

Third new Thai government installed in four months

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A special session of the Thai parliament on Monday voted in Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva as the third new prime minister in just four months. While at present the former opposition leader has a parliamentary majority and the backing of Thailand's traditional elites, including the military, his government is likely to be as unstable as its predecessors.

Abhisit's installation came 12 days after the Constitutional Court dissolved the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and two of its parliamentary allies for electoral fraud. Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat and 108 senior party officials were banned from politics for five years. The politically partisan character of the ruling is underscored by the court's decision in September to remove PPP leader Samak Samaravej as prime minister for receiving a small stipend for appearing on a TV cooking show.

The vote for Abhisit followed months of political turmoil provoked by protests by the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which demanded the ousting of the PPP. PAD protesters occupied Government House, the main government administrative centre in Bangkok, in August. For a week before the Constitutional Court's ruling, they had occupied Bangkok's two major airports, stranding hundreds of thousands of travellers.

The PAD, which had the tacit support of the military, the king, the state bureaucracy and the judiciary, railed against the PPP-led government as corrupt, anti-monarchy and a pawn of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin, who took office in 2001, was ousted by the military in September 2006 after stormy PAD protests and a protracted constitutional crisis. His banned Thai Rak Thai (TRT) re-formed as the PPP and defeated the Democrats in fresh national elections last December.

by 235 votes to 198 for former national police chief Pracha Promnok, leader of Puea Pandin. Pracha had the support of those who remained loyal to the former government, including PPP members still in parliament under the banner of the newly formed Puea Thai party.

Various media reports indicated that the military top brass played a significant role in pressing PPP members and allies to cross to the Democrats, which have only 167 seats. The Inter Press News Agency (IPS) web site reported on a clandestine meeting between army commander General Anupong Paochinda and a group of prominent politicians. The affair became public knowledge after the politicians got lost and were spotted stranded at a petrol station waiting for new instructions.

For all the denunciations of the PPP's "corruption", a great deal of money undoubtedly changed hands to secure the vote for Abhisit. The newspaper *Matichon* claimed that 40 million baht (\$US1.2 million) was being offered to parliamentarians to change sides. The *Nation* reported that the going rate for wooing back defectors from the Democrats was 55 million baht. German academic Michael Nelson told IPS: "Even after buying MPs, which is standard procedure here, one can never be sure. There are rumours that some MPs have been taken to a safe house in Bangkok and have been locked there to prevent them from being influenced or subjected to lobbying by other parties."

The sordid behind-the-scenes manoeuvring to install Abhisit is an indication of the shaky foundations of the new government. Abhisit's first task will be to choose a new cabinet. In what may turn out to be a payoff to the military, Abhisit immediately indicated that the post of defence minister would be filled by someone who is not a member of parliament—opening the door for a top general to take the job.

In Monday's contest, Abhisit won the prime minister's post

Democrat Party headquarters on Tuesday were under

police guard amid rumours that supporters of the pro-PPP United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) would surround the building. A video address by exiled Thaksin Shinawatra to 40,000 supporters gathered at a Bangkok stadium last Saturday only increased the fears. Thaksin branded the Constitutional Court decision as a "silent coup".

The new coalition is already torn by internal divisions. The Democrats, who gained their support in the early 1990s by opposing military rule, have now been placed in power with the backing of the army. To distance the party from the military, Democrat Secretary-General Suthep Thuangsuban publicly declared that no one associated with the now defunct Council for National Security (CNS) would be included in the cabinet. The CNS was the body that effectively ran the country for 14 months following the 2006 coup.

PAD leaders have threatened to revive their protests if anyone associated with Thaksin is included in the new cabinet. The *Bangkok Post* reported on Tuesday that members of the Newin Chidchob faction, which split from the PPP to join the Democrats, are being considered for top cabinet posts. Newin himself is under the Constitutional Court's ban, but even the inclusion of his factional members in the new government could be enough to spark fresh PAD protests.

The rush to install the Democrats was necessitated not by any master plan of Abhisit or his backers, but because of the disastrous impact of the drawn-out political turmoil on the economy and on the foundations of the Thai state itself. Business leaders have been crying out for a resolution to the political crisis that has compounded the country's rapid economic decline through falling exports and foreign investment.

The monarchy, which is the linchpin of the state apparatus, has been significantly damaged by King Bhumibol Adulyadej's increasingly open support for the moves against the PPP-led government. In the early 1990s, the king played a critical role in defusing the political crisis that erupted when the military regime was challenged by mass protests. Now the myth that he stands "above politics" has been undermined by his partisan support for PAD.

The anti-Thaksin *Nation* on Monday nominated one of the first tasks of the Abhisit government as defending "the monarchy from any slanting or misunderstanding". It noted that in September alone Thai authorities closed down or

denied access to more than 400 websites that contained "indecent or anti-monarchy content". The *Nation* last Friday issued a blistering attack on the British-based *Economist* magazine for stating a few facts about the Thai monarch, his ties to the military and support for right-wing regimes.

Just as important as the cabinet appointments are the policies that the new administration will pursue. The traditional elites were bitterly hostile to the Democrat-led government that took office following the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis because its implementation of IMF restructuring measures cut a swathe through less competitive sections of Thai capital. PAD leaders such as media tycoon Sondhi Limthongkul initially backed Thaksin because he promised to defend Thai businesses, and turned against him when he failed to do so.

Abhisit has stated that reviving the economy and restoring the confidence of foreign investors will be his main focus in power. However, any attempt by the Democrats to implement the open market policies demanded by international capital will rapidly produce a backlash from the PAD and their backers.

More fundamentally, the new government has nothing to offer workers or the rural and urban poor who are being hard hit by the country's economic downturn. Thaksin and the TRT/PPP secured a base of support in the long-neglected rural north and north-east of the country with a series of economic handouts. Many of these rural supporters are bitter that their party has been ousted from government once again by PAD leaders who make no secret of their contempt for the "uneducated" rural poor.

As the economic crisis continues to deepen, the Democrat coalition will, like its counterparts around the world, inevitably attempt to impose new burdens on working people and wind back the limited measures provided under Thaksin. What is emerging are the conditions for a political storm that will not only engulf the Democrats but the entire establishment.



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