related to the idea of the two realms within one kingdom?

Commentary

INCENSE BURNS as Thayasirit Thangphamthong plays his favourite Beatles tunes as we discuss current issues in his expansive condominium in Nonthaburi. A staunch supporter of the Democrat Party, Kuhn Firm – the nickname his parents gave him as a child -- predicts that Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva will win the next election. When asked why, he gently says that the premier has a charming political spirit.

Three Issues

Three main issues exist in Thailand. The first is the coherence of a kingdom protected by a symbolically powerful monarchy. The second issue involves divisive political forces inside and outside Thailand. The third issue is about superstition in Thai culture.

Superstition is political because it impacts on “real” life, is widely accepted and practised by many if not most people in Thailand as seen in Songkran, Phi Ta Khon, and Loy Kratong. The military is no exception to superstition. For example, all Thai soldiers wear some form of amulet such as jatukham Ramathep, jatukham Phra Pidta Pangpakham Ruen, and jatukham Bhrama Vijapassana (bronze and gold) for protection and good luck.

Balance of Power: the Two Realms Thesis

The Thai world is about a balance between the life realm and the spirit realm. Both share a common space but not a shared destiny. Spirit houses for example exist in all Thai houses and businesses. They are also found in government offices and buildings. A spirit house is an abode for ghosts to live to forestall mischievous “wandering”. Social status is accorded to both realms to ensure equanimity. Successful political leaders, businessmen and military commanders are sensitive to the importance of ensuring a balance between the realms.

If one believes that one has done evil, one must atone for such actions. The non-atonement for sin leads to bad karma. Movements between the life realm and the spirit realm are fluid, dynamic and have a two-way impact. This is why Thai culture emphasises merit-making for good karma.

Internal Issues

Bad karma results in catastrophe. For example, the abortive Red Shirt siege in April and May this year weakened the Red protest movement. The lack of sufficient merit-making has undermined their attempts to recover lost political ground.

My interviews in Ayutthaya in June and July 2010 revealed that elements of renegade Red Shirts were reconnoitering several places outside Bangkok. This was confirmed several months later when the Reds amassed in Ayutthaya City on the way to Bangkok in October 2010. Other Red elements crossed the border into Cambodia. The Department of Special Investigation (DSI) is said to have proof that the Reds were training as assassins in Cambodia, a claim repeatedly rejected by Phnom Penh.

The DSI is also investigating the deaths at Silom BTS station, Khouk Whua intersection, Big C, Central World, Wat Pathum Wanaram and Lumpini Park. This was confirmed on November 17, 2010 by Tharit Phengdit, a DSI director-general. The only way out of their rut is for the Reds to gain merit by aborting their political cause. The political scientists I spoke to disagreed. They reasoned that for any country to be a democracy, protests must be recognised as a legitimate form of interest articulation.

External Issues

In another realm, the Preah Vihear temple dispute between Thailand and Cambodia ensues. In spite of the 2000 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two countries to resolve the underlying dispute over territory, a full settlement is unlikely to take permanent place notwithstanding the strenuous work of the Joint Boundary Committee (JBC) and the General Border Committee (GBC). The lack of finality between the countries has led the dispute to be raised to Thailand's Administrative Court, which may not have the jurisdiction to make a ruling on the matter.

Thanksin Shinawatra is said to be in contact with several key personnel in Chiang Rai and other parts of the kingdom. Some degree of rapprochement between Bangkok and Phnom Penh developed when Thaksin relinquished his advisory role to the Phnom Penh government. For example, at their Pattaya 2010 meeting, Cambodia's prime minister Hun Sen promised his Thai counterpart to help capture Red Shirt Arismun in Siem Reap, Cambodia. But the capture of Arismun still leaves Seh Daeng – the key Red Shirt leader who was shot dead by troops -- in the spirit realm. Once a person crosses from the life realm to the spirit realm, he may never return permanently.

If the Ghost Returns

There is a powerful and travelling spirit outside Thailand. The ghost has not yet crossed back into the kingdom. For the sake of unity, Thailand could prepare an abode for its return. But if the ghost returns, the internal forces will be reinvigorated. Nevertheless, in an attempt to make merit, the Reds assembled to remember those who died during the siege and moved from the life realm to the spirit one. The date and time chosen for that assembly of several thousands at the Democratic Monument was chosen for good luck. They sang and danced and asked for the release of their comrades.

Kuhn Firm reminds me that no one died that day. It was 10 October 2010 at 10 am. He smiles and invites me to eat as the smoky incense enhances the gang kiew wan gai while the Beatles hit Yellow Submarine plays.

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