

# Thai anti-government protesters clash with security forces

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About 15,000 anti-government protesters clashed with some 17,000 police and soldiers in central Bangkok last Saturday before dispersing. Organised by the newly-formed Pitak Siam (Defend Thailand) group, it was the first large demonstration against Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra since her Puea Thai party won office in the July 2011 election.

Pitak Siam organisers had forecast a huge rally—some promised a turnout of one million. Rumours had circulated of plans to take Yingluck hostage. “Red Shirt” members of the pro-government United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) warned of violence and a military coup.

Yingluck exploited the situation to invoke the Internal Security Act (ISA) on November 22, allowing police to establish barricades, impose curfews and ban the use of electronic devices in three Bangkok districts. In the end, police outnumbered demonstrators. The ISA was eventually lifted on Thursday.

Pitak Siam leader Boonlert Kaewprasi, a former general, and other speakers denounced the government as a proxy for exiled former premier Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck’s brother. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in September 2006 for alleged corruption and tolerating insults to King Bhumibol Adulyadej that breached the country’s anti-democratic *lèse-majesté* laws.

At the rally site near the parliament, Boonlert initiated chants of “Yingluck, get out!” and told the crowd: “I promise that Pitak Siam will succeed in driving this government out.”

Some protesters attempted to break through a roadblock and clashed with police, who responded with tear gas. There were 138 arrests, all but one of whom were released without charge, and 82 injured, mostly protesters.

Boonlert then suddenly called off the rally, citing the violence and danger to protesters. He declared the rally “a failure”, adding: “From what happened nobody would want to pursue my initiative.”

Facing criticism from his supporters, Boonlert later said he had called off the rally to avoid bloodshed, after consulting with the commander and deputy commander of the First Army Region. Boonlert resigned as Pitak Siam leader and as president of the Armed Forces Preparatory School Alumni Foundation.

The rather strange episode confirms that none of the bitter divisions within the Thai ruling elite have been resolved. Thaksin’s ousting in 2006 was followed by five years of political turmoil that included a brutal army crackdown on pro-Thaksin Red Shirts in Bangkok in May 2010 that resulted in more than 90 deaths and 1,500 injuries.

Pitak Siam resembles the pro-monarchist Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), formed in 2005 to bring down the Thaksin government. PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul had been a Thaksin ally but turned on him for failing to protect Thai companies adversely affected by the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis. Thaksin instead further opened up the economy to foreign investment.

PAD found political allies within the traditional Thai

ruling establishment, centred on the monarchy, military, judiciary and state bureaucracy. These forces resented the manner in which Thaksin, a right-wing populist, had built a base of support in northern rural areas through limited social concessions, including cheap health care and village credit. Thaksin, himself a billionaire, had used his position to favour his cronies and undermine the traditional system of patronage.

PAD or “Yellow Shirt” protests in 2005 helped to generate the atmosphere of political crisis that enabled the military to oust Thaksin. After re-writing the constitution, the military held elections in 2007. Despite the rigged constitution, pro-Thaksin parties regained office, leading to further political turmoil. The ensuing PAD protests were again instrumental in enabling what amounted to a judicial coup that resulted in the installation of the Democrat Party-led coalition government in late 2008.

Following a subsequent military crackdown on Red Shirt demonstrations, which had drawn significant support from the urban and rural poor, the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elite reached a compromise in the lead-up to the 2011 election. In secret meetings in Brunei, representatives of the military and monarchy agreed to accept a Puea Thai government, in return for no action against the 2006 coup leaders, no interference in internal military affairs and the enforcement of the laws protecting the monarchy.

PAD bitterly opposed any concessions to Thaksin and Puea Thai, and called for a boycott of the election. This led to a split after its parliamentary front, the New Politics Party, fielded candidates. Puea Thai, headed by Yingluck Shinawatra, easily won the election and formed government with several smaller parties. The New Politics Party failed to win a seat.

Last Saturday’s protests appear to have been a testing of the waters by layers of the traditional elites, using ex-general Boonlert Kaewprasi, a political unknown. According to a November 26 report on the *New Mandala* web site, hosted by the Australian National University’s College of Asia and the Pacific, Pitak Siam is an attempt by sections of the PAD leadership

“to recalibrate an identity and position in Thai society” following the decline in its support.

According to this article, Pitak Siam involves some former Yellow Shirt supporters, including Dr Tul’s Multi-Coloured Shirts, Thai Patriot Networks, sections of the Assembly of the Poor and some state enterprise unions. Boonlert, who was not previously involved in PAD, was elevated to the leadership to gain the support of former military officers in order to heal rifts in the leadership. The aim of the demonstration was to test support “to determine the likelihood of future rounds of large-scale demonstrations.” Boonlert’s abrupt departure suggests that the experiment did not live up to expectations.

The political situation nevertheless remains tense, amid concerns over the impact of the global economic turmoil on the Thai economy. The growth rate for 2012 is forecast at 5.5 percent, but this follows a disastrous 8.9 percent contraction, year on year, in the fourth quarter of 2011 as a result of severe flooding. Exports, on which the economy is dependent, are vulnerable to the stagnation in Europe and the US, as well as the slowdown in China. Any sharp contraction in Thailand is likely to reignite turmoil in the country’s ruling elites.



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