

Thai military plays key role in forming new government

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After intense behind-the-scenes manoeuvring, Thailand's opposition Democrat Party announced on Monday it had the numbers to form a new government and formally called for the reconvening of parliament. The push is the outcome of a protracted campaign by anti-government protesters, backed by the monarchy, the military, the state bureaucracy and the courts, to oust the elected People Power Party (PPP)-led government.

On December 2, the Constitutional Court dissolved the PPP and two of its coalition allies for electoral fraud, effectively ousting Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat. Somchai and 108 party officials are banned from politics for five years, leaving 39 parliamentary seats vacant. Former Deputy Prime Minister Chaovarat Chanweerakul is currently head of a caretaker government.

A week ago, the Democrats were an isolated opposition with just 167 seats in the 480-seat lower house. Far from seeking to form government, the party was calling for fresh elections, something it now wants to avoid at all costs. The rapid turnaround is a reflection of the desperation in ruling circles for an end to a political confrontation that has paralysed the government and contributed to a sharp economic downturn.

At the end of November, thousands of anti-government protesters from the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) occupied Bangkok's two major airports for a week, stranding hundreds of thousands of airline passengers. The army and police tacitly supported the demonstrators, ignoring Somchai's declaration of a state of emergency at the airports. The security forces took a similar stance toward PAD's occupation of the Government House compound beginning in August.

The military is now taking a hand in forming the next government. According to a series of media reports, army commander General Anupong Paochinda and other military officials have been pressuring government coalition partners and factions of the PPP, now renamed Puea Thai, to switch sides.

According to the *Bangkok Post* on Sunday, General Anupong held secret meetings with top political leaders and coordinated talks involving the Newin faction of Puea Thai, other coalition parties and the Democrats. So persistent were rumours of army intervention that army spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkanerd had to publicly deny Anupong's involvement. He admitted that politicians had called the

general on Friday night but claimed Anupong did not advise them.

According to the pro-government United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), key parliamentary leaders were called to the house of a senior military officer on Saturday night and told to support the Democrats as the next government. The UDD has described the affair as a military coup "in disguise".

Banharn Silpa-acha, a former premier, whose Chart Thai party was one of the PPP allies banned, told party MPs he had "no other path" but to support the Democrats and had been "pressured" to do it. The *Nation* newspaper reported on Tuesday that Banharn had telephone calls from both General Anupong and Democrat Secretary General Suthep Thuagsuban on Monday to urge him to stick to his decision to change sides. Chart Thai has been renamed the Chart Thai Pattana party.

Air force chief Itthiporn Supawong disclosed the military's bias on Tuesday, saying that the two PPP-led governments had failed to administer the country properly. The Constitutional Court removed the previous Prime Minister Samak Samaravej in September for receiving a small honorarium for appearing on a popular TV cooking show. The PPP won elections last December after the military, which ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, imposed a new constitution and relinquished power.

The Democrats claimed on Sunday to have enough defectors from Puea Thai to form government. They presented a petition to the speaker of the lower house with the signatures of 240 MP—221 are needed for a majority. As well as 163 Democrats, 25 came from the Puea Pandin party, 15 from Chart Thai Pattana, 8 from the banned Matchima Thipataya and 8 from Ruam Jai Thai Chart Pattana—all former PPP allies. Another 21 came from the "Friends of Newin" faction of the former PPP.

It is not clear whether the numbers will hold up to elect the Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva as prime minister. Puea Thai is refusing to stand aside and has called on supporters in the rural north east to picket the houses of defecting MPs to urge them to return to the ranks of the former government. But at a meeting on Tuesday, key leaders of the defectors reaffirmed their support for the Democrats.

Sections of business have thrown their weight behind the Democrats, mainly as a means of ending months of political confrontation. Federation of Thai Industries chairman Santi

Vilassakdanont said on Sunday there would be no excuse for anti-government rallies, and investors would regain their confidence. Board of Trade chairman Pramon Sutivongm said the government under the guidance of former Prime Minister Thaksin had failed to end the political conflict and the Democrats would do so.

In a further move to undermine Puea Thai, the half-appointed upper house has launched a legal challenge against party list members of the banned parties. If successful, the case could establish the basis for declaring the entire December 2007 election invalid and open the way for King Bhumibol Adulyadej to intervene to appoint a government. PAD leaders have been calling for a "new politics" that would largely dispense with elections in favour of the appointment of 70 percent of parliament.

The protracted confrontation stems from the election of Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party in 2001. Thaksin was backed by sections of the ruling elite as a means overturning the pro-IMF policies implemented by the Democrats in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. When Thaksin subsequently bowed to pressures from global capital for a further opening up of the Thai economy, he alienated many of his previous supporters, including media mogul Sondhi Limthongkul who initiated PAD in late 2005.

PAD leaders welcomed the military's seizure of power in 2006 and restarted their protests this May to denounce the PPP, as the TRT was re-branded, as a puppet of Thaksin, who is now in exile. There is no guarantee that the moves to form a Democrat-led government will resolve the crisis as the pro-market policies of the Democrats appear to be opposed to those of PAD and its backers. PAD leader Sondhi has declared that he will wait and see what government is formed, but will not tolerate any connection to Thaksin.

Moreover, there is no guarantee that those who voted for Thaksin, the TRT and its successors will simply accept being disenfranchised. PAD leaders have provoked considerable resentment in rural areas, where Thaksin had a strong electoral base, by dismissing rural voters as uneducated and susceptible to election bribes. The next government will face even greater opposition as the full social impact of the country's deepening economic crisis becomes apparent.

The Democrats are already compromised by their unspoken support for the 2006 military coup. In the early 1990s, the party garnered significant support by opposing continued military rule and calling for elections. If the Democrat Party forms the next government, it will have done so with the aid of the army and other sections of the traditional Thai elites.

More significantly, the crisis has weakened the position of the Thai monarchy, which has traditionally formed the linchpin of the Thai state apparatus. King Bhumibol Adulyadej has in the past functioned as a key safety valve to defuse political crises. In 1992, he stepped into the standoff between the military-backed regime and pro-democracy protesters to force a compromise that led new elections.

The image of King Bhumibol as a neutral arbiter has been tarnished by the monarchy's backing for PAD. Its stance was made explicit when Queen Sirikit attended the funeral of a PAD protestor, who had been killed on October 7 in a confrontation with police, and offered

financial support to the injured. The king failed to give his much awaited national birthday address last Thursday—a sign of political paralysis in the royal palace.

As the political crisis in Thailand has deepened, the fragility of the monarchy has been underscored by increasing threats to use the country's harsh and reactionary *lese-majeste* laws to block any criticism of the king. A constant theme of PAD's propaganda has been that Thaksin and his party are republicans in disguise out to destroy the monarchy.

This week the British-based *Economist* was withdrawn from sale in Bangkok by distributors, fearing prosecution over two articles critical of the Thai king. The magazine voiced the disquiet in international financial circles over the role of the monarchy, which has close ties to the military and state bureaucracy, in encouraging relatively small PAD protests to create political and economic havoc.

One of offending articles detailed the king's long association with anti-communist groups, including those responsible for the murder of students at Thammasat University in 1976. After pointedly referring to the recent fall of Nepal's monarchy, the magazine warned that "PAD was nurtured by the palace and now threatens to engulf it ... The monarchy is now, more clearly than ever, part of the problem."

Nervous at the potential for a political explosion, the *Economist* noted in the second article: "At a pro-Thaksin rally in July a young activist ranted against the monarchy calling the king 'a thorn in the side of democracy' for having backed so many coups, and warning the royal family that they risked the guillotine. She was quickly arrested. What shocked the royalist establishment was not just the startling criticism of the king—but that the activist was cheered."

The magazine's fear is that the crisis has the potential to spiral out the control of the two brawling right-wing factions of the country's ruling elite.



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