

Thailand: Amnesty bill exposes ruling elite's divisions

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Underlying political tensions in Thailand have again emerged to the surface following Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's introduction of a bill proposing an amnesty for those involved in political violence between September 19, 2006 and May 10, 2011.

Moved by parliamentarian Worachai Hema, a member of the ruling Puea Thai party, the bill is one of six pieces of draft legislation purportedly seeking national "reconciliation." But it is the only bill formally brought before the parliament. This move sparked anti-government protests in Bangkok in the three days before the bill was tabled in parliament on August 7.

On August 4, about 4,000 people gathered in Bangkok's Lumpini Park, in an action called by the Democratic Force to Overthrow Thaksinism (Pefot). The Pefot leadership is dominated by retired senior military and police officers. Protest leaders claimed that the government was aiming to shield Yingluck's brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, the twice-elected prime minister who was deposed in a military coup in September 2006. Thaksin is living in self-imposed exile in Dubai, after being convicted of corruption charges.

The Pefot rally, with its strong military connections, triggered rumours of another army coup, which was denied by army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha. The government nevertheless invoked the Internal Security Act (ISA) in three districts of Bangkok, blocked roads around the parliament and the Government House administrative centre, and deployed 38,000 police.

On August 7, the opposition Democrat Party, which also opposes the amnesty bill on the basis that it is a plot to legally rehabilitate Thaksin, organised another rally. But the 3,000 protestors dispersed after police refused to allow the demonstration to proceed. On August 9, the ISA declaration was lifted, the road blocks were removed, and the municipal police

command resumed security responsibility in the capital.

The amnesty bill extends from the day before the 2006 military coup until King Bhumibol Adulyadej dissolved the lower house of parliament—paving the way for the July 2011 election that Puea Thai won. This timeframe includes the protests by the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy ("yellow shirts") against pro-Thaksin governments in 2008, and the army's brutal suppression of pro-Thaksin protesters or "red shirts" against the military-backed Democrat Party-led government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva in April and May 2010. At least 90 people were killed and 1,800 injured during the crackdown on Thaksin supporters in central Bangkok, led by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD).

Thaksin was ousted from power in 2006 after he fell foul of the country's traditional ruling elite, clustered around the monarchy, the military hierarchy, the state apparatus and judiciary, and the various business interests aligned with them. Thaksin promoted his own business empire and his crony allies, at the expense of the old guard. He also began to open up sections of the Thai economy to foreign investment. He further antagonised the old elite as he built up electoral support among the rural population of the north east and north of the country and the urban poor, through limited financial concessions, including cheap village loans and health care.

In 2011, the Yingluck government came to office after years of political unrest—including the protests backed by the traditional elites against pro-Thaksin governments and the UDD protests in 2010 against the Abhisit government.

In a secret deal before the 2011 election, the traditional elites agreed to accept her government, provided that it protected the monarchy and kept out of

“military affairs.” But the new government’s electoral base expected that those responsible for the 2010 massacres, including Abhisit Vejjajiva and his deputy Suthep Thaugsuban, would be held accountable, while the charges against hundreds of “redshirt” protestors would be dropped. UDD leaders warned the government that it risked losing support if these demands were ignored.

The Yingluck government’s call for “reconciliation” is aimed at a deal with the old political establishment and the military to advance the interests of Thai capitalism at the expense of the rural and urban poor. Thaksin and his colleagues are above all concerned that the working class and peasants will begin to mobilise in defence of their class interests.

An *Irrawaddy* article on July 31 noted that Thaksin’s recent video speech commemorating the 2010 crackdown implied that the “redshirts” work was done. This message, the newspaper noted, was met by thousands of assembled Thaksin supporters with “shock and silence.” The former prime minister’s message “confirmed suspicions among the [redshirt] movement that Thaksin was working behind the scenes to strike a deal with the country’s military and the traditional elite to pave a route home.” Currently circulating is a purported recording of a July 6 conversation between Thaksin and Deputy Defence Minister Yutasak Sasiphrapa, on the terms of a backroom deal to allow Thaksin to return to Thailand.

The Puea Thai leaders’ decision to bring forward the amnesty bill is another manoeuvre aimed at resolving the ruling elite’s political crisis by absolving both sides of any crimes.

In the parliament, the bill passed its first reading, 300 votes to 124. The debate was shut down after only 4 of the 60 opposition Democrats lined up to speak had been heard. Yingluck did not attend the session. The prime minister is planning a national “political reform” assembly of all “political stakeholders” to work out a compact within the ruling elite. However, the Democrat opposition and other anti-Thaksin forces have refused to attend.

The political tensions revealed in the machinations around the amnesty issue will intensify as the deepening global economic crisis impacts on export-dependent Thailand. Big business is demanding further pro-investment and export policies, and government

spending on business-oriented infrastructure. To pay for these programs, the corporate elite is demanding an immediate end to Puea Thai’s limited populist policies designed to maintain its support base among the rural poor.

The stage has been set for renewed social and political upheavals.



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