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Bangkok Today

As the vortex of Thailand's power and a hotbed of political activism, Bangkok entered 2012 bruised and battered. Already shaken by street protests and clashes between pro-monarchy forces and supporters of deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, in June 2011 the capital was struck by devastating floods resulting in the loss of 600 lives, and a staggering US\$45 billion in economic costs to farms and factories. Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra fared poorly in flood management, but won sympathy for her accountability and hard work.

Best on Film

Monrak Transistor (directed by Pen-Ek Ratanaruang; 2001) An aspiring *loók tǔng* (Thai country music) singer trades his bucolic provincial life for one of struggle in the big city.

Nang Nak (directed by Nonzee Nimbutr; 1999) This classic Thai tale is a fascinating peek at Thai beliefs, not to mention at the provincial village that existed before Bangkok was taken over by concrete.

Best in Print

Sightseeing (Rattawat Lapcharoensap; 2004) Written by an American-born Thai who later moved to Bangkok, the short stories in this book provide a look at the lives of normal Thais who live in the type of suburbs and towns most visitors will never see.

Four Reigns (Kukrit Pramoj; Thai 1953, English 1981) *Four Reigns* follows the fictional life of Phloi, a minor courtier during the Bangkok palace's last days of absolute monarchy.

Democratic Stalemate

The floods of 2011 became Yingluck's political baptism. Her post-flood learning curve has been steep, but she has gained much in stature and confidence as she holds the electoral ground in lieu of her controversial older brother. Yingluck hails from the Shinawatra family business and made it to the premiership in 45 days on the coat-tails of Thaksin's resilient popularity and populist platform that, a decade ago, provided a sense of upward mobility to the neglected masses and addressed long-standing grievances of Thailand's rural heartlands. Thaksin's pro-establishment opponents, clad in royalist yellow, have done all they can to keep him at bay since the coup, but he keeps hovering over them as Thailand's undefeated election winner so far this century. Thaksin's years in power were characterised by corruption allegations, conflicts of interest, abuses of power and human rights violations. As a corruption conviction and two years in jail await his return, Thaksin and his loyalists have pinned their hopes on a general amnesty, or constitutional amendments based on the Yingluck government's majority in the national assembly.

The titanic tussle between Thaksin's red shirts and Thailand's yellow-shirted traditional elites has yielded a political stalemate. The exiled former prime minister can win elections but is not allowed to rule, while his opponents can call the shots but are unable to triumph at the polls. A truce has been put in place for the interim. Establishment centres have allowed Yingluck to rule in Thaksin's name without the street protests that rocked Bangkok in 2008 (most spectacularly the takeover of Bangkok's airports). In return, the pro-Thaksin red shirts stay in line, Thaksin agrees to remain abroad, the Yingluck government leaves the army's high command untouched, and anti-monarchy elements are suppressed.