

Anti-government protests escalate in Thailand

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Demonstrations in Bangkok aimed at bringing down the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra intensified this week as protesters targeted buildings containing the country's 19 state ministries and sought to paralyse their operations.

The protests are the latest stage in the long-running feud within ruling circles between the country's traditional elites—the monarchy, military and state bureaucracy—and layers loyal to Yingluck's brother, the billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra.

Protest leaders denounced the Puea Thai-led government as being controlled by Thaksin, who is in self-imposed exile after being convicted on corruption charges. They are demanding an end to the government, the establishment of a non-elected ruling council and the “uprooting” of “Thaksinism” from Thailand.

More than a dozen ministries and departments in Bangkok have been, or remain, occupied or blockaded by protesters. Among those targeted were the Finance Ministry, the Budget Bureau, the Foreign Ministry and the Interior Ministry. Some occupations and rallies lasted only a few hours.

The pattern was evident on Tuesday at the Interior Ministry, where the protests involved right-wing groups, such as the Peoples Democratic Force to Overthrow Thaksinism, led by retired senior military officers, and the Dhamma Army. About 8,000 demonstrators surrounded the ministry in the morning and demanded that officials leave. Power was cut until an official emerged and promised to stop serving the government.

On Wednesday, protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban left his new headquarters at the Budget Bureau to lead a crowd estimated at 17,000 to the Department of Special Investigations (DSI), where they forced the staff to leave. The DSI has charged both Suthep and opposition Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva with murder for ordering the violent suppression of pro-Thaksin or

“Red Shirt” protests against the then Democrat-led government in 2010.

Yesterday, demonstrators massed outside the police headquarters in central Bangkok and cut off power. Squads of riot police were present inside the building but took no action against the protesters. According to a police spokesman, protest numbers have declined to about 15,000 in the capital from tens of thousands earlier in the week. A number of provincial government centres have also been occupied, mainly in the south of the country.

The aim of the protests is similar to those organised by the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—the “Yellow Shirts”—that created the conditions for the army to depose Thaksin in 2006.

The Yellow Shirts, tacitly backed by the monarchy, the military and the judiciary, again took to the streets in 2008 after the army stepped aside and held new elections, which the pro-Thaksin Peoples Power Party (PPP) won. PAD protesters occupied the Government House administration centre and Bangkok's two airports. The police and army took no action and government authority collapsed.

In late 2008, the Constitutional Court stepped in to outlaw the PPP, enabling the Democrats, with the military's assistance, to form a government. The security forces did not take the same approach to Red Shirt protests in 2010 against the Democrat government—more than 90 people were killed and some 1,500 injured in crackdowns by heavily armed police and soldiers.

Prime Minister Yingluck invoked the Internal Security Act (ISA) on Monday throughout Bangkok and surrounding districts, including at the Suvarnabhumi international airport. The ISA permits authorities to impose curfews, restrict demonstrations and set up checkpoints.

The government's Centre for the Administration of

Peace and Order said it will prosecute those involved in the seizure of state premises and charge Suthep. On Tuesday, the Criminal Court issued a warrant for Suthep's arrest for illegal assembly and invading state offices.

The real question, however, is whether the police and army will follow government directives. Army commander Prayuth Chan-ocha indicated that the military will not get involved in street demonstrations. Rumours of preparations for an army coup are beginning to swirl in the Bangkok media.

Democrat leader Abhisit moved a no-confidence motion in the lower house of the parliament on Tuesday. In the debate, he accused the government of corruption, pointing to its scheme to support rice prices paid to farmers, who form a major electoral base for Puea Thai in the country's north and north east.

Big business and the financial elite have criticised the scheme for pricing Thai rice out of much of the world market, leading to large stockpiles and undermining the country's position as the world's leading rice exporter. Abhisit said that of the 400 billion baht spent on the scheme, less than half found its way to farmers.

Yingluck defended her government's policies, emphasising that it had maintained economic growth during the global economic crisis and downturn. The debate underscores the divisions between the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps of the ruling elite, which revolve around sharp differences over economic policy and the control of patronage. The government, which controls the lower house, easily defeated the no-confidence motion yesterday by 297 to 134.

The street protests led by Suthep have continued. He resigned from parliament as deputy opposition leader in order to evade a law prohibiting parliamentarians from taking part in street protests. A 2008 US Embassy cable revealed by WikiLeaks described Suthep as the man who did the Democrats' dirty work—a role he continues.

The initial trigger for the current protests was the government's attempts to pass an amnesty bill that would allow Thaksin to return to Thailand. When that failed, the government proposed a constitutional amendment to convert the Senate into a fully-elected body, but a court ruled the bill unconstitutional.

Most anti-government protesters are drawn from layers of the Bangkok middle class and Democrat

supporters from the south. Suthep has attempted to disguise the anti-democratic objectives of the traditional Bangkok elites, for whom the Democrats now speak, with populist rhetoric about a "post-Thaksin" Thailand free from the domination of monopolies and with police controlled by the people.

The potential for street clashes is growing, with tens of thousands of Red Shirt government supporters camped at Bangkok's Rajanangala stadium. Many are from the urban and rural poor who received limited handouts under previous Thaksin governments. Despite Thaksin's populist demagoguery, Puea Thai, no less than the Democrats, represents the interests of sections of the corporate and financial elite.

Both factions of the ruling class are concerned that the political situation could spiral out of control, amid broad hostility among working people to the worsening living standards and the deep social divide. These social tensions will only worsen as the country's exports and economy continue to slow.



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