

# Bangkok Airports: closed by people power

A European tourist sleeps at Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Bangkok in the early hours of the morning after anti-government protesters besieged the airport  
(Credit: AP Photo/Wason Wanichakorn)



For all the investment in perimeter fences, screening technologies and manpower, recent events at both the major airports in Thailand's capital and international gateway, Bangkok, have demonstrated that there is a limit to what can be achieved by the security agencies in maintaining a safe, secure operating environment. In sharp contrast to the razzmatazz surrounding the opening of the new Suvarnabhumi International Airport two years ago, the recent images emerging from the Land of Smiles portray the delicate balance between peaceful protest and anarchy. **Philip Baum**, in London and **Aaron Le Boutillier**, in Singapore, report on how Suvarnabhumi and Don Muang airports became the stage for anti-government demonstrations and the implications thereof for aviation security.



For a day at least, the world looked on as Thailand's domestic political grievances were transferred to the international arena. There's nothing quite like an aviation story to garner media attention and when the masses manage to shutdown a premiere tourist destination's major gateway and key transit hub for those en route from Europe to Australasia, or vice versa, it's guaranteed to be headline news. That is, unless reports from elsewhere around the globe can be equally dramatic; there is little doubt that the terrorist attacks on Mumbai were just that. They rightfully condemned Thailand's woes to an "also in the news today" story.

From an aviation security perspective, there are many lessons to be learned from Mumbai. First and foremost, the terrorists abandoned the idea of using sophisticated explosives with ingenious concealment methodologies and opted to use firepower to inflict mass casualties on an unsuspecting population. This is exactly the type of attack that many security consultants fear when we look at crowded airport terminals filled with people waiting to be processed by security. Or crowded airports, full of demonstrators...

Granted our current security strategy, the emerging trend of demonstrators opting to gather at international airports and use the platform to make their case is worrying. Environmental groups in the United Kingdom and Sweden, disgruntled employees in Latin America or Greece, and now those in search of a peaceful coup d'état in Thailand, regardless as to the validity of their argument, are further compromising our best security efforts at some of individual states most sensitive sites.

Many believe that extreme violence in Thailand, a country that is perceived as being "so peaceful" to the outside world, is only a heartbeat away. Any civil war would be devastating to the Thai economy, with its \$16 billion per annum revenue from tourism, especially given the context of the global credit crunch which is already having detrimental impact on the nation.

On Monday 24th November 2008, Thailand's anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) leader Chamlong Srimuang announced that

supporters would be setting off to shutdown various locations in Bangkok. Their aim would be to topple the government lead by Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat who, at the time, was attending the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Peru. In fact, PAD announced, with 48 hours notice, that they would be marching on Suvarnabhumi Airport to protest against Wongsawat's return. And so they did...

Many arrived earlier than scheduled. The old Don Muang airport was also occupied by PAD followers, and it was there that the protest's first airport-based casualty occurred. Shortly after midnight on 25th November, an assailant (government supporter) fired a grenade into the inbound passenger terminal building in which protestors were sleeping. Some reports indicate that the grenade was an M79, but whatever it

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was, the result was an explosion that caused panic and blast-related injuries. Ronnachai Chaisri, 29, died on his way to Bhumiphol hospital.

By Wednesday, the PAD demonstrators had effectively closed down both of Bangkok's airports. All flights were cancelled and tens of thousands of business and leisure passengers had their travel plans in chaos. American passengers, attempting to get home in time for Thanksgiving, bemoaned the fact that a regional dispute was impacting their festivities and Muslim passengers set to go on Hajj were also facing the reality of a lifelong dream being put indefinitely on hold.

This was uncharted territory.

### The Background

Suvarnabhumi alone last year handled 261,592 commercial flights, more than 41 million passengers and 1,209,720 tons of

freight, making it one of the busiest in the region.

The current events at Suvarnabhumi may come as a surprise to those uninitiated in Thai politics. However, to those who have followed the political ups and downs of this Kingdom with its rich history of coup d'états and political unrest will know this is just another game of tug-of-war played out by the Thai elite. Forget about the Montagues and Capulets, we now have the red shirts and yellow shirts!

The red shirts are the supporters of the People's Power Party (PPP), led by the Prime Minister, who just happens to be the brother-in-law of former Prime Minister (and ex-Manchester City Football Club owner!) Thaksin Shinawatra. Shinawatra was deposed by a coup in 2006, following which his party, Thai Rak Thai, all but disappeared. Thai Rak Thai had been popular with the nation's workers, yet with a background of alleged financial irregularities, even they temporarily supported the concept of military rule. However, in December 2007, following elections, the PPP (Thai Rak Thai, but in a different guise) won the popular vote bringing Wongsawat to power.

The yellow shirts are the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and are fiercely loyal to King Bhumibol. They perceive the PPP as a threat to the monarchy and even argue for a more restricted form of democracy – the argument goes that “the masses” (PPP supporters) are not necessarily educated enough to vote. The demonstrators would welcome a return to military rule; after all, new elections might just generate the same result as in December 2007.

### Response

There is no doubt in the minds of Thais in general that the Royal Thai Police wanted to confront the demonstrators. However the government was mindful of the negative international reaction the last time that police confronted an unarmed crowd, that included women and children, by opening fire with tear gas and heavy weapons without warning.

Many of the images broadcast around the world of the latest demonstration depicted more of a party atmosphere than an act of “coup d'état in progress”, so any response needed to be proportionate to avoid universal condemnation. Crowds of people donning yellow shirts engaged in a sit-in hardly demanded armed intervention.





Leading the "yellow shirts" is People's Alliance for Democracy's Chamlong Srimuang, whilst leading the "red shirts" is the Prime Minister and head of the People's Power Party, Somchai Wongsawat

Meanwhile, in the midst of the demonstrators, were the numerous foreigners who still hoped to board flights out of the country. Again, any action could result in there being casualties amongst that group – in the long history of the complicated struggle within various levels of Thai society, there has been no history of Thais turning their frustration upon Westerners. All sides would agree that ensuring their safety was essential to the long-term lifeblood of the country.

Another reason for the police to be restrained were the armed forces and their, perceived or actual, sympathies with the PAD.

The Chief of the Armed Forces, General Anuporn Paochinda, called upon the Prime Minister to resign and call elections, however he also ruled out a coup, perhaps mindful of the fact that Wongsawat also had his supporters too. Whilst not so visible this week, the red shirts have also been staging mass gatherings in football stadia. Shinawatra, currently in exile, has been addressing such meetings by satellite link.

By the Friday morning, the Prime Minister had declared a state of emergency at the two Bangkok Airports and ordered the police to clear them. It was an almost impossible task to do. General Anuporn Paochinda told the Prime Minister that the armed forces would not move to enforce the order, whilst the Air Force Chief advised that he would move to protect Thai people if police actions led to bloodshed. The Air Force stood between the demonstrators and the police – the police withdrew.

Meanwhile, the Navy Chief sent naval commandos to Suvarnabhumi to support the Air Force. Both are substantially better armed and trained to manage such situations than the Police.

Some regard General Anuporn as a pretty smart soldier, unlike past coup leaders, and he could well be waiting for the civilian government to collapse. That way he could assume power without fear of international sanctions should he simply seize it.

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With no solution in sight, the weekend arrived and passengers remained stranded; the demonstrators seemed set for the long haul. And we're not talking flights! The Prime Minister dismissed the Chief of Police for failing to carry out his orders to forcibly deal with peaceful protesters and he appointed General Patheep Tanprasert in his place.

The police attempted siege tactics by turning off water and electricity supply to both airports and prevented food, water and medical supplies from reaching them, manning the roads in full riot gear, armed with batons and shields. The armed forces did not respond but assured the police that they would if people were actually hurt by them.

In effect, we had two government security agencies, the police and the armed forces, siding with different political parties. Hardly the essence of good security.

### The Implications

So, what happens when groups looking to disrupt airport activities simply bypass our fences and perimeter intrusion detection systems and march en masse towards passenger terminals? Forget about one or two people trying to sabotage airports or hijack aircraft, how does one stop thousands of people simply becoming anarchic and walking into an airport and bringing international travel to a halt?

Perhaps the starting point is to heed the warnings. The writing was on the wall for some time as the PAD had actively broadcast their intent to lay siege to the airports. Might there have been an opportunity blocking the routes to the airports rather than allowing them to reach the terminal buildings? Possibly, but air travel would still have been impossible.

What makes this security issue so delicate is that the unrest in Thailand, from both parties, spans the entire social demographic of the Kingdom with sympathisers and activists in all camps. Many enforcers of the law may also be reluctant to carry out orders and it is this that may have contributed to the ease in which the supporters overran the airports.

As has been mentioned, the army will not help the government on this issue and the fact that so many wives and children of high ranking members of the Bangkok elite were also likely to be protesting on the airport grounds did not ease the decision-making process.

### Emergency Planning

Another concern that has emerged is the amount of training check-in staff and general airport workers have in crisis management and evacuation procedures. Especially, people from the higher strata of management who should be ready to implement a crisis management system immediately the need arises.

Information garnered from people present at the point of "take-over" was one of chaos as many staff were seen running away and tourists were left to figure out for themselves what plan of action to take. There was no information and a lot of potential for further unrest from people not involved in the original push. Talk about volatile situations and the potential for unruly passenger behaviour. Imagine being stuck in an airport for 24 hours with no



information and a thousand people in yellow shirts constantly clapping their hand clackers!

The requirement for a centralised command post to relay information and address the issues and needs of the passenger is vital in a case like this.

**Conclusion**

According to Airport Director Serirat Prasutanond, the Airports of Thailand has lost more than US\$1 million since the shutdown of Suvarnabhumi and he indicated that Thailand's state-of-the-art gateway to the world might remain closed until 15th December: three weeks after the demonstrators commenced their action.

That pessimistic view may not come to fruition. On Tuesday 2nd December (as this journal was set to go to press), Prime Minister Wongsawat resigned after Thailand's Constitutional Court dissolved the nation's top three ruling parties for electoral fraud and banned Wongsawat himself from politics for five years. The PAD commenced their celebrations and announced that the airport demonstrations

would end the next day. A limited number of cargo-only flights resumed immediately and some predict that international passenger flights might be fully operational by 6th December.

In the meantime, some passengers are getting out through U-Tapao Airport, near to Pattaya, but facilities there are very limited. For a start, there are insufficient X-ray machines and metal detectors to carry out even the most basic screening. Additionally, Air Asia and Thai Airways are operating extra inbound and outbound flights from Chiang Mai and Phuket international airports which, albeit regional, are better equipped to deal with civil aviation than U-Tapao which has greater fame for being the home of the Royal Thai Navy First Air Wing and a Thai Airways maintenance facility than being an international passenger terminal.

One just hopes that, when Bangkok's airports do re-open, the grounds are thoroughly searched as, even though there is little evidence of damage, there may well be people with more evil intent that would wish to exploit the potential a mass demonstration has afforded them to

infiltrate weapons and explosives into secure areas.

Ominously, for the rest of the world, the demonstrators would appear to have achieved their goal through their airport-based action. They may not have ensured peace in Thailand and could well have exacerbated the divide between the reds and the yellows in the long term, which could herald a more violent future. What is clear is the fact that people power can successfully overwhelm the best security system: globally, we must learn from the experience of Bangkok.

*Philip Baum is Editor of Aviation Security International and Managing Director of Green Light Ltd. Aaron Le Boutillier is Manager, Asia Pacific Operations for Green Light Ltd., whose regional offices move from Singapore to Bangkok in January 2009. The publishers of Aviation Security International would also like to thank Terry Alton, a Bangkok-based security consultant, for his assistance in the preparation of this article.*

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