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OPINION/ THAI POLITICS

On May 30, a grave truth was revealed

Few people realise the extraordinary import of the Constitution Tribunal's dissolution of the country's most powerful party

By **JEFFREY RACE**

Those wishing to escape the political cycle of reform, hope, degradation and coup d'etat in which Thailand has circled since World War Two, and those wishing to assess the likelihood of this happening, might ponder some wisdom from the science of human society.

Matters once only whispered, feared or subjects of speculation, have now seen proof in the full light of day. Drawing conclusions demands some details of the Constitution Tribunal's decision.

The Thai Rak Thai party defended itself factually by simply denying the evidence, claiming incriminating bank records, video images and oral statements were fabricated by its enemies. Legally, the TRT raised multiple objections to the proceedings, most importantly that the alleged acts, even if proven, were trivial and not meriting the party's dissolution.

The tribunal concluded from the extensive investigative record (filmed images, bank transfers, computer hard drive structures, oral statements) that misconduct indeed occurred: falsification of official records, bribery, false testimony, illegally running more than one candidate in the same constituency.

Its reasoning clarified that the opposition Democrat party did not falsify evidence as the TRT claimed; such accusations were instead false with intent to deceive the court.

The tribunal ruled that the offences, far from trivial, threatened the security of the state, as shown by subsequent turmoil.

TRT leaders have neither accepted the tribunal's factual conclusions nor apologised to the public for misconduct now proven beyond doubt.

They have declined to apologise even though faked repentance and a sham promise to reform would lift the chance for return of their political rights.

TRT leaders appear to be normal, sane humans, some indeed pleasant and kind people, loving husbands and devoted parents. (I know several of them personally.) Many foreigners think they should be embarrassed and keen to appear contrite for their children's sake, even if hypocritically.

How can such bizarre behaviour occur right before our eyes, in an otherwise delightful country?

The answer is a grave truth, now proven in legal proceedings, of decisive import for the kingdom's future.

It is simply that the nation's dominant political forces really believe the acts alleged to be trivial. They view black lies, falsification of official documents, bribery, and threatening and suborning witnesses all to be effective in gaining power to loot the state, while diminishing not at all their reception in polite society: they are still invited to cut ribbons and to sponsor society weddings.

Their children are lionised in the public media, not shunned. They feel no shame before their children because they are raising the next generation of vipers to rule with the same values: lying, stealing, bribery really are actions lek noi in the words immortalised in the TRT's court pleading.

Thailand will continue to be known elsewhere in the world as a beautiful land of refinement, perfect for sun and sex; where few can be trusted, no one's property is safe, and weak reform efforts resulting from the prodding by a few public-spirited citizens of an oddly passive public only occasionally interrupting the looting.

Why is it this way?

Societies coerce obedience to rules in two ways: law and peer pressure.

Working via reason, law is weak. But peer pressure compels, as any parent knows, since it works via emotion, which dominates human behaviour.

Many cultures supplement the strictures of law with outspoken public condemnation of misconduct, particularly Judeo-Christian societies which have a strong tradition of witness to the truth even at risk to the speaker. (Read Nathan's face-to-face chastisement of King David for adultery and murder in 2 Samuel 12:1ff.)

Chastisement fails in Thailand; the country may actually have more righteous people than many countries with healthier politics, but its Buddhism inspires quietism instead of witness toward abuse of office. Devotees expect the Law of Karma to work effortlessly on its own in the fullness of time.

The coup authors dream about regenerating public life by removing 111 malefactors from politics. The 111 expect enormous riches to return them to the seats of power, where they will settle accounts with their present tormentors. On May 30 they learned not to abstain from evil (hence no words of repentance), only to turn off the incriminating security cameras in the Ministry of Defence when next plotting to seize the state.

The reformers' plan repeats past actions while magically expecting better results. But the forces of righteousness are relying on the weak reeds of Thai law and the Thai military, not the really powerful lever they have in hand.

Is there a path out of this cycle of hope and degradation? Yes: Stop using magic; start using what science knows of human behaviour.

In Thailand the rule of law in practice is now "the strong animals eat the weak". A big boost to announced better law enforcement is ensuring via peer pressure that the Law of Karma immediately penalises violators. This means more than sporadic sermons by a few quixotic personalities like Ji Ungphakorn, Sulak Sivaraksa and Thirayuth Boonmi.

It would mean that the top opinion-forming institutions in society right down through the press to the silent majority of long-suffering good people (now passively awaiting the cosmic workings of the Law of Karma) begin to speak up against transgressors, immediately and publicly, tying names to specific evil acts, setting a standard to shun such people and their families. That helps elsewhere, but is missing in Bangkok.

Those wanting to change the pattern of Thai politics must change their own behaviour first. The malefactors will fight back, with clean means (harassing litigation) and foul (threats to personal safety). Those wishing for righteous politics must shoulder the same risks as did Nathan, whom David could have executed in a flash, just as he had Uriah killed.

Like naughty children, the malefactors will continue until they are sent from the dinner table. (Sending a few to prison would certainly help.)

Thailand's foreign friends wonder how to appraise the chance for change.

That would require a decisive act of will by Thailand's moral leaders great and small to adopt a stance of public witness, no longer passivity and silence. Watch whether it happens; if so results will come.

It is at the same time both that easy and that difficult.

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