

THOSE IN AUTHORITY SHOULD CHOOSE WORDS CAREFULLY 10A**EDITORIAL****THOSE IN AUTHORITY
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Reactions among certain members of the ruling party to opposition rallies border on intimidation; it's time they lived up to their 'democratic ideals'

A common belief among political observers in Thailand is that when outspoken Deputy Prime Minister Chalerm Yoobamrung says something, the outcome is likely to go in the opposite direction. This may be the case again after he dismissed the significance of anti-government "white mask" protesters. To him they are just a handful of familiar faces, but they proved him wrong with their large turnout in Bangkok last Sunday.

Quick to comment, the deputy premier sent the protesters a warning that they should be careful of a "third party". He made it clear there was the possibility of a bomb attack at the rally. The protesters were also told that police would take legal action if there were any "wrongdoing". As threatening as they were, his comments didn't discourage the group that calls itself Anonymous Thailand, whose numbers are surging. Some of them even signalled that they had joined the rally in response to the "invitation" from Chalerm.

Was the government concerned about the opposition at all? Chalerm firmly shook his head. Although he acknowledges the growing presence, he was quick to provoke the group by saying their number was small. His comments hardly reflect the tough reality that the government is currently facing – from its own mismanagement if not the protests.

The rally comes at a time when corruption is rife. The problems of the rice price-pledging scheme have peaked, there is ambiguity in the massive flood-prevention project, and there are questions over the investigation into the murder of anti-government figure Akeyuth Anchanbutr. It all adds up to mounting pressure. Indeed, the popularity of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and the ruling Pheu Thai Party has plunged by 10.8 and 7.8

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per cent respectively compared to last November, according to a recent Bangkok Poll.

Chalerm remains confident that nothing can shake the government's stability. He is not alone in that assumption. Former prime minister Somchai Wongsawat also recently expressed his firm belief that the Yingluck administration will stay the course of its four-year term.

Like Chalerm, the former premier and the brother-in-law of Yingluck has warned the "white masks" against sedition. His message goes that if protesters aim to

topple the government, it is a crime against the state and those guilty are subject to the death penalty. Such a warning could be interpreted as intimidation. It is perhaps understandable that Somchai might make such utterances after his bitter experience with street protests when he was the prime minister.

But his warning is not grounded in reality. The white-mask group is not clearly linked to any one political group. The protesters have gathered after communicating on the social media, and their protests have proved orderly so far, without seizing the airport or any section of the city. They have not set up a "fortress" or invaded any government properties. Their campaign is far from following in the footsteps of the yellow and red shirts. Still, Somchai told the press: "It is not right if they are not pleased with the government and come out on the street and are armed with weapons."

Somchai and Chalerm's reactions are not in line with the tenets of a democratic culture. They are concerned about freedom and rights only when they are not in government. Had the Democrat Party's Suthep Thaugsuban said the same kind of thing during the red-shirt take-over of central Bangkok, Somchai or Chalerm would have condemned the statement. Unknowingly, they are now tasting their own medicine. They have both obviously suffered knee-jerk reactions to the white-mask movement.

Asserting authority is sometimes necessary to instil public order, but it has to be proportionate to the reality. Talk of "sedition", "national security" or "crimes against the state" when responding to an orderly opposition rally is cause for grave concern. The government's concern is increasing. This administration labels itself "truly democratic" when compared to its main political rival, the Democrat Party. It has to prove its democratic credentials, but will not be able to do so by issuing veiled threats against those who oppose it.