



UCBMUN XXI



Thailand 2014: The Bangkok Shutdown

Update Paper

Bangkok Shutdown 2014: Update Paper

Introduction:

This update is designed to enhance your understanding of the landscape and setting of both Bangkok and broader Thailand going into this committee. It will consist of a more detailed description of the committee's setting in Bangkok, some relevant graphics and maps, a brief survey of how protests in Bangkok operated in the last ten years, an update on where the major players are at the start of the committee, and some further detail on how the committee will be run.

Painting Bangkok

Thailand's capital city has long since established itself as a hub for tourism: with its eclectic combination of modernity and history drawing swathes of foreigners to the banks of the Chao Phraya river upon which the city was built. Bangkok is the product of its both its rich and tumultuous history and the driving forces of globalization increasingly prevalent in Southeast Asia today. This section of the update paper will aim to paint a picture of Bangkok; but one that you may not necessarily find easily on the internet. Feel free to use this information as you approach your research and performance in this committee.

Geography

The western part of the city, built around the north-south flowing portion of the Chao Phraya river constitutes what is known as the old city. This area housed the bustling commercial and business districts from the post-WWII era until the late 1980s. Around this time, development began to move eastward, towards the arterial Sukhumvit road. Today, Bangkok's main commercial district is Ratchaprasong, in the Sukhumvit road area and away from the old city; although there always seems to be a new up and coming mall no matter where you are in the city. Ratchaprasong's main intersection is a prime example of the juxtaposition of old and new in Bangkok, with the Erawan Shrine (a small shrine to the Hindu god Brahma) at a street corner diagonally opposite the glitzy mall CentralWorld (that was burned and gutted during the 2010 Protests):

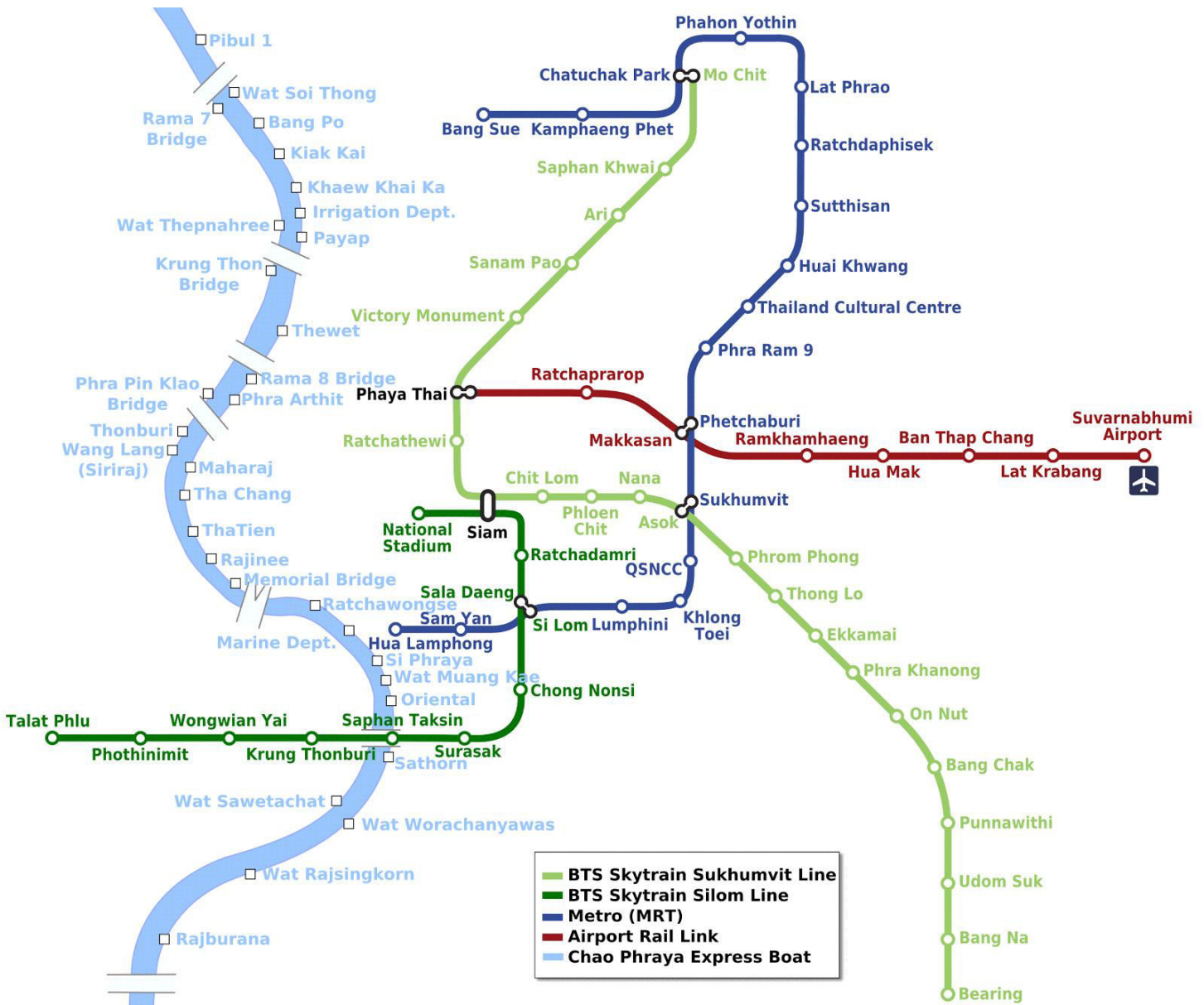
Figure 1: The Erawan Shrine with two BTS Skytrain lines converging above and CentralWorld's LED screen in the background



Transportation

Bangkok was once known as the “Venice of the East” as it could be traversed by a complex network of canals (known as “Klong” in Thai). Today, these canals have largely been replaced by roads which are characterized by some of the worst traffic in the world. This traffic has been severely exacerbated in the last decade, with a growing expat population, increased tourism, and stagnation in infrastructure development. It can take over an hour to

travel two miles by road in Bangkok at peak hour, and the extreme heat and humidity present in Bangkok’s tropical climate makes it difficult to promote pedestrian traffic. Public transportation exists, but the network is not extensive enough to fully offload the roads and address their congestion problem.



There are two main metropolitan rail lines in Bangkok: the Bangkok Transit System (BTS), a two-line elevated skytrain system, and the Metropolitan Rapid Transit (MRT), a two line subway system. While the two transit systems are operated and

ticketed separately, interchanges exist between the two lines. There are currently talks underway to propose an all-inclusive ticketing system that allows for more affordable and smoother interchanges between both lines; this is projected to be

completed in 2017. A third rail line, the Airport Link, is a newer rail system that connects the city to Suvarnabhumi International Airport (which is far East of the main city). These train lines have all, in recent years, begun to experience intense congestion (especially at the key interchange stations like Siam and Asok).

commuter route for the city. However, the canals are notorious for their extreme pollution: rumors often circulate that whatever organisms remaining in the canals are mutated from the carcinogenic water content. While this may be partially attributable to urban legend, the canals are without a doubt extremely polluted.



While Bangkok's canal network is hardly what it was several decades ago, a system of river and canal ("Khlong") boats do continue to operate in the city. Canal boats are long tailed motorboats with covers and several rows of benches. Khlong San Saeb, a canal that flows parallel to the major Phetburi road, serves as a key

Perhaps the defining feature of Bangkok's transportation system is the prevalence of motorcycle taxis (known locally as "motosai"). These are two-wheel rides driven by official orange vest-clad motorcycle taxi drivers, who can drive single passengers short distances for a nominal fee, usually under 50 baht. These



motorcycle taxi drivers tend to group themselves into large taxi stands at the mouths of “sois” (streets that feed into the arterial roads). These drivers known for their notoriously unsafe but very convenient way of weaving in and out heavy traffic,

flagrantly driving in the opposite direction on one-way streets, and getting their passengers to their destinations in good time despite the Bangkok traffic. An alternative to these rather dangerous motorcycle taxis are Tuk-Tuks, which are



three-wheeled open-air automobiles, very popular with the tourists.

Recreation

At every corner of Bangkok, there is a visible confluence of ancient heritage and the hallmarks of cosmopolitan life. Undoubtedly, Bangkok is famed for its unique nightlife: from its vibrant bar scene to the more notorious red light districts. The districts of Thonglor and Sathorn house some of Bangkok's trendiest bars and clubs, often frequented by the Thai elite and the city's expatriates. Closer to the old city is Khao San Road, a major road in the "hippie" district of Bangkok housing low-cost bars and clubs which target mainly European backpackers but also inevitably end up promoting much of Thailand's underage drinking.

While prostitution is not technically criminalized in Thailand, there is harsh regulation placed on soliciting and the like - but Thailand's sex industry is booming. From the red light districts of Patpong, Nana, and Soi Cowboy to the more benign-looking massage parlors and spas that discreetly advertise on their doors that "Outside Service is Available", the realities of prostitution surround you in Bangkok. Despite the strong cultural heritage of the art of Thai massages, the practice has

become a punch-line of sorts internationally, with its "happy endings".

But Bangkok is famous for much more beyond its nightlife. From night markets that spring up only after sundown with stalls selling fried pork on a skewer and fresh *Roti* (crepes with banana and other sweet additions) to the *Pad Thai* stall frequented by office-goers at the corner of their streets. Bangkok also thrives on its abundance of 7-Eleven (known simply as "seven") stores that stay open for 24 hours. In fact, in some parts of the city, there may be 3-4 7-Eleven stores within a 100 meter radius.

Thai culture plays a strong role in shaping the culture of Bangkok as well - particularly through its observance of cultural and religious holidays. Perhaps the best example of this is the Thai New Year's festival of Songkran in mid-April. Songkran is celebrated first with the Buddhist tradition of merit-making (wherein Thais offer food and other goods to monks), and then with large scale water play as a symbol of purification. During the days of Songkran, Bangkok erupts into a full blown water fight and it is impossible to set foot outside without being drenched by ice water (a welcome change in the sweltering April heat).



The Mechanics Shutting Down Bangkok: A Visual

In the past ten years, protestors in Bangkok have utilized the specific geography of the capital city to draw crowds and attention. In addition to the seemingly obvious protest locations of the Government House and the Democracy Monument, Ratchaprasong and Asok intersections have proven themselves to be strategic locations for protestors to amass significant media attention. Ratchaprasong, the major shopping district, is a hub for tourists and

locals alike - and shutting it down draws attention, whether positive or negative.

In 2010, CentralWorld was burned and gutted by Red Shirt anti government protestors after a week of camping out at Ratchaprasong:



Below is an image from earlier in that week, showing the large crowd of red shirt protesters.



Updates on the Current Situation

Protests

There has already been a large protest in opposition to the November 2013 amnesty bill, which, among other things, dismissed the corruption charges leveled on Thaksin Shinawatra and pardoned protesters involved in large movements dating back to 2004. The bill was also passed in a pre-dawn session of the House of Representatives, thereby disallowing pushback and debate from the opposition; this led to further criticism and suspicion of the government and the Pheu Thai Party. Opposition to the bill came from not only the Democrat Party, but also the Red Shirts.

It appears that the Red Shirts are gaining a following, especially among those living in rural areas of Thailand. Similarly, the Yellow Shirts are expanding their influence and reach. The two movements have not clashed as of yet, but many are anticipating a violent collision should the two groups cross paths.

Thaksin Shinawatra

Thaksin, the former Prime Minister of Thailand who was ousted in a coup d'état in 2006, remains in exile in Dubai. Despite this, he continues to exert much influence over the Thai populace and government,

especially due to the fact that his sister is the current Prime Minister. Rumors are spreading that Thaksin is preparing to make a grand entrance back into Thai politics when the timing is perfect; though these rumors have little evidence behind them, they serve as a reminder that the idea of Thaksin returning to power in Thailand is not as unpopular as some may suspect.

The Royal Family

King Bhumibol Adulyadej is currently suffering from a low grade fever and pneumonitis, but his health has been improving due to his doctor's prescription of antibiotics. Nevertheless, the King's health conditions remain unpredictable, and Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn is being prepared to ascend in the case of the King's death. This is not, however, the first scare that the King's health has delivered the country, and he may well continue to reign in his old age.

Committee Dynamics

This committee will be run in a traditional crisis fashion, with the crisis staff bringing in frequent updates to delegates on various scenarios and situations playing out in Bangkok, broader Thailand, and on the international stage. We will not be using a notepad system; rather, we will be using a

single-note system. We ask that delegates please write clearly, legibly, and be sure to include the name of their character on both the outside and inside of their crisis notes. Additionally, we ask that delegates please number or bullet-point their crisis notes whenever possible, as this will result in a much quicker response from the crisis staff.

At the beginning of the first committee session on Thursday, you will each receive a dossier that contains in it your portfolio powers, including: personal wealth or budget, relevant connections both domestically and abroad, and, where applicable, detailed military powers.