

Political turmoil continues in Thailand

John Roberts
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Efforts by the Thai government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra to replace the country's military-imposed constitution have reignited bitter internecine fighting within the country's ruling elite.

A mass rally in Bangkok staged by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) on June 24 highlighted the political tensions. According to Thai police, 35,000 people rallied at the Democracy Monument on the city's Ratchadamnoen Avenue to protest against an injunction issued by the Constitutional Court on June 2 against the government's constitutional amendment legislation. The Court had ruled that it had the authority to suspend the final reading in parliament of legislation on the methods for constitutional change.

The suspension would allow the court to consider petitions by the opposition Democrat Party alleging that the proposed changes threaten the constitution and the country's monarchy. The current constitution was drawn up for the military during its 14 months of rule following the September 2006 coup that ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The ruling Puea Thai proposed in February to set up a Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA) of 99 people, comprising representatives elected from the country's 77 provinces and 22 legal experts. Political parties would be excluded. The new constitution drafted by the CDA would be put to a national referendum.

Four "reconciliation" bills are also before the parliament, including one by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, who led the 2006 military coup. The bills would provide amnesty to those involved in the 2006 coup, as well as the UDD or "Red Shirt" demonstrations in April-May 2010 that were violently

suppressed by the military. Sonthi's proposal would indemnify both sides.

The Democrats and anti-Thaksin People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) bitterly oppose the establishment of the CDA and the reconciliation bills. They allege that the government led by Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, plans to stack the CDA with its supporters as part of an attempt to rehabilitate Thaksin and undermine the monarchy.

About 1,000 PAD or "Yellow Shirts" protestors surrounded the parliament building on June 1 to prevent Puea Thai members from entering as the reconciliation bills were tabled. PAD leader Chamlong Srimuang told that rally: "We need to deal with this government. If they don't listen to us, the PAD are experts at getting rid of prime ministers." In 2008, PAD protests, including the occupation of the capital's airports, played a key role in the setting the stage for the Constitutional Court's ousting of two pro-Thaksin governments.

Many of those participating in the protest on June 24 came from the country's rural north east and north, as well as from Bangkok's urban poor. Thaksin built this support during his time in office from 2001 to 2006 with a series of limited social concessions, including cheap health care and village development loans.

The rally was pointedly called on the 80th anniversary of the 1932 coup that ended Thailand's absolute monarchy. UDD leaders declared that the rally was a warning to country's traditional elites, or *ammart*, around King Bhumibol Adulyadej—the military, state bureaucracy and judiciary. These layers have exercised real power since 1932, including through 22 military coups or attempted coups.

UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan told the rally that state institutions were acting as “a state within the state” and were undermining the UDD and the government. On the eve of the rally, the Office of the Constitutional Court called on the Criminal Court to revoke Jatuporn’s bail on bogus terrorism charges relating to the 2010 UDD Bangkok protests. The reason given was that he had offended the Constitutional Court’s judges at a previous protest.

At the rally, UDD leader Tida Tawornseth announced that 100,000 people had signed a petition calling for the impeachment of seven of the nine Constitutional Court judges that had voted to suspend the parliamentary debate on constitutional change.

The protracted divisions within the Thai ruling elite between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions reflect sharp differences over economic policy that have only worsened amid the global economic crisis.

The traditional elites centred on the monarchy have opposed efforts by the Thaksin camp to open up the Thai economy to foreign investors and to undermine longstanding political patronage networks. At the same time, they fear that Puea Thai’s populist appeals to the urban and rural poor will only encourage social upheavals that the government will be unable to control.

An uneasy truce was established in the lead-up to last year’s national election. In a behind the scenes deal, the military permitted Yingluck to become prime minister in return for a guarantee that there would be no government interference in the military and that the position of the monarchy would be upheld. Under Yingluck, prosecutions have continued under the country’s reactionary lèse-majesté laws, alienating many Red Shirt supporters.

UDD supporters are also wary of the reconciliation bills that would let the military leaders responsible for the 2010 crackdown off the hook. State prosecutors have indicated that there is evidence against the army in 18 of the 92 deaths of protesters.

The Constitutional Court will this week hear witnesses for and against the Democrat petitions to block the government’s proposals for constitutional change. The Yingluck government has suspended parliamentary debate on these issues in line with the court’s injunction, but there is deep suspicion among UDD supporters about the court’s political bias. Whatever the court’s final ruling, it is likely to spark a new round of political unrest.



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