

Lipman/Passport the world: Eyewitness to a dark day in Thailand's history

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BANGKOK, THAILAND -- For the second time in nearly two decades, May 19 served as one of the darkest days in Thailand's modern history.

Unfortunately in Bangkok, history did repeat itself and the date will forever be associated with the two times in the royal country's volatile political history when violence and protests spiraled out of control.

Since the sniper attack on Major Gen. [Khattiya Sawasdiapol](#) -- better known as Seh Daeng -- at the Sala Daeng intersection May 13, the tense situation saw increased instability, turning the areas near the red shirts' Ratchaprasong protest site into war zones as red mobs, supported by armed black shirts, fought street battles with security forces. Friends were forced to evacuate their apartments because they were declared "live firing zones" and the public transportation system was shut down indefinitely.

Things finally reached a boiling point with the rejection of the brokered peace process and rumors of an imminent crackdown by the [Royal Thai Government](#) and army. I went to bed late that night only to wake up at 6 a.m. May 19 with a pit in my stomach and disbelief at what I was reading on Twitter and seeing on the Thai television stations in my apartment.

With the collapse of the peace talks, the government used force to break up the protest sites at Ratchaprasong intersection and Lumpini Park. Armored personnel carriers (APCs) rolled down familiar streets and troop reinforcements were launched as the sun rose. By noon, the [Royal Thai Army](#) gained control of Lumpini and the bamboo and tire barricades were broken through. After an emotional announcement of surrender from the main stage at Ratchaprasong, the area was cleared out and hoards of red shirts were brought to waiting buses to bring them safely home. At around 2 p.m., seven red shirt leaders turned themselves in to the police on charges of violation of the emergency rule and committing acts of terrorism.

Unfortunately, their surrender failed to calm the tempers of the remaining rogue and extremist red shirt protesters, who immediately ran amok throughout Lumpini, Ratchaprasong and [Din Daeng](#), torching several buildings around the protest site -- including Central World, Southeast Asia's second largest mall -- and throughout much of the city. A curfew was placed on the city and 23 other provinces for the remainder of the week as the violence grew progressively worse throughout May 19.

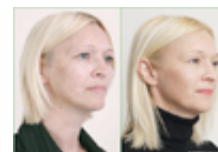
I watched the day's events unfold from a safe distance in a friend's apartment-cum-expatriate refugee



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camp not far from mine, which offers an iconic view of the Bangkok city skyline. Logged into the Reuters' live blog of events, Al Jazeera's live broadcast coverage, Twitter and Thai TV stations, we could see thick black plumes of smoke billow and cover the skyline from the affected areas -- a view so vastly different from the city we all knew.

To be in the city while it was occurring on the streets I used to love felt surreal. These were not the cheerful Thais I had come to know and it was only weeks prior that I walked a visiting friend through the red main stage area and a pro-government rally to debunk the idea that Thailand is unsafe for people to visit.

It was an emotionally trying day, and incredibly disheartening, to watch the city that has been the backbone of my travels in Southeast Asia implode. An immense sense of sadness and disappointment in witnessing the devolution of public discourse and rational dialogue took over all other emotions. Yet, at no given moment did I feel unsafe.

While staring out at the burning skyline that day, we all talked about the volatile political system of Thailand, lèse majeste laws and free press, the battle between political factions and fair elections; all of the things that have seemed to dominate much of my conversations and writings since settling in the city.

When I came to the city, I did so under the pretenses that I would take a course for certification to teach English as a second language. The anti-government protests changed that, though, and I suddenly found myself engrossed in Thai media, soaking in as many reports as I could, eager to learn more about the tight grip the protests held on the city. Because I am not a Thai national and don't have a vote, I'm hesitant to offer an opinion on either side, though I sympathize with one cause more than the other.

At this point, no matter which side I, my expat or Thai national friends take, both the red shirts and the Royal Thai Government have blood on their hands and the political system needs to be seriously reevaluated. To have an effective democracy in the truest sense, free press, an absence of corruption, viable elections and alternative opposition and equal justice for all needs to be established. Until the conversation shifts from red shirts vs. the government to the steps to build a real democracy, there can be no solution. Though the day's events were traumatic and heartbreaking, it can hopefully serve as a wake-up call for Thailand.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. Visit her blog, Passport: The World, at www.stamfordadvocate.com. To read Sarah's blog, go to <http://blog.ctnews.com/lipman>.