

Clock ticking for PM to avoid disgrace

COMMENTARY

Atiya
Achakulwisut



As the tiny specks of light from the protesters' mobile phones at the student-led rallies grow into an ever-widening galaxy of discontent by the day, the lighting along the road ahead for Prime Minister Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha only seems to get darker.

What choice does he have?

As an avowedly self-righteous man, PM Gen Prayut will definitely want to hold on to his position.

"What have I done wrong?" He asked the other day while justifying the declaration of a severe state of emergency until next month.

But how can he stay on?

Arresting key leaders saw the protest become organic. Many brave youths raised their heads above the parapet as the movement became leaderless but equally adroit and continuing to grow.

Intimidating the crowd with water cannons and chemical dyes enraged the protesters while waking up those who might have stood idly by until then.

The protests may be unlawful as they defy the emergency decree banning gatherings of more than five people.

But it remains dubious if the declaration of the emergency situation was ever justified given that the anti-government protests had shown no signs of violence.

The use of water cannons against unarmed, mostly young protesters made many people wonder whether the government was using disproportionate force.

The police claimed that its crowd dispersal techniques were in line with international



A lone protester sits in front of police water cannon trucks to prevent them from advancing on demonstrators who gathered peacefully at Pathumwan intersection on Friday. APICHT JINAKUL

standards.

But the United Nations Human Rights Guidance on Less Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement said water cannon "should only be used in situations of serious public disorder where there is a significant likelihood of loss of life, serious injury or the widespread destruction of property".

From news reports, the Pathumwan gathering was far from a riot.

Indeed, one's common sense should be enough to decide that such a protest did not need to be dispersed by high-power water cannon or chemicals which the police have still not identified.

That the police tried to cling on to the claim of "complying with the international standard" when its practice appeared against basic human conscience resulted in public dismay.

The force of the water cannon was enough to wash away any semblance of PM Gen Prayut's legitimacy.

The exercise made the state look like an over-zealous group of parents taking an unnecessarily hard line when telling their children to pack up and come home for dinner. In sum, it was an ignoble exercise both in practice and in optics.

It's no surprise that the Pathumwan incident became a game-changer, swinging the pendulum of broad public sympathy back towards the protesters.

Academics, artists, writers and many other public figures have come out to show support for the protesters while denouncing the use of violence.

Meanwhile, the protest has grown in size and expanded to other areas in Bangkok and the provinces.

Can the PM be more heavy-handed?

He sure can but the cost will be high and the endgame probably not worth the risk.

Nevertheless, the government, showing no sign of compromise, turned to media censorship as its solution, ordering the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission to take down elements of the coverage by four online news outlets.

It also threatened to prosecute more than 300,000 URLs and block the social media application Telegram.

It can expect a backlash from media profes-

“

It's no surprise that the Pathumwan incident became a game-changer.

sionals and international rights groups. It's unclear what good will the measures do the government except further expose a poorly veiled penchant for authoritarianism.

There are countless channels where people can get the kind of information they want these days. With social media tools, anybody can report news and become their own media outlet.

If they really can't access trustworthy news sources, they could just attend the rally to see for themselves.

The PM can up the ante by imposing a curfew on top of shutting down sections of public transport, which incidentally does not work in deterring the protesters but instead causes widespread inconvenience to the public at large.

But what if the Free Youths calls for a gathering during non-curfew hours? Will the government dare to disrupt everything to clamp down on the rally?

Time is not on Gen Prayut's side either.

Even though the emergency decree gives him a month of special power, the PM will still appear impotent if he can't do anything to improve the situation over the next few days.

At the extreme end, another coup d'etat could be staged.

But with resistance this high, the putsch and the role of the monarchy should there be one could bring Thailand closer to the abyss, a profound state of conflict and confrontation where resolution might not be possible without casualties.

Would PM Gen Prayut and the establishment network behind him want to rule over such a torn, dysfunctional state?

Another approach for the PM is to keep squeezing the protests while pursuing a possible solution through a special meeting of parliament.

The motion to amend the charter could be reconsidered. The powers-that-be may hope that the move will appease the protesters and douse the flames of discontent.

It actually act might have, before the water cannon blasts.

Consumed by a lust for victory, the PM traded the prudence of a leader for the reprehensible totalitarianism of his military past. Determined to get rid of the dissent at all costs, he appears to have inadvertently chosen to accelerate down a slippery road that can only end in tyranny.

With less and less room to manoeuvre, the PM would do well to consider that once labelled a pariah, he may never be judged as fit to lead again, whatever the letters before his name.

Atiya Achakulwisut is a Bangkok Post columnist.