

Thai court dismisses the government

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In a highly political decision, Thailand's Constitutional Court effectively sacked the government yesterday by dissolving the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and two of its coalition partners. Anti-government protests that paralysed Bangkok's two main airports for a week have been called off, but the country's protracted political crisis is far from over.

The court ruled unanimously that the PPP, Chart Thai and Matchima Thipataya were guilty of electoral fraud in last December's national election. Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat announced that he would step down after the court banned him and 108 executive members and officials from the three parties from politics for five years. Government supporters, who protested outside the court yesterday, condemned the decision as a "coup in disguise" and a "judicial coup".

It is the second time in three months that the Constitutional Court has ousted the government. In September, the judges ruled that Prime Minister Samak Samaravej, also from the PPP, had violated the constitution by continuing to receive a small honorarium for his appearances on a long-running cooking show on commercial TV. In May 2007, the court dissolved the PPP's forerunner, Thai Rak Thai (TRT), and imposed a political ban on former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and 110 senior TRT officials.

Yesterday's court decision is another demonstration of the continuing political warfare inside the Thai state amid a bitter, protracted confrontation between pro- and anti-government factions of the country's ruling elite. For months, Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) demonstrators have been allowed to occupy the Government House compound in central Bangkok. No action was taken by the army, the police or the courts after PAD protesters seized control of Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi international and Don Muang domestic airports, stranding up to 250,000 tourists and travellers. Instead, the Constitutional Court met with unusual haste to sack the government for electoral

fraud—a practice for which all Thai parties are notorious.

While the court ruling has defused the immediate crisis, the political standoff remains. PPP leaders have vowed to form a new government by re-forming their party under a new name—Puea Thai (Party for Thais)—and choosing a new prime minister. Even though some 24 PPP parliamentarians, including 13 cabinet members, will be forced to resign as a result of the court ban, the renamed PPP and its allies will still have a clear parliamentary majority. Somchai's deputy, Chavarat Charnvirakul, has taken over as acting prime minister and parliament is being convened on December 8 to install a new government.

Such an outcome will not satisfy PAD or its backers in the military, the monarchy, courts and state bureaucracy. In ending the airport occupations yesterday, PAD leader and media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul warned: "If a puppet government returns or a new government shows insincerity in pushing for political reform, we will return." Although protest numbers have been dwindling as the confrontation has become more violent, PAD is still capable of mobilising thousands of largely urban middle class supporters.

Sondhi launched the PAD protests against the Thaksin government in late 2005, precipitating a constitutional crisis that led to an army coup in September 2006. The military junta called fresh elections under a revamped constitution last December, expecting that the pro-Thaksin PPP would be sidelined, but the opposite took place. PAD restarted its protests in May denouncing first Samak, then Somchai, as a "puppet" of Thaksin, who is currently in exile.

PAD spokesmen bitterly criticise Thaksin and the PPP-led government for corruption, treason and disrespect for the monarchy. However, Sondhi and other PAD leaders publicly backed Thaksin and his TRT when he first came to power in 2001. Sections of Thai business supported Thaksin as a means of ending the IMF-backed restructuring measures implemented by the Democrat Party-led government following the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

Having come to power, however, Thaksin alienated many of his establishment supporters by continuing to open Thailand up to foreign investors. Sections of the military and state bureaucracy were resentful that Thaksin was undermining their traditional prerogatives and associated payoffs. Layers of small and medium business in Bangkok complained at the failure of the government to protect them from international competition. These elements formed the core of a rather heterogeneous movement that also roped in those angered by Thaksin's autocratic methods and the impact of his policies on jobs and living standards.

There is nothing remotely progressive, however, in PAD's agenda. Its "new politics" directly expresses the interests of the traditional Thai elites that have ruled the country for much of the past 80 years through military dictatorships. PAD leaders brand the many rural voters who supported the TRT, then the PPP, as ignorant and uneducated and call for 70 percent of the national assembly to be appointed. PAD has no political party of its own and has an uneasy relationship with the opposition Democrats. The main aim of PAD's occupations has been to provide a pretext for the army or the state apparatus to directly intervene.

There is no guarantee that the PPP will be allowed to re-label itself and form a new government next week. The Constitutional Court ruling opens the door for further moves by the state apparatus against the government. *Asia Times* correspondent Shawn Crispin pointed out that the Election Commission might now intervene to overturn the December 2007 results. "The half-appointed Senate as well as the Privy Council [of the king] could potentially play appointment roles in such a scenario, one political analyst suggests. It's also still possible that the military will move to forcefully fill the political gap through an appointed body, especially if Tuesday's court decision leads to more street violence."

The ongoing political crisis, compounded by the impact of the global economic recession, is having a devastating impact on the Thai economy. Finance Minister Suchart Thada Thamrongvech told Reuters on Monday that the economy would grow next year by at most 1-2 percent, down from earlier forecasts of 4-5 percent. International credit rating agencies Standard & Poors and Fitch downgraded their outlook for Thailand from "stable" to "negative" on Monday. Fitch Rating predicted a growth rate of 0.9 percent for 2009.

Thai business groups have cautiously welcomed the court decision as a means of ending the crisis. Thai Chamber of

Commerce chairman Pramon Sutivong told the *Nation* that the "private sector wants all conflicts to end soon and expects PAD to come to its senses now that the government has been unseated". Layers of big business have in the past supported the PPP government as a means of further opening up the Thai economy and encouraging foreign investment.

The international press has been increasingly critical of PAD and its backers for throwing the country into chaos and undermining the "democratically elected" government. An exasperated article in the British-based *Times*, for instance, declared that an entire country had been "held to ransom by a few thousand middle-class zealots" demonstrating "the alarming transformation" of Thailand into "a place where effective democratic politics has almost ceased to function".

Other articles paint the ruling PPP as a bastion of democracy and a defender of the "rural poor" against the middle classes and privileged elites of Bangkok. The PPP, however, is no more concerned with the democratic rights and living standards of the rural masses than PAD represents the interests of the bulk of the middle classes in Bangkok. While offering limited handouts to rural areas, Thaksin, one of Thailand's wealthiest businessmen, was notorious for his repressive, anti-democratic methods while in office. Both the pro- and anti-government camps are funded by wealthy backers and represent competing right-wing factions of the ruling elite.

The temporary lull in tensions is likely to be short-lived as the government and its opponents manoeuvre behind the scenes prior to the convening of parliament next week to select a new prime minister.



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