

A charade of false pretences at the airport

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We have seen it. Finally the long-awaited moment took place on Thursday following long speculation over the exact time and date. A rousing welcome greeted Thaksin Shinawatra when he returned to his motherland after 17 months spent in self-imposed exile evading an arrest warrant issued by the Criminal Court.

It was not a low-key, lacklustre homecoming, as Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama had earlier claimed it would be. The frenzy was expected. All those who wanted Thaksin's blessings and new opportunities for career advancement as well as a boost to their business and political fortunes were there.

Being absent from the scene with a lame excuse would have meant losing a golden chance to be part of the inner circle of yes men and cronies of some significance.

If there was anything that might have disappointed Thaksin, it was the number of admirers who showed up to welcome him. There were just a few thousand people and most of them were mobilised by some kind of persuasion and inducement - financial, of course.

The low turnout could have been due to poor handling, or the cronies' unwillingness to part with hard cash for fear that their spending would not be duly appreciated by the boss.

During the high times, tens of thousands of people could be hired to create a big scene similar to the homecoming of Juan and Eva Peron amidst cheers from the victims of populist plans and financial handouts.

The crowd that waited for several hours with all of their hearts and soul were the hard-core fans and those obsessed with blind faith and devotions. The politicians wearing business attire were there because they, like Faust, have sold their souls to the devil for financial gain.

Nevertheless, they all disregarded the fact that it was the arrival of a criminal suspect, a fugitive who had to return to deal with pressing political problems that could break his grip on power. Thaksin is back to ensure that his nominee head of government does not act too independently and get out of control too soon.

It was not unexpected that Thaksin did what he had to do - exploit the full blaze of publicity and suspense for all he could. His kneeling down and paying respect to the home ground was overacting on his part and too well stage-managed.

Judging from the screenplay and the charade, played out quite naturally in front of the TV and other cameras, he surely deserved an Oscar award in the film "No Country for Old Men", though Thaksin would not consider himself an old man. Not yet at 59 years old.

The reality at that particular moment, aside from the charade and play-acting, could be the false pretence and the bravado. The smiles of his cronies were devoid of sincerity. They deserved some Oscar nominations for their farcical performance in addition to pats on the back and shoulders by the boss.

Oh yes, we also detected a glint of fear and uncertainty in the eyes of Thaksin despite the ironclad security around him. The self-confidence he tried to exude failed to conceal some worries about unpredictable factors.

We should not look at the event as an arrangement of grandeur and honour for a super VIP or a worshipped icon. The deceased drug kingpin Pablo Escobar of Colombia and ex-strongman Manuel Noriega of Panama also warranted such protection as well.

What Thaksin and his family fervently need from now on is maximum publicity - positive or negative - just to remind the people that they are still around. Next is freedom from all pending criminal charges. The disgrace so far sustained could be written off simply as a failed business investment.

How would he achieve that? A well-funded disinformation and public-relations campaign will be carried out to create the impression that he has been a victim of injustice and political conspiracy by those envious of his success. So far, this has had a little success among the gullible.

What the public should be aware of and keep a close watch on is the entire judicial process dealing with Thaksin, his family members and cronies. If history is to serve as a worrisome guide, there must be sufficient vigilance to ensure that there is nothing suspicious in the performance of duty.

We have learned about attempts to bribe some judges and witnesses in previous legal battles in which Thaksin and his family members were involved. The public cannot rest assured that the judicial process from now on could not be twisted and bought.

Senior officials crucial in law-enforcement have already been removed to inactive posts and replaced by trusted hands of Thaksin in just a few days. These were all bold and blatant acts reflecting an arrogance of power and disregard, if not contempt, for the public.

We are reliving the Thaksin era, ironically in just 17 months, thanks to the ignorance and sloppy performance of the Surayud administration. That was a sheer disgrace to the country. That team would not want to be remembered, but rather forgotten, for the sins of omission and the lack of a sense of mission they displayed.

This time it is not about a fight with Thaksin, but a hard struggle on the part of the people to ensure that ultimately our judicial process does not succumb to the power of money.

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