

Standoff intensifies between Thai government and protesters

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The political crisis in Thailand continued over the weekend as thousands of anti-government protesters remained in occupation of government buildings in Bangkok and forced the temporary closure of three regional airports. Rail workers have shut down sections of the country's network and other unions are threatening to take industrial action.

Leaders of the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) have been demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej since May. Last Tuesday, however, PAD dramatically escalated the confrontation when an estimated 30,000 protesters invaded the compound that included the prime minister's office and other government buildings. PAD also attempted to take over a state-owned television station.

Samak, who was only installed as prime minister in February after his People Power Party (PPP) won national elections in December, has refused to budge. He accused PAD leaders last week of deliberately stoking up violence to force him to declare a state of emergency that would allow the military to take the reins of power. To date, he has insisted that he will not use force to disperse the protesters.

A stormy 11-hour debate in a special session of the national assembly ended late last night without any resolution to the crisis. The opposition Democratic Party called on the government to dissolve parliament and call fresh elections. Samak attacked the opposition for destroying the country's image and refused to either resign or hold a new national poll. On Saturday, all the parties in the ruling coalition reiterated their support for Samak.

In another sign of the seriousness of the crisis, Samak paid a visit to the Thai head of state—King Bhumibol Adulyadej—on Saturday but made no comment on the audience after he returned to Bangkok via a military airport. The king, who has intervened in acute political crises in the past, has made no comment on the present confrontation.

Last Friday, in a brief clash with protestors, police used tear gas to disperse about 2,000 PAD demonstrators outside Bangkok's Metropolitan Police Headquarters after they arrived demanding to see a police officer over a previous incident. Up to this point, however, the police have largely stood on the sidelines, allowing PAD demonstrators to maintain their occupation of the government compound despite court orders to leave. PAD leaders still face charges of insurrection, illegal assembly and refusing orders to disperse.

Also last Friday, protesters forced three southern regional airports—Phuket, Krabi and Hat Yai—to close. At Phuket airport, a major tourist destination, about 1,000 protestors forced their way into the terminal. PAD supporters blocked the entrances to terminals at Krabi and Hat Yai. The airports have since been reopened.

Nation reported on Saturday that Thai Airways International union leader Chamsri Sukchotrat had warned of strike action if violence were used against the protesters. It also noted that some airline staff and Port Authority of Thailand workers had joined around 240 train drivers and technicians who had stopped work, shutting down about a quarter of the country's rail network. Associations of state enterprise workers, including in electricity and water supply, were considering action in support of PAD.

The protest movement is rather amorphous. PAD draws its main support from among layers of the urban middle class. They regard Samak as a stooge for former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who was ousted by a military coup in 2006. Thaksin, a right-wing populist with a base of support in rural areas, was bitterly criticised for his corruption, his autocratic methods of rule and military crackdown on Muslim separatists in the country's south.

The anti-government protests have the potential, however, to trigger wider unrest. The involvement of trade unions is connected to concerns among government workers that Samak will continue Thaksin's economic restructuring, which involved the privatisation of state enterprises and job losses. High oil and food prices, which have driven inflation to a 10-year high of 9.2 percent, are undermining living standards and further fuelling social discontent.

Right-wing protest leaders

The right-wing PAD leadership has not the slightest concern for the jobs and conditions of working people, nor, despite its name, for the defence of basic democratic rights. The PAD leaders, media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul and ex-general Chamlong Srimuang, a former Bangkok governor, are connected to conservative sections of the military, state bureaucracy and royalist establishment.

Sondhi backed Thaksin's election in 2001 when he campaigned against the Democratic Party and its free-market policies, promising to protect Thai businesses. But as Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (TRT) government came under pressure and began to implement pro-market economic reforms, Sondhi turned against him and launched PAD in 2005. When the PAD protests swelled in early 2006, in particular over his controversial sale of Shin Corp for \$US1.9 billion, Thaksin called a snap election, which the TRT won overwhelmingly, but the political crisis continued.

With the tacit support of the king, the army ousted Thaksin and imposed military rule in September 2006. The military only permitted fresh elections last December after pushing through a new constitution that included an upper house, which is only half-elected, and a special security law that provided for a permanent role for the military in politics, including the right to intervene directly in times of emergency. The TRT was outlawed and 111 senior TRT figures

banned from politics for five years.

Despite all the obstacles placed in its way, the PPP—a reincarnation of the TRT—won the largest number of seats. Joined by a number of smaller parties, it formed government with Samak as prime minister. Samak is a longstanding right-wing politician who was interior minister in the 1976 military regime that took over following a massacre of students that year at Thammasat University. The PPP won the bulk of its support in the rural north and north east of the country, capitalising on Thaksin's reputation for providing limited handouts and improved services. Samak was confirmed as prime minister by 310 to 163 parliamentary votes in February.

The PAD protests began in May when Samak and the PPP proposed to amend the constitution. The PPP faces being dissolved under regulations imposed during military rule because some of its members allegedly broke electoral laws during the December election campaign. Electoral authorities are to decide this week if the process of dissolving the PPP is to continue.

PAD accuses the PPP of being a proxy for Thaksin, despite the fact that the government did not strike a deal with Thaksin over corruption charges after he returned to Thailand from exile in February. Thaksin has gone into exile again after a court found his wife guilty of corruption and imposed a jail term last month. State authorities are proceeding with legal moves to seize \$US2.3 billion of Thaksin family assets, a move that is designed to destroy Thaksin's political clout.

PAD's anti-democratic character is underscored by its call for a new constitution, in which only 30 percent of members of parliament would be elected and the remaining 70 percent appointed by state bodies. PAD leaders have concluded that it is impossible to win over sections of the rural population that have backed the PPP, and previously the TRT. The sentiment among right-wing, middle class protesters is that the rural poor are too ignorant and uneducated.

In July, PAD joined the nationalist furore created over a joint Thai-Cambodian communiqué on the disputed Preah Vihear temple, claiming that the Samak government had effectively endorsed a 1962 International Court ruling that recognised Cambodian sovereignty over the temple. Foreign Minister Noppadon Pattama was forced to step down over the decision and was replaced in a major cabinet reshuffle last month to try to improve the government's image.

Divisions in the military

The political paralysis in Bangkok is compounded by divisions within the military. While the army has been reluctant to support PAD's desire for a military intervention, the security forces have also not cracked down on the protests. Police have made no attempt to serve arrest warrants on PAD leaders.

Army commander General Anupong Paojinda last week reiterated that he did not believe another military coup was the answer. The military's 16-month rule produced one economic crisis after another as the junta attempted to impose the king's ideology of economic self-sufficiency and protect Thai businesses. The regime was forced to withdraw or modify its measures to control the movement of foreign capital and investment after the share market plunged.

According to the *Bangkok Post* on Saturday, Samak held a meeting of the Defence Council last week at which General Anupong refused to support the imposition of a state of emergency. When recalled to the meeting to discuss the escalating crisis, Anupong reportedly suggested to Samak that he either resign or dissolve the lower house of the parliament.

Several *Asia Times* articles have reported a split in the military

hierarchy with a "hard-line" group supporting PAD. The *Asia Times* of August 29 cited an official as saying that the prime minister's office was monitoring a number of senior pro-PAD officers, including General Panlop Pinmanee and Manoonkrit Roopkachorn. To ward off the possibility of another coup, Samak, who is also defence minister, has been seeking to cultivate relations with layers of the army top brass.

The opposition Democratic Party has publicly maintained its distance from the PAD. However, deputy leader Korn Chatikavanij told *Asia Times* that the best scenario would be for Samak to resign and for the Democrats to form a government with realigned political parties. Such a move would have to include defectors from the PPP. Korn's statement suggests the Democrats are manoeuvring behind the scenes for a parliamentary realignment either to form a new government or to contest fresh elections.

What is taking place is a bitter fight within the Thai political establishment between two right-wing factions, neither of which represents the interests of ordinary working people. At the centre of the differences are sharp disagreements over the direction of economic policy, exacerbated by Thailand's weakening economy. Annualised economic growth slowed from 6.1 percent in the first quarter to 5.3 percent in the second—far weaker than regional rivals such as China, India and Vietnam. Since the PAD protests began in May, the SET share index has declined 24 percent, reflecting concerns about political instability.

The protracted political crisis in Thailand, which goes back to 2005, is a product of broader international economic shifts. Not only is Thailand facing fierce regional competition for foreign investment but its exports are being affected by the economic slowdown in its major markets in the US, Europe and Japan. Whatever the outcome of the immediate political standoff, no faction of the Thai ruling elite has a remedy for the country's deepening economic problems or the intensifying social tensions between rich and poor.



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