

Government in exile to start pulling the strings

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Get ready! The big puppet show is about to begin. The new government has one big litmus test lying in wait as soon as it is installed: is this a shadow Cabinet or a Cabinet with a long shadow?

It will immediately assume the image of a surrogate government acting on behalf of a "highly visible hand". Everyone knows who calls the shots. But nobody in the government is going to admit it. It's not a case of a government within a government. It will be, strange though it may sound, a Bangkok-based government in exile. You say that sounds weird? Think again.

Without publicly admitting the freakishness of the whole scenario, some top People Power Party executives have nevertheless given sufficient hints to suggest that what we see in the coalition government isn't really what we are going to get.

You don't even have to read between the lines to get the message. Surapong Suebwonglee, secretary general of the PPP, said during last Saturday's press conference to declare the formation of a PPP-led six-party coalition government: "The PPP will be taking care of the major ministries such as Finance, Transport, Commerce and Tourism. The party will screen competent people who remain behind the scenes known only among the inner circles of the party...."

To seasoned observers, that's tantamount to admitting that those you see up front as Cabinet members may not be the real ministers. The main work will be carried out by those behind the scenes. There is a party "owner" and there is a party leader. There is the official prime minister and there is the "supremo" out there issuing instructions and making decisions that count.

If most Thais appear to go along with the big game of pretence, it's not because the politicians can pull the wool over our eyes. We are only waiting for the right time to ferret out the truth.

Local political circles are abuzz with speculation as to whether Samak Sundaravej, if he does get endorsed in Parliament tomorrow as the new prime minister, is merely a stunt man for Thaksin Shinawatra. Or is the controversial veteran politician in fact quietly embarking on a personal plan to demand the right to be his own man?

If the ongoing coffee-shop gossip materialises, we will see a number of "surrogates" acting on behalf of the real actors behind the scenes, some of them from the 111 former executives of the dissolved Thai Rak Thai Party.

The wives of at least two leading politicians on the banned list - Suwat Liptapanlop (the strong man behind the Ruam Jai Thai Chat Pattana Party) and Somsak Thepsutin (the indisputable power behind Matchima Thipatai) - have been tipped by rumour-mongers to be eyeing the Energy and Labour portfolios respectively. Strange, but true. Weird, but more than probable.

And you don't have to go far to search for some concrete clues. In his latest taped interview in Hong Kong with Jom Petchpradab from TITV - which was never aired because of the channel's change-over from a commercial station to a public broadcasting service - Thaksin told the reporter he had "proposed" Samak to lead the PPP.

Thaksin said: "To be frank, I was accused unfairly of not being loyal to the (royal) institution. It's a very serious and painful allegation against me. Therefore, the person I would recommend to my friends to head the PPP must be someone with a clear record of loyalty to the royal family. Khun Samak is one of them. Therefore, I proposed his name to lead the party. My friends said that's it, he's the right choice. Therefore they extended him the invitation - and he accepted it."

The reporter followed up with a direct statement: "But many people still don't think Khun Samak is the real prime minister. They think it's you."

Thaksin, instead of denying it outright, beat around the bush. "The real person is you, not me," he laughed. The "Real Person" happened to be the programme's title.

The big political puppet show is about to begin. Sit tight and enjoy it while you can. Oscar Wilde once wrote about puppetry: "There are many advantages in puppets. They never argue. They have no crude views about art. They have no private lives."

A famous puppeteer has been quoted as saying: "Through puppetry we accept the outrageous, the absurd or even the impossible and will permit puppets to say and do things no human could. We allow a puppet to talk to us when no one else can get us to speak."

The great thing about puppetry, they say, is that puppets by their very nature do things that are not humanly possible. In political puppetry, the puppets are also attempting to do things that are not humanly imaginable either.

Make sure you check all the exits in advance.

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