

WikiLeaks cable reveals US role in 2006 Thai coup

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Diplomatic cables leaked by WikiLeaks reveal that the US essentially approved the military coup that toppled Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on September 19, 2006, while publicly distancing itself from the takeover. The cables shed further light on the anti-democratic activities of the US and other major powers behind the cloak of secret diplomacy.

The documents also show that US officials have worked closely with the military and the Thai monarchy in the period since the 2006 coup, discussing how to deal with subsequent pro-Thaksin governments.

Within Thailand, the revelations are so damaging for the royal family that the present military-backed government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has sought to block their publication. Yesterday an article on the web site of the *Bangkok Post* was removed within hours of being posted. The cables shatter the long-cultivated myth that the monarchy is neutral and above politics—a myth that has enabled the monarchy to directly intervene in crucial periods of political crisis.

A cable from the US Embassy in Bangkok on September 20, 2006 recorded a conversation between US Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce and General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, the army chief who carried out the coup. They met “privately” just after Thai troops and tanks had moved into the capital and overturned Thaksin’s government during the afternoon of September 19.

Boyce asked who had attended the coup leader’s audience with King Bhumibol Adulyadej “last night”. Sonthi replied that Prem Tinsykanonda, the president of the king’s advisory Privy Council had brought him and other military heads to the palace. Boyce’s cable said Sonthi had commented that “the king was relaxed and

happy, smiling throughout. He provided no further details.” The reference to a “happy” king indicated that the monarch backed the military’s actions.

Deep divisions had emerged within Thai ruling circles. Sections of business and the traditional political establishment centred on the monarchy, the military and the state apparatus had turned against Thaksin. The prime minister, a billionaire business tycoon himself, had backed away from his earlier promises to protect Thai businesses from the restructuring measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund following the Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998.

Business people threatened by Thaksin’s policies established the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to unseat his government. Posturing as opponents of Thaksin’s autocratic rule, PAD organised mass “Yellow Shirt” demonstrations in Bangkok that helped create the conditions for the military coup.

The leaked cable indicates that the Bush administration knew well in advance of the coup of the preparations and had given a nod of approval. The US public expressions of “concern” had already been worked out in advance with the coup leader.

Boyce wrote: “Turning to the US reaction, I reminded him [Sonthi] of our conversation, August 31, when I told him any military action would result in immediate suspension of assistance programs ... I told him he could expect us to announce such a measure shortly. He understood.” Boyce continued: “I added that the restoration of such assistance could only come after a democratically elected government took office.”

Sonthi had already announced, before attending the US

embassy, that an interim constitution would be drafted and a civilian government installed within two weeks. Clearly, the planned “civilian” administration would be nothing more than a front for the military. Nevertheless, Boyce approvingly commented that this was a “good example”.

The Bush White House suspended military aid and joint exercises with Thailand to show its “concern”, but soon restored business as usual with the Thai military. The junta held elections in late 2007 under a new anti-democratic constitution and the pro-Thaksin Peoples Power Party (PPP) was formed in February 2008. While Washington hailed the result as “a return to democracy”, a PPP government was certainly not its intended outcome.

Having failed to prevent the return of a pro-Thaksin government, the traditional establishment launched a concerted campaign to remove it from power. PAD demonstrations quickly resumed. In September 2008, the Thai Constitutional Court, dismissed Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej on the flimsy pretext that he had breached the law by participating in a TV cooking show.

According to a further leaked cable, Samak told US Ambassador Eric John in October 2008 that the king’s wife, Queen Sirikit, was “responsible for the 2006 coup d’etat, as well as the ongoing turmoil generated by PAD protests.” At the time, PAD continued its demonstrations, besieging government buildings, to force Samak’s successor, Somchai Wongsawat, to step down. The US, however, made no public comment.

Another US memo, dated November 2008, confirms that discussion was taking place in ruling circles about another military coup. The queen publicly identified with PAD by appearing at the funeral of a PAD Yellow Shirt demonstrator killed in clashes with police. But the cable reported: “King Bhumibol explicitly told Army Commander Anupong Paojinda not to launch a coup,” citing an unnamed advisor to Queen Sirikit. The US, which again had inside information, raised no opposition.

Just a month later, in December 2008, PAD’s occupation of Bangkok’s two airports helped create conditions of chaos in which the Constitutional Court dissolved the PPP on trumped-up charges of electoral fraud. The military then persuaded the PPP’s coalition partners and a dissident faction to join Abhisit’s

Democrats and form a new government.

The cables confirm what was evident at the time: the muted US response to the 2006 coup was guided purely by US economic and strategic interests. The US has longstanding connections to the Thai military going back to the 1960s and 1970s when Washington backed military dictatorships and used the country as a base for US operations during the Vietnam War.

Whether the US condemns or condones a junta is based on political expediency. Over the border in neighbouring Burma, the US had maintained an economic blockade of the military dictatorship and postures as a defender of the democratic rights of the Burmese people. What Washington objects to is not the suppression of basic democratic rights but the close ties between the Burmese junta and China, the main US rival in the region.

The installation of the unelected Abhisit government in Thailand triggered mass protests led by the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). This “Red Shirt” movement threatened to unleash a broader social movement, as sections of farmers, small business people and urban workers began to voice their social grievances. Abhisit responded with state repression culminating in a bloody military crackdown on May 19, in which heavily armed troops fired on protesters. At least 91 people were killed in clashes in April and May.

As in September 2006, the US did not condemn the actions of the Abhisit government or the military.



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