Military coup ousts Thai prime minister

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Late Tuesday night, the Thai military deployed troops backed by armoured vehicles to seize control of the capital Bangkok, surrounding the parliament building, the prime minister's office and taking over all television stations. The coup against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra followed months of political intrigue fuelled by deep rifts in the ruling elites and a constitutional crisis that saw the April 2 national elections annulled by the courts.

The army, with the tacit support of Thai king Bhumibol Adulyadej, moved to preempt the resumption of mass anti-Thaksin protests due to take place on Wednesday. In April and May, hundreds of thousands of protesters took to the streets of Bangkok, demanding that Thaksin resign over corruption allegations. Thaksin promised in April to step aside after fresh elections. However, as a protracted constitutional crisis dragged on, he appeared likely to remain in control.

Thaksin was in New York at the time of the coup, planning to address the UN General Assembly. When he got wind of the putsch, the prime minister attempted to sack army chief General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin and impose a state of emergency. Thaksin phoned a message through to Bangkok's Channel 9 TV station which began to broadcast his decree at 10.20 p.m. According to the *Bangkok Post*, the announcement was cut off as troops entered the station. By 11 p.m. tanks were firmly planted at all strategic points in the city.

According to the *Nation*, General Sonthi and other armed forces heads were granted an audience with the king at midnight, effectively signalling royal approval for the coup. Early yesterday morning, the military leaders constituted themselves as the Political Reform Council, imposed martial law, revoked the country's 1997 constitution and dissolved Thaksin's government, the Constitutional Court and the Senate.

The Political Reform Council justified the coup by declaring that the Thaksin government had created "social division like never before," insulted the king and "politically meddled" with state organisations. Laying the basis for legal action against the ousted prime minister, it noted there were "widespread reports of corruption".

General Sonthi, who has assumed the role of interim prime minister, appeared on television yesterday. He announced that a civilian prime minister would be installed within two weeks, but that elections, which were due next month, would be postponed for a year while a new constitution was drafted. He threatened legal proceedings against Thaksin.

Significantly, the king issued a statement yesterday endorsing Sonthi as head of the Political Reform Council and calling on civil servants and the population to "obey his orders". The monarchy has close connections to the military, which directly ruled Thailand for most of the twentieth century. The king's support for the coup indicates that the most conservative elements of the Thai ruling elites are backing the move.

The military has been able to exploit widespread hostility to Thaksin, particularly in the capital. Soldiers and tanks were adorned with yellow ribbons—a sign of their support for the king, and also the colour adopted by anti-Thaksin protesters earlier in the year. No open opposition to the coup has yet emerged from elements of the security forces loyal to Thaksin or in rural areas where his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party had support.

The coup is the culmination of more than a year of bitter political infighting in Thai ruling circles. Billionaire telecommunications tycoon Thaksin and his TRT party swept to power in the 2001 and 2005 elections by exploiting popular opposition to the IMF "reform" agenda imposed by the Democratic Party-led government following the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998.

Thaksin won considerable support, particularly in rural areas, for his populist promises of handouts to villages, cheap health care and protectionist measures to defend Thai businesses. Increasingly, however, Thaksin came under international pressure to resume the IMF restructuring program in order to compete for foreign investment and shore up the economy. He privatised state assets, including the national electricity generating authority (EGAT), and began talks on a free trade deal with the US.

These steps generated significant opposition, including among Thaksin's former allies such as publishing magnate Sondhi Limthongul, who initiated a series of protest rallies last year. The demonstrations swelled to more than 100,000 in February amid widespread public outrage over the sale of Thaksin's family share in the telecommunications giant Shin Corp for $US1.9 billion. Not only was there anger over the manner in which Thaksin had avoided paying tax, but over the sale of a major Thai company to a foreign corporation—the Singapore government's investment arm Temasek.

The Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which organised the protests, became the focus for broader concerns among layers of the middle class and working class. EGAT workers facing the loss of jobs and conditions joined the rallies. Others voiced their opposition to Thaksin's monopolisation of the media and abuse of democratic rights, including his brutal "war on drugs" in 2003, in which the police reportedly carried out thousands of extra-judicial killings of alleged drug dealers.

Former senior Thai diplomats also spoke at the rallies, denouncing the government's brutal suppression of democratic rights in the Muslim south of the country that intensified a

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separatist uprising and damaged relations with Malaysia. The criticisms also reflected deep anger in the army hierarchy, which had been ordered to enforce a state of emergency in the south and increasingly found itself involved in a civil war.

Thaksin attempted to defuse the political crisis by calling a snap national election for April 2. He calculated, correctly, that support for TRT and its populist pork-barreling policies in the rural northern areas would ensure his re-election. However, the opposition parties boycotted the poll, triggering a constitutional crisis.

So intense was the hostility to Thaksin in Bangkok that a number of seats remained unfilled after the votes cast failed to reach the legal minimum of 20 percent. Under the constitution, parliament was not permitted to meet and form a new government until all seats were filled.

The opposition parties appealed to the king to sack Thaksin. He refused to do so but exerted pressure behind the scenes to press Thaksin to retreat. On April 4, Thaksin promised to step aside once a new cabinet was formed, prompting PAD to call off the Bangkok rallies. However, by-elections on April 23 failed to fill the empty seats, so the constitutional deadlock continued.

King Bhumibol finally intervened directly on April 25. Describing the situation as "a mess," he again rejected opposition appeals for him to sack Thaksin and called on the courts to resolve the constitutional crisis. On May 8, the Constitutional Court annulled the election as the opposition parties had called for.

Nevertheless, the political crisis continued unabated as Thaksin and his opponents engaged in a bitter struggle for control of the instruments of state. Concerned that TRT would win any new election, the opposition parties pressed for the replacement of the electoral commission and instituted legal actions against TRT aimed at declaring it illegal. For his part, Thaksin moved against his opponents and indicated that he would stay on as TRT leader after new elections.

One of the immediate triggers for the coup appears to have been Thaksin's moves against senior officers, including General Sonthi, who had been critical of the prime minister. The London *Times* reported that in July 100 middle-ranking officers loyal to Thaksin were removed from key posts in Bangkok. According to the *Asia Times* website, Thaksin was about to strike back by moving two of his supporters into key posts controlling security in the capital.

Asia Times journalist Shawn Crispin wrote: "The coup significantly comes against the backdrop of a hotly contested scheduled military reshuffle, in which Thaksin had controversially vied to elevate army officials loyal to him from his pre-Cadet Class 10 to the pivotal First Army Division. That reshuffle list reportedly brought Thaksin into conflict with senior members of the top brass and the [King's advisory] Privy Council, and his refusal to back down from the proposed personnel changes appears to have been a major factor behind the coup."

More fundamentally, however, Sonthi and his backers were deeply concerned that the unresolved political crisis was about to boil over again and involve masses of ordinary working people. Unable to resolve their deep divisions by constitutional means through elections, the ruling elites have imposed military rule above all to prevent the development of a political movement that threatened to move beyond the control of the existing political parties and institutions.

Significantly the opposition Democratic Party has backed the coup. Former prime minister and party leader Chuan Leekpai told the media: "As politicians, we do not support any kind of coup, but during the past five years the government of Thaksin created several conditions that forced the military to stage the coup. Thaksin has caused the crisis in the country." The Democratic Party has in the past opposed military rule and was in the forefront of mass protests in 1992 that led to the downfall of the last dictatorship.

International reaction has also been muted. The US, Britain and other major powers have issued statements lamenting the loss of democracy in Thailand and calling for its swift return. But there have been no calls for any sanctions against Thailand or appeals for Thaksin to be reinstalled as prime minister. US National Security Council spokesman Frederick Jones was typical. "We look to the Thai people to resolve their political differences in a peaceful manner and in accord with the principles of democracy and rule of law," he declared.

Sharp falls in the value of the baht and Thai shares, as well as broader market instability, reflect wider concerns that the coup is a sign of further political turmoil in Asia. Michael Spencer, chief Asia economist for Deutsche Bank in Hong Kong, reassured investors, declaring: "Why should there be any contagion in Asia? We have all across Asia fiscal surpluses, current account surpluses, we have debt levels that are down dramatically from 1997."

Underlying the Thai coup, however, are deeply felt resentments and anger over the impact of the economic restructuring measures that created the limited economic recovery following the Asian financial crisis. Far from resolving the underlying economic and political problems, military rule, while initially accepted by many, will inevitably generate popular opposition and further political turmoil. One of the first actions of the new military rulers was to ban all protests, public meetings or gatherings of more than five people.

Financial commentators may be hoping there will be no "contagion" but many of the processes underway in Thailand have their parallels throughout South East Asia and have already produced signs of political instability in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Ironically, a day before he was ousted, Thaksin addressed the prestigious Council of Foreign Relations in New York on the topic "The Future of Democracy in Asia". His fate may well be an indication of that of other governments, as ruling elites throughout the region find themselves unable to impose their agendas through electoral means.

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