

Thai court sacks prime minister over cooking show “corruption”

Differences over economic policy

Peter Symonds
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The political impasse in Thailand descended into farce on Tuesday when the country's Constitutional Court ordered the dismissal of Prime Minister Samak Samaravej, along with his cabinet, because Samak hosted a cooking show on commercial television. The judges unanimously declared that Samak had violated the constitution by receiving an honorarium of around \$579 per appearance while in the position of prime minister.

Samak's People Power Party (PPP) initially dismissed the verdict, declaring that it would re-elect Samak as prime minister. However, amid mounting pressure from business circles for an end to the country's protracted political crisis, the party appears to be casting around for a replacement. The parliament meets tomorrow to ratify a new prime minister and cabinet.

The Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which triggered the immediate turmoil on August 26 by invading the grounds of Government House and demanding Samak's replacement, has declared that it will continue its protests despite the court decision. PAD leader Prapan Kunmee told thousands of protesters on Tuesday: “We will stay here until this government is thrown out.”

The court's decision was clearly a political one. Analyst Giles Ungpakorn commented to Agence France Presse (AFP): “The law that they are using to say that Samak has to resign was designed to limit the influence of big business in politics. Samak's cooking program doesn't really fit the bill. It isn't the spirit of this law. It just adds to the confusion and the circus.” Samak, who hosted the show “Tasting, Grumbling” for seven years, continued for four episodes after becoming prime minister.

The court verdict is one more indication that powerful layers of the military and state bureaucracy are backing the demands of the PAD leadership for a government that suits their interests. PAD leaders insist that Samak has been functioning as a proxy for former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was deposed in a military coup in

September 2006 and is currently in exile. A series of cases has been launched in the courts against Samak, other PPP leaders and the party itself, which the electoral commission ruled last week should be dissolved for malpractice in national elections last December.

PAD's objections to Thaksin and Samak have nothing to do with their real crimes: autocratic methods of rule, Thaksin's extra-judicial killing of hundreds of alleged drug dealers in 2003, or the ongoing military repression in the country's south against Muslim separatists. Rather PAD and its backers are hostile to Thaksin for undercutting the influence of the traditional ruling elites in Bangkok by establishing a political base in rural areas through his populist pledges and limited financial handouts.

PAD leader Sondhi Linthongkul, a wealthy media magnate, bases himself on vague appeals for a “new politics”. However, behind the populist façade of greater participation, this “new politics” is a reactionary mixture of Thai nationalism and autocratic rule to be presided over by the military, state bureaucracy and the king. In the guise of ending vote-buying in rural areas by corrupt “old politicians”, Sondhi has proposed that 70 percent of parliament be appointed, with greater military independence from government.

Sondhi has refused to negotiate, declaring that PAD will continue its protests until the government goes. PAD's ability to dictate terms is dependent on the tacit support of the military which has refused to implement a state of emergency that Samak declared last week following violent clashes between pro- and anti-government demonstrators. Under the state of emergency, all gatherings of more than three people were banned. Yet the army, which has never been squeamish about suppressing protests in the past, has refused to act against the PAD demonstrators.

Sondhi is using his ASTV satellite news station to beam PAD propaganda throughout Thailand around-the-clock and to fund the occupation at Government House. He told the

Asia Times web site this week that the rallies of thousands of largely middle class protesters were costing one million baht (\$US29,000) a day. Sondhi told *Asia Times* that apart from ASTV, which foots most of the bill, the remaining money came from medium- and small-sized business owners.

Differences over economic policy

The political standoff between the Samak government and the PAD leadership is the continuation of a bitter and protracted struggle between factions in the Thai ruling elite. Both are right-wing in their politics, autocratic in their methods of rule and treat ordinary working people and their aspirations with contempt. For all the current vitriol, PAD leader Sondhi and his backers initially threw their weight behind Thaksin when formed his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party and won office in 2001.

Thaksin was able to capitalise on the widespread discontent toward the previous Democrat Party government, which had implemented the austerity program demanded by the IMF in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Thaksin, a billionaire tycoon with close ties to the military and police, not only promised handouts to rural areas, but pledged to protect hard-hit Thai banks and businesses, such as Sondhi's media empire. Once in office, however, Thaksin came under pressure from international capital to implement privatisation and market reforms and, as he did so, lost the backing of Sondhi and other supporters.

Sondhi denounced Thaksin for his "corruption" and launched PAD in 2005 with the aim of bringing down his government. The army, with the backing of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, seized power in September 2006 after Thaksin's victory in a snap election provoked a constitutional crisis and ongoing PAD protests. The military regime, however, quickly ran into economic difficulties after it attempted to impose capital controls and provoked an immediate collapse in share values. The junta drew up a new constitution, banned the TRT and called fresh elections last December, hoping to marginalise Thaksin's supporters, who formed the PPP.

Far from resolving the ongoing crisis, the election simply deepened it. The PPP emerged with the largest number of parliamentary seats and formed a coalition government with smaller parties. The Democrats retained support in Bangkok and in the southern provinces but became increasingly discredited by their advocacy of pro-market policies and acceptance of the 2006 coup. The Democrat Party—the country's most longstanding—had previously built its

reputation on opposing the country's numerous military regimes and supporting parliamentary democracy.

In the present crisis, the Democrats have been largely eclipsed. When party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva suggested a government of national unity this week, with himself as prime minister, the proposal elicited little support in the media, from the government or PAD.

The factional struggle within the Thai establishment has been driven by, and also compounded, the country's deteriorating economic prospects. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that a study by the University of Thai Chamber of Commerce predicted that economic growth would fall to only 4.5 percent this year—down from 5.7 percent for the first half of the year and well below regional rivals such as Vietnam. Share prices have dropped by 24 percent since PAD restarted its protests in May. The Thai stock exchange continued to fall this week after the court decision.

Fearful of the impact of ongoing political turmoil, the media and business leaders reacted to news that the PPP intended to reappoint Samak as prime minister with despair. An editorial in *Matichon* declared: "Reappointing Samak will only widen the rift in society and risk leading the country into chaos and a bloodbath."

Federation of Thai Industries chairman Santi Vilassakdanont complained to the *Bangkok Post*: "We want to see the political deadlock end as soon as possible. We don't want Mr Samak to return, as then the impasse will not end. And no one is taking responsibility for the impact. It's the business sector and the general public who feel most of the pinch."

An exasperated Dusit Nontanakorn, vice-chairman of the Thai Chamber of Commerce warned that the economic damage could reach 100 billion baht if the political crisis continued to the end of the year. "Eventually the whole country could just collapse," he told the *Bangkok Post*. "I don't care who becomes the next prime minister. But the political impasse has to end."

The PPP has backed away from its initial insistence that Samak would be reinstalled as prime minister. But, whoever is chosen tomorrow, any respite in the political crisis is likely to be temporary.



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