

Washington returns to business as usual with Thai military

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The US administration immediately welcomed the installation of the newly elected government in Thailand last week as “a return to democracy” and moved to restore full relations, including with the military, which seized power in a coup in September 2006. Washington conveniently ignored the fact that the Thai military retains considerable powers, through a revamped constitution and a new security law that allows its intervention in the event of a vaguely defined national emergency.

The Bush administration’s criticisms of the Thai coup were limited from the outset. A small amount of military aid was halted under US congressional rules blocking assistance to any country where an elected leader has been overthrown. The Pentagon maintained its longstanding connections with the Thai military under a variety of guises including counter-terrorism and controlling weapons of mass destruction. The US military held its annual joint Cobra Gold exercises in Thailand last year without a hitch.

Last week, US State Department spokesman Tom Casey effusively congratulated “the Thai people on their success in reestablishing an elected government” and declared that the US looked forward to “engaging across a range of issues” with the new prime minister Samak Sundaravej. He announced that Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte had “certified to Congress that a democratically elected government has taken office in Thailand” paving the way for the resumption of full military cooperation.

The \$24 million in restored military aid includes the International Military Exchange Training program for Thai officers, the Foreign Military Financing program and the Global Peacekeeping Operations Initiative. Top US officials have already organised visits to Bangkok—Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill

is due for talks on February 28-29, followed by the chief of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Timothy Keating. Hill told the media last week that he regarded the return to civilian rule in Thailand as a “very, very positive step”.

US ambassador to Thailand, Eric Johns, noted approvingly that the new cabinet was considering plans to make Thailand more attractive to foreign investment. These include Samak’s promise to remove capital controls imposed by the military junta and the possible scrapping of a proposed tightening of regulations under the Foreign Business Act. Negotiations may also resume at some point on a Thai-US free trade agreement, begun in 2003 by ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Other countries, including Australia, quickly followed suit. A European Union statement from Brussels last week welcomed “the return to democracy” in Thailand and foreshadowed the development of “close and productive relations”. New Zealand foreign minister Winston Peters said the restoration of parliamentary rule was “good news” for Thais and for “their friends around the world”.

None of this praise has anything to do with concern for the democratic rights of ordinary Thais. While hailing the so-called restoration of democracy in Thailand, the Bush administration maintains relations with, and supplies military aid to, autocratic regimes around the world, including in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. In giving its stamp of legitimacy to the Thai elections last December, the Bush administration was driven by the need to restore full relations with a longstanding ally in South East Asia.

The Thai military has only grudgingly stepped into the political background. The election took place under a constitution drawn up by the junta, which was

designed to undermine the pro-Thaksin Peoples Power Party (PPP) and create a weak coalition government based around the Democratic Party. The PPP headed by Samak was created after Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) was banned and 111 of its leaders, including the exiled former prime minister, were barred from politics for five years.

Just before the election, the Thai generals also pushed through special security legislation which provides the military with extensive powers in the event of a national emergency. The upper house, almost half of which will be appointed by judicial and state officials, provides another avenue to block the new government's legislation and policies, and to impeach ministers.

None of the issues that led to Thaksin's ousting in 2006 have been resolved. Central to the disagreements were differences within the ruling elite over economic policy. Having initially protected weaker Thai businesses from international competition after coming to power in 2001, Thaksin began to succumb to international pressure to open up the Thai economy. Thaksin's former backers reacted angrily as he began a program of privatisation and spending cutbacks as well as negotiations for a Thai-US free trade deal.

Opposition protests swelled in 2006 as sections of middle class and workers joined in, angry over official corruption, Thaksin's anti-democratic methods and the social impact of the economic restructuring program. The military stepped amid a deepening constitutional crisis produced by a boycott of elections by opposition parties. The army also had its own concerns over the deepening crisis in the country's south caused by Thaksin's imposition of a state of emergency to stamp out Muslim separatist rebels.

In last December's election, however, the PPP won 233 seats in the 480 lower house seats and formed the new government with five smaller coalition partners. The military has no fundamental disagreements with Prime Minister Samak, who is a right-wing populist like Thaksin. He is closely associated with the military and served as the interior minister in a junta that seized power in 1976 following a massacre of student protestors at the Thammasat University.

The nature of the new government was indicated by Samak's declaration that he intends to revive Thaksin's war on drug traffickers. In 2003, the security

forces carried out a thinly veiled campaign of extra-judicial killings that resulted in the deaths of thousands of alleged drug dealers. Newly-installed Interior minister Chalermsak Yooamrungrasame has promised results in a new onslaught, particularly in border areas, within 90 days.

Differences with the military are likely to emerge over economic policy, as the Samak government proceeds to overturn what remain of the junta's capital controls. Economic growth was only 4.8 percent last year, among the lowest in South East Asia. There are also concerns that a US slowdown will affect exports, which contribute 60 percent of GDP. Any downturn in the Thai economy will only heighten tensions in the ruling elite and lead to social unrest.

As far as the Bush administration is concerned, however, it is back to business as usual. Washington has important interests at stake. Thailand is an important strategic partner in US efforts to encircle rival China through a series of alliances in Asia—stretching from Japan and South Korea through South East Asia and on to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. US relations with the Thai military stretch back to the 1960s and 1970s when the country was used for American bombing raids on North Vietnam.

Recent Congressional hearings over the CIA's torture tapes revealed the existence of a secret CIA-run interrogation centre at a Thai military base where at least two "terror" suspects from Pakistan and Afghanistan were questioned. A report on *AsiaTimes online* on January 25 suggests the base is, or was, in northeastern Udon Thani province and was also used for electronic spying.

Now that the US has formally certified a "return of democracy" in Thailand, US agencies are free to resume where they left off after the 2006 military coup.



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