

Thailand floods: Not enough to destroy the government

SASIWAN CHINGCHIT

Former lecturer at Prince of Songkla University, Thailand
Independent researcher, Washington D.C.

Thailand's worst floods in 50 years have posed a tremendous challenge to the newly elected government. Whether Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra can withstand the high tide of public criticism and sail to the end of her four-year term has been a hot topic of discussion in the mainstream Thai media. The government cannot avoid taking the blame for the underperformance and mismanagement by the Flood Relief Operations Center, but the damage will be insufficient to affect the strong popular support it enjoys through the Peua Thai Party.

2010 and 2011 have been tragic years for Thailand. After the political turmoil in May 2010, floods have hit different parts of Thailand incessantly since October 2010 towards the end of 2011. From the last mid-May 2011, tropical depression storms coupled with an unusually heavy volume of Monsoon rainfall resulted in massive flooding in the lower Northern and Central parts. Finally, in October 2011, major cities like Chiang Mai were also badly affected before the water flowed down to Ayutthaya and submerged four industrial estates. The economic impact is severe. Critics note that the affected industrial estates had no chance to respond in time to the disaster due to the government's assurance that everything was "under control" and its reluctance to share vital hydrological information with the public.

The catastrophe reached its culmination when inundation threatened Bangkok in late October and the government was forced to recognize the severity of the crisis. Only then

officials began to encourage people to leave their homes in the capital since the "water-world"-like scenario was expected to last a month or more. While it is not yet possible to calculate the final damage, it is now certain that Thailand is being severely damaged by the natural disaster.

Early complacency is not the only dark spot of the government's response. Information released by the Flood Relief Operations Center (FROC) was so contradicting and confusing that the Center eventually lost its credibility. For example, an official announcement on October 16 informed people that the biggest mass of water had already passed Bangkok when the flood was still to reach the city's threshold.

The Center also mismanaged flood relief distribution. On October 30, pictures and a video clip depicting a giant pile of relief bags unattended within a FROC warehouse were widely circulated on many Internet forums and social networks along with distributing volunteers' claims that the government refused to dispatch the aid. Moreover, the government was also accused of corruption when the real value of goods in the relief bag was found to be lower than officially claimed.

As frustration in Bangkok grows, all fingers point to Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand's first female Prime Minister, who faces criticism for lacking leadership ability.

The November polls by Suan Dusit and ABAC show public disappointment with the government's performance in



handling the flood. This also comes amidst rumors that the Thai Army Chief and politicians from the Taksin's disbanded Thai Rak Thai Party (TRTP) think Yingluck does not fit the job which, in turn, feed speculation among journalists that the present government could be driven out by the flood.

However, there are few times in Thai political history when heads of government resigned due to their inability to meet public expectations in particular issues. And those cases happened more than 30 years ago. If not ousted by coups, most had to leave the post because they failed to secure parliamentary support. Resigning as a way of showing personal responsibility is not a part of Thai political culture. With a landslide victory and support from coalition parties, the chance that Yingluck's government will lack parliamentary support is not likely. Criticisms against the government seem to occupy most of the media space and online communities but they are from those middle class Thais who, in any case, never support the Peua Thai Party (PTP).

The voice of Bangkok's middle class is known to be loud but represents a small vote bank when compared to people in upper Thailand's rural hinterland, where the PTP's political base is located.

In the past, governments were susceptible to Bangkok's opinion but that was because no party had ever managed to build up a strong, direct and secure tie with the countryside at the grassroots level like the Taksin's TRTP did.

Taksin's political legacy has gone through many transformations and challenges. TRTP was originally popular among the middle class. The party was composed of qualified technocrats, successful businessmen and highly educated politicians. After it was disbanded, the new People's Power Party, and then the PTP started recruiting less refined politicians of fierce characteristics. These new members like Chalerm Yubamrung or the Red Shirt leader, Jatuporn

Prompan, do not meet the middle class taste but prove to be good in the political game.

The oppositions, be it the Yellow Shirts or the Democrat Party, have tried to highlight Taksin's corruption and cronyism, and he is even accused of being anti-monarchy, but all this has not proven enough to harm his political support. The two elections since the 2006 coup have shown that Taksin's parties do not need the middle class' support to win election. Current political polarization also creates an environment of distrust and makes it more difficult for people to switch their support. Supporters of one side generally presume all information from the opposition to be fraudulent. And even if there was a clear proof of corruption in the government's flood relief management, Peua Thai supporters like the Red Shirts would find it difficult to lend their support to the Democrat Party, which led the violent crackdown against them and is seen as serving the anti-democratic aristocracy. The result of the last election in July 2011 was a clear mandate from the majority that voted against the coup and undemocratic intervention. It did not really matter who the PTP's candidate was, as long as he (or she) was Taksin's nominee. Seen as her brother's proxy, whether Yingluck was qualified enough was not an issue for her voters. She may not be good at her job but currently there is still no alternative figure with a better profile and image.

Rather than the immediate response to an unpredictable natural catastrophe, what may affect Peua Thai's political support in the countryside is the compensation and recovery plan after the water recedes. The government still has time to prove itself. When their ban period ends in May next year, the former TRTP members will return and most likely be ready to join the cabinet. The PTP-led government will then grow stronger. However, another election is required if any of these members is to replace Yingluck as Prime Minister.

EDITOR | Paulo Gorjão

ASSISTANT EDITORS | Kai Thaler • Vasco Martins

DESIGN | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)
Rua Vitorino Nemésio, 5 - 1750-306 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>
email: ipris@ipris.org

IPRIS Viewpoints is a publication of IPRIS.

The opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IPRIS.





feel our energy

