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P-Move close in on dream

The government did the right thing to reverse Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's remarks and speak in good faith with P-Move representatives. Gen Prayut was wrong and unnecessarily abusive when he accused them of protesting in order to demand handouts. The People's Movement for a Just Society, to use P-Move's full name, is once again trying to right old wrongs. Now, thanks to clearer thinking, it may be possible.

Until now, every government of recent decades has acted wrongly towards both P-Move and the forest dwellers it represents. Even the suggestion that the Prayut regime will consider justice is a big step forward. In fact, given that the government and its supporting junta are indicating that they will participate in democratic elections, it would be to their advantage. The people of Thailand in general support P-Move. Resistance to this admirable group comes from the bureaucracy.

The grassroots network came to Bangkok collectively early this month seeking discussions with the government. Members sat on the sidewalk not far from Government House and pledged to remain there until they could meet senior officials. Security officials — army and police — attempted to block them. Soldiers in the North even boarded and illegally detained two buses overnight in order to prevent P-Move members from reaching Bangkok. In the capital, leaders spoke with the media to re-explain their predicament.

In brief, governments for several decades have declared occupied forest areas as protected. The effect was that they

seized land from "undocumented" forest dwellers, forcing the people out. The now-landless people had *chanot chum chon* land titles, issued long ago for community land ownership. Under a 2010 deal brokered by the Abhisit Vejjajiva government — the only one in recent memory to take any interest — members of 50 communities nationwide were given permission to dwell on, but not to sell, the land.

This enraged the bureaucrats, who saw it as upcountry people getting undeserved, favourable recognition by politicians. When the Yingluck Shinawatra government came to power in 2011, government will weakened. Gen Prayut's coup government of 2014 effectively opened the gates for the Royal Forest Department to once again throw communities off their own land. Quite properly fed up with the battle of Forest Department vs forest people, P-Move decided on the trip to Bangkok to hold the top level of the government accountable.

That is when Gen Prayut disrespected P-Move. He showed a remarkable lack of knowledge of the issue he was addressing. He accused P-Move of demanding "everything for free", which it has not done. "It just isn't possible to give away protected forest land," said the premier, but that demand had never been made.

On Saturday, Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon got involved. Thanks to the intervention of the army's chief of staff and day-to-day Isoc commander, Gen Natthapol Nakpanich, a deal was reached rather quickly. Gen Prawit will lead formal discussions on getting the community land deed project back on track. Land disputes were listed for negotiation. Recently threatened communities in seven provinces will not be moved.

This — not free land as Gen Prayut stated — met the P-Move goals for their Bangkok sit-in. Leaders and members quickly packed up and returned home. Once responsible regime members took P-Move seriously, it was something of a marvel how smoothly and beneficially this first small step was achieved.

Now P-Move and accountable government members will get down to brass tacks. By conceding that P-Move is acting in good faith without political motive, the regime conceded must now move expeditiously and in good faith. Forest dwellers have been stigmatised, brutalised and treated badly for many years. One hopes the government will negotiate with equal honesty and help P-Move's constituency to achieve the community land ownership they have long been promised.