

Temporary truce in Thai anti-government protests

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A temporary truce in the wave of anti-government protests in the Thai capital of Bangkok was reached yesterday after police removed concrete and razor wire barriers around the Government House administrative centre and the Metropolitan Police Bureau. Police permitted demonstrators into the grounds, but not the buildings, a concession that allowed protest leaders to claim a partial victory.

The easing of tensions followed a week of protests demanding the removal of the Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her Puea Thai-led government. The demonstrators led by the former deputy leader of the opposition Democrat Party, Suthep Thaugsuban, are drawn from layers of the Bangkok middle class supportive of the traditional elites—the monarchy, the army and the state bureaucracy.

The demonstrators have been attempting to occupy key government buildings and TV stations, leading to violent clashes over the weekend with police and pro-government supporters. At least three people were killed. The street battles continue on Monday between police using tear gas, water cannon and rubber bullets, and dwindling numbers of hard core demonstrators. At least 100 people were injured yesterday.

Yingluck responded on Monday by appointing Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Surapong Tovichakchaikul, one of her key supporters, to take charge of the police Centre for the Administration of Peace and Order. The government has also stepped up its propaganda with a daily TV program attacking the opposition protests. On the same day, the Criminal Court issued a warrant for protest leader Suthep on a charge of insurrection, which carries a possible death sentence.

After the barriers were brought down yesterday, Suthep declared a “partial victory.” The stand down is

likely to continue until after Thursday’s celebrations to mark the birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Many opposition protesters are staunch monarchists who are bitterly hostile to Yingluck’s exiled brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in the military coup of 2006.

The latest opposition protests were triggered after the government attempted to pass an amnesty bill that would have allowed Thaksin to return to Thailand and avoid jail on corruption charges. The amnesty would also have extended to military and Democrat leaders who were responsible for the brutal military crackdown in 2010 on pro-Thaksin or “Red Shirt” demonstrators opposed to the then Democrat-led government.

The four years of political upheaval after the 2006 coup were driven by deep divisions within the Thai ruling class, between the traditional elites and pro-Thaksin supporters, over economic policy and political patronage. Following the 2010 crackdown, the rival factions, fearful of the eruption of mass social struggles, struck a compromise to allow Yingluck to take office if she won the 2011 election. In return, the Puea Thai government would respect the prerogatives of the military and the monarchy.

While the present protests were triggered by the amnesty bill, the re-emergence of the factional fighting is being fuelled by a sharp decline in the country’s exports and economic growth. The opposition Democrat Party, which moved a no-confidence motion last week, has strongly criticised the government’s rice subsidy scheme, which benefits Puea Thai’s rural support base in the North and East.

The US “pivot” to Asia, aimed at undermining China’s influence, is also compounding the dilemma facing ruling elites throughout the region as they seek to balance between their economic reliance on China

and their strategic ties with the US. Thailand is a formal US ally and there are long-standing relations between the US and Thai militaries.

WikiLeaks cables from the US embassy in 2006 revealed close contact between the US ambassador Ralph Boyce and top military figures. At the very least, Washington gave the green light for Thaksin's removal. The US will undoubtedly also have a hand in deciding whether his sister Yingluck remains in office.

The anti-democratic character of the opposition's protests is demonstrated by its call for the appointment of an unelected "People's Council." Opposition leader Suthep dismissed Yingluck's proposal to dissolve the lower house of the parliament and call a new election. He told protesters that "a dissolution of parliament does not mean anything to us," as an election would only result in a new pro-Thaksin government.

The real aim of the anti-government protests, which include Democrat supporters bussed in from the southern provinces, is to manufacture a political climate of crisis that would enable the army to take power—as happened in 2006.

At this stage, the army has declared, publicly at least, that it will not take sides in the political standoff. However, the military has begun to provide personnel to back the police guarding buildings around the capital. At a press conference yesterday, police general Piya Uthayo said army commander Prayuth Chan-ocha had promised to send reinforcements if asked.

Yesterday morning, Prayuth said the army would watch from the distance as the political parties sought a solution. However, air force chief Prajin Jantong and armed forces Supreme Commander Thanasak Patimapagom announced yesterday that a meeting of armed forces commanders would be convened to discuss ways of resolving the political crisis as soon as tomorrow's birthday celebrations for the king were over.

Opposition leader Suthep announced that protests would be suspended for the king's birthday. "From December 6, we will resume the fight every day, every hour and every minute until we achieve victory," he declared. In fact, the government's fate will be decided behind closed doors—quite possibly as ministers, parliamentary figures, generals and senior state bureaucrats troop to the summer place to pay their respects.

All eyes will be on the monarch, who is expected to make a short speech. King Bhumibol has a long history of mediating disputes within the country's ruling factions, and also of backing the military to take power should that fail.



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