

Airport occupations bring Thailand to political breaking point

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Political tensions in Thailand are reaching breaking point as anti-government protesters from the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) continue to occupy Bangkok's two main airports—Suvarnabhumi international and Don Muang domestic.

PAD leaders, tacitly backed by the military hierarchy, the monarchy and state bureaucracy, are demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat who has refused to step down. He and his cabinet have retreated to the northern city of Chiang Mai amid intense media speculation that the army might carry out a coup.

It is not just the airports that are paralysed, but the Thai state, after months of confrontation between pro- and anti-government factions of the ruling elite. PAD, which seized control of the Government House compound in central Bangkok in August, took over Suvarnabhumi airport last Tuesday and Don Muang airport on Thursday as part of their "final battle" to oust the government.

Up to 100,000 foreign tourists are trapped in what is one of the world's major airline hubs. Limited flights are taking place from the U-Tapao military airport, 140 kilometres south east of Bangkok. Several countries are seeking ways to evacuate their nationals. The Spanish government has announced that it will send military aircraft to extract its citizens. The Australian government was seeking access to airports in other parts of Thailand.

In a desperate bid to end the standoff, Somchai announced a limited state of emergency last Thursday to cover Bangkok's two airports. But army commander General Anupong Paochinda, who called last week for Somchai to step down, has insisted that no force be used against the PAD protesters and has refused to authorise the use of troops. The security forces have not hesitated in the past to use violent repression to prop up regimes to which they were politically sympathetic.

On Friday, Somchai sacked the police chief, but to no effect. Emboldened by the army's stance, several thousand PAD protesters have entrenched themselves behind barricades at the two airports. PAD guards are armed with batons and golf clubs, and according to some press reports, with guns. PAD upped the ante on Saturday by breaking through a police blockade at Suvarnabhumi airport and kidnapping a police officer. Hundreds of riot police retreated rather than challenge the PAD protesters.

Over the past week, there have been sporadic attacks on both pro- and anti-government supporters. Just after midnight on Sunday morning, a grenade exploded in the midst of PAD protestors encamped at Government House, injuring at least 45 people. PAD leaders blamed government supporters, but no one has claimed responsibility. The attack, whoever carried it out, compounds the chaos in the capital and provides a further pretext for the army to intervene.

Following the grenade attack, PAD leader and former general Chamlong Srimuang met the Bangkok police chief and announced that PAD guards and police would carry out joint patrols of the Government House area. Chamlong and other PAD leaders were arrested in October after a Thai court declared the occupation illegal only to be released on bail. The genial relations between PAD and the security forces were exemplified by photographs released on the Internet showing Chamlong sitting around a table with smiling police officers.

The ruling People Power Party (PPP) has also mobilised its supporters, particularly from the rural north and north east. When Somchai was in Udon Thani over the weekend, 10,000 red-shirted government supporters gathered to ensure his protection. Several thousand supporters of the pro-government United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) rallied in downtown Bangkok

yesterday.

Rumours of a coup have abounded in Bangkok over the past week. The *Nation* reported on Friday that stories were circulating that General Anupong and Prime Minister Somchai had exchanged ultimatums. Anupong was said to have told Somchai he must dissolve parliament by midnight next Thursday or face a coup.

General Anupong reportedly met with Prem Tinsulanonde, a prominent royalist ex-general who heads the Privy Council of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. The military has issued a bland statement explaining that increased troop movements observed around the capital, including armoured vehicles, were simply part of training for cadets.

A speedy decision in the Constitutional Court case may provide a trigger for the removal of the government. Along with the security forces and state bureaucracy, the courts have demonstrated an obvious bias against the PPP. In September, the Constitutional Court dismissed former PPP Prime Minister Samak Samaravej for accepting an honorarium for appearing on his long-standing TV cooking show.

PAD leaders routinely denounce the PPP-led government as corrupt and a stooge for former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by the military in September 2006. When the army finally relinquished power last year, Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) was banned and its prominent leaders barred from politics. Despite these steps, its successor, the PPP, won a solid victory in national elections last December.

PAD's call for "new politics" has nothing to do with democracy. Rather PAD leaders reflect the interests of layers of the traditional Thai elite frustrated at the PPP's ability to win elections with the support of its substantial rural base. PAD is calling for parliament to be replaced by a body that is 70 percent appointed by the state bureaucracy. PAD leaders have adamantly refused to negotiate an end to the standoff with the government.

Neither PAD nor its backers objected to the autocratic methods used by Thaksin while he was in power. Rather their concern was that the TRT and the PPP have harmed their economic interests by further opening up the Thai economy to foreign capital. Both sides in this bitter factional dispute are seeking to control onto the levers of state power as a means of lining their own pockets. The result is political paralysis that is compounding the country's economic crisis

which in turn is exacerbating political tensions.

Thai Chamber of Commerce chairman Pramon Sutivong yesterday called on the "government to resign or dissolve the parliament because we think this is the best way out." The comments are clearly a response to the widespread perception that the army is about to step in. "This situation can't go on for long," he told *Bloomberg*. "It will soon lead to violence, forcing the military to come out to stage a coup again. We all want to avoid that."

The Federation of Thai Industries has estimated that the takeover of the airports is costing the country \$57 to \$85 million a day. Some analysts predict that the collapse of the Thai tourist industry could lead to the loss of a million jobs. The economy has already slowed sharply in the third quarter to 4 percent on an annualised basis, compared to 6 percent for the first quarter of 2008. Some commentators forecast that the growth rate could plunge to 2 percent next year.

Over the weekend, the US State Department described the airport seizures as "not an appropriate means of protest" and called on PAD supporters "to walk away from the airports peacefully". European Union ambassadors issued a statement declaring the occupations "totally inappropriate". "We urge the protesters to evacuate the airports without delay in order to avoid a major constitutional crisis and its economic consequences for Thailand," it stated.

PAD leaders, however, have shown no sign of backing down. The local Thai press has reported that PAD is threatening to extend their occupations to the country's sea ports if the government does not resign. Their object is clearly to pressure the military to intervene. If the army chiefs are holding back, their main fear is that a second coup in just over two years will only plunge the country deeper into economic and political crisis.



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