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COMMENTARY

## The military holds the key to suthep's victory \_ or defeat

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Army chief Gen Prayuth Chan-ocha must be the most popular man in Thailand right now. No doubt the phone calls and the meeting requests are aplenty. This is because the endgame for the current political struggle is in his hands.

For Thaksin Shinawatra, he will do everything he can for the army chief to stay put. For Suthep Thaugsuban, he will do all that he can to roll out the tanks. Simply put, Mr Suthep cannot win without the military making a move, whether in the streets or in a silent coup from behind the scenes.

This is why he has to keep changing the deadline for his "final" victory. This time it's Jan 13. If the military still doesn't budge, we may have a "final" putsch once a month for the next 10 years.

It's not written in the constitution, but it is long understood that while the government of Thailand may be elected by the people, its presence in government also requires, at the very least, the tolerance of the military.

"By the people and for the people" is the democratic motto, but in Thailand it's "by the people and hopefully the military will be OK with it". For that matter, we can also add a "u" to the "by".

Mr Suthep can bring a hundred thousand or a million or five million people into the streets

every day. But the number that counts the most is at the ballot box. Thus, he and the Democrats cannot win this game democratically, and they know it.

The goal is to eradicate Thailand of the Thaksin regime. But what can Mr Suthep do to make Thaksin give up and wash his hands? This cannot be done peacefully, and he knows it.

It's also not just Thaksin. It's all the political figures within the Pheu Thai Party. It's the network of business allies. It's the millions or billions in investments and expected returns. It's the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) and 15 million-plus voters.

What can Mr Suthep do to make them all give up? This can only be done through force, whether in the streets or from behind the scenes; and only the military has such power.

The game then is in the hands of Gen Prayuth. He has said time and time again that the military will not get involved; that the days of military coups are over. But recently he has changed his tune to "it depends on the situation".

In addition, before the 2006 coup, another army chief also said that there would be no coup. We know how that went.

However, today is not 2006. Time has changed and the game has changed. If the 2006 coup proves anything, it is that the old way no longer works.

The 23 coups or attempts in 80 years of Thai history have been a polite tradition. Violence is zero to minimal. The person finding himself outgunned would politely bow out and accept a lucrative retirement.

Thaksin has changed that game by refusing to bow out, while only accepting a lucrative exile, but continually attempting to instigate his return to power. This refusal to accept defeat means that if the military were to act again, it would have to be thorough and decisive, which could very well lead to widespread violence.

This is because if Thaksin doesn't accept defeat, his entire political machine would not accept defeat. In addition, the so called "watermelon" soldiers, including front-line personnel, junior and senior officers and many generals, may jump tank.

To purge the Thaksin regime would also mean to purge the watermelon soldiers. It means to purge the leaderships and key figures within the UDD, as well as other allies of Thaksin in politics and in business.

If they do an efficient job, it could be over with quickly and perhaps even relatively painlessly. If they botch it up, then wherever Egypt and Syria are, Thailand may not end up far behind.

Mr Suthep will do whatever it takes to win, that is to be expected. An interesting question, however, is while many of the protestors wouldn't mind a military coup \_ after all, this is Thailand \_ how many would actually be able to stomach a bloody purge? How many would be willing to see a civil war? Sabre rattling is one thing; actually hacking each other into pieces is quite another.

An even more interesting question may be that if the military comes out, could Thaksin get it to

come out on his behalf?

But the most interesting question may be this \_ why don't we just decide democratically at the polling station instead? Well, we all know the answer to that.

Perhaps it is best, then, that everyone helps Mr Suthep to look for a compromise and a way out, while saving face.

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Contact Voranai Vanijaka via email at [voranai@gmail.com](mailto:voranai@gmail.com).

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Writer: [Voranai Vanijaka](#)

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