

Thailand's military junta tightens its hold on power

John Roberts
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The Thai military junta strengthened its grip over the weekend by appointing a retired general as the new “civilian” prime minister and imposing an authoritarian constitution that sanctions the September 19 coup. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who supported the military takeover, approved the arrangements on Sunday afternoon.

The choice of Surayud Chulanont, a former army and armed forces commander, made clear that the junta's main aim is to suppress political opposition and social unrest. Other candidates mooted as prime minister, such as former World Trade Organisation head Supachai Panitchpakdi, might have helped placate international investors. But as the *Nation* newspaper put it, the generals chose “national stability” over “international image”.

Coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratkalin bluntly told the media that “security and social unity” was one of the reasons for installing Surayud. The military with the backing of the king, stepped in as mass protests against deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra were due to resume. The junta imposed martial law, deployed tanks and troops in Bangkok, abrogated the 1997 constitution, dispersed parliament and arrested leading figures from Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party.

In comments to the *Nation*, Surayud highlighted fears of political unrest, particularly after Thaksin hinted last week that he might return to Thailand from Britain. “Myself and several other people understand that supporters and opponents will clash on the day that Thaksin returns home. It would be a big commotion,” Surayud said. “Therefore, we want the military council to speed up national reconciliation.”

Thailand's military rulers are seeking to portray Surayud as a “democratic” general. In 1993, he was

critical of the army's massacre of protesters in 1992 and declared that the army should not be involved in politics. He was appointed army chief in 1998 by Democratic Party Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, but was removed by Thaksin in 2002, who transferred him to the largely ceremonial post of armed services chief.

However, General Surayud is just as ruthless as the rest of the military hierarchy. He made his career in the military's special forces and became their commander. In May 1992, he was in charge of the troops who killed dozens of students protesting against the military dictatorship of General Suchinda Kraprayoon. At the time, the current coup leader, Sonthi, was one of his subordinates.

For the past three years, Surayud has served on the Privy Council, an inner circle of close advisers to the king. He served as an aide to former army commander and military strongman Prem Tinsulaonda, who ruled Thailand throughout most of the 1980s. Prem, also a privy counsellor, has collaborated closely with the king throughout the current political crisis.

The interim constitution announced over the weekend is similar to that used by the 1991-92 military regime and makes no pretence of protecting democratic rights. The document provides a blanket amnesty for the participants in last month's coup and formally entrenches the junta as the Council for National Security (CNS), with sweeping powers on security matters.

While coup leaders claim they will have no role in the day-to-day matters, the CNS has the power to sack the prime minister at any time. A 250-member National Legislative Assembly appointed by the generals will replace parliament. A Constitution Drafting Committee will draw up a new constitution within 100 days and, presumably if the junta approves, will be put to a

plebiscite. Elections are to be held in October 2007.

The efforts to present the coup as “democratic” are in large measure aimed at dispelling international criticism and reassuring foreign investors. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* last week, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice sharpened Washington’s criticisms, urging the Thai military “to get back on democratic path very, very quickly”. Washington has terminated a \$24 million military aid package to Thailand and hinted at the cancellation of joint military exercises.

The Bush administration is not, however, calling for the immediate restoration of democracy or the return of Thaksin to power. Washington’s main concern is that the Thai coup may encourage political instability throughout the broader region. In her interview, Rice declared: “The biggest problem is that in a South East Asia that was pretty stable... it’s a U-turn.” While playing down the problem of “contagion,” she said, “we are terribly displeased to have had a military coup”.

The coup has raised fears among foreign investors that the new regime may reverse Thaksin’s market reforms. The *Financial Times* highlighted Surayud’s remarks over the weekend that his government would be guided by the “self-sufficiency” ideals of the king. “We won’t concentrate so much on the GDP numbers,” he said. “We would rather look into the indicators of people’s happiness and prosperity.”

Differences over economic policy have been at the heart of the conflict between Thaksin and his political opponents. The TRT won power in 2001 by capitalising on popular hostility to the Democratic Party government’s restructuring measures. Thaksin, himself a billionaire, made a series of populist pledges to the urban and rural poor. He easily won the 2005 national elections.

In power, Thaksin came under intense international pressure to continue pro-market policies, alienating some of his powerful supporters. Anti-Thaksin protests began last year and swelled to huge rallies in February amid allegations of corruption over the \$1.9 billion sale of the Thaksin family share in the Shin Corp communications conglomerate. Thaksin called a snap national election in April to try to consolidate his rule, but instead triggered a protracted constitutional crisis after the opposition boycotted the poll.

There is no doubt that the king and the coup leaders sympathise with elements of the disparate anti-Thaksin movement. But the decision to seize power was driven above all by fears that the political situation was threatening to spiral out of control. On the day before the coup, the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) was preparing to restart rallies against Thaksin, halted after he promised to step aside. The protests would have provoked an angry response from Thaksin’s supporters.

In the wake of the coup, the junta has banned all political activities. While tanks were withdrawn from the streets of Bangkok over the weekend and a formal end to martial law is expected, Prime Minister Surayud is unlikely to ease restrictions on political meetings and protests. Harsh censorship measures are in place and hundreds of community radio stations have been shut down, particularly in rural areas with strong TRT support.

The military ordered the closure of the Midnight University website last Friday. Six academics from the Chiang Mai and Midnight Universities had used the website to protest the new constitution. The site contains about 1,500 scholarly articles and received about 2.5 million hits a month. Thammasat University academic Kasai Tejapira declared that the military had closed “the foremost free and critical educational and public intellectual website in Thailand”.

Despite government bans, small groups of protesters have opposed the military regime. On September 25, 60 students held a rally inside Thammasat University, denouncing what they termed the “Council of Demented and Ridiculous Military.” On Friday, a taxi driver received serious injuries and wrecked his cab when he drove it into an army tank in the Royal Plaza. Nuamthong Praiwan, 60, had defiantly daubed his taxi with the slogans “Sacrificing Life” and “You destroyers of the country”.

These isolated protests are a small indication of the underlying social and political unrest that the coup is aimed at preempting.



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