Thai prime minister to dissolve parliament

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In a further sign of the country's deepening political crisis, Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra announced today that she will dissolve parliament and call a new election. Her announcement comes after weeks of anti-government protests, including the temporary occupation of government buildings, and the decision yesterday by MPs from the opposition Democrat Party to resign en masse.

"At this stage, when there are many people opposed to the government from many groups, the best way is to give back the power to the Thai people and hold an election," Yingluck said. "So the Thai people will decide." No date was set for a poll.

Suthep Thaugsuban, former deputy Democrat leader who resigned to lead the protests, previously rejected the offer of elections, because the ruling Puea Thai party was likely to win. Suthep called for the appointment of an unelected "people's council," which is nothing other than a plea for the military to intervene and establish a junta.

Suthep speaks for reactionary sections of Bangkok's traditional elites—the monarchy, military and state bureaucracy—who are bitterly hostile to Yingluck's brother, former prime minister and telecom billionaire, Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in September 2006 that subsequently led to one political upheaval after another.

Yingluck's decision to shut down parliament is designed to pre-empt further Democrat-backed protests and weeks, if not months, of political instability. Sections of big business warned that the continued crisis was impacting on the economy and undermining the country's ability to attract investment.

The Democrat Party is yet to respond. If it calls for an election boycott, it risks being further marginalised. The party has not won an election in more than a decade. At the last poll in 2011, it lost in a landslide to Puea Thai, which has significant support in the populous north and north east of the country as a result of Thaksin's limited handouts to rural areas. The Democrats are opposed to a rice price scheme that has assisted farmers.

Suthep announced plans for protests today, declaring they would blow the "final whistle" on the government. The People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) said the protests today would be the "final battle." But protest numbers have been dwindling. PDRC leader Akanat Promphan said on Saturday that if the turnout was poor, the rallies would end and the PDRC leaders would hand themselves over to police.

The decision to hold an election is undoubtedly the product of wheeling and dealing behind the scenes. A pause in the protests took place last Thursday to mark the birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, who used the occasion to appeal for national unity and stability. Air force chief Prajin Jantong and armed forces Supreme Commander Thanasak Patimapagom announced last Tuesday that the armed forces commanders would meet after the king's birthday to discuss ways to resolve the political crisis.

Last Friday, Admiral Samuel Locklear, commander of the US Pacific Command, and the US Ambassador to Thailand, Kristie Kenney, met with Yingluck at Government House in Bangkok. The intervention of Kenny and Locklear is a clear indication that Washington is concerned that the political crisis could impact on its plans to integrate the Thai military and bases into its "pivot to Asia" aimed at encircling China.

As confirmed by WikiLeaks cables, US officials were actively involved behind the scenes and effectively gave the green light for Thaksin's removal in 2006. Kenny and Locklear, however, appeared to be publicly supportive of Yingluck. Kenney declared that the US believed the present crisis must be settled by talks. Locklear hailed Thailand as Washington's oldest ally in Southeast Asia, adding that the US wanted to

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maintain a good relationship.

Locklear later met Thai armed forces commander General Thanasak Patimaprakorn. Thanasak backed the US call for dialogue and the government's plan, then, to hold a forum to find solutions to the conflict. "This is a good opportunity for all parties to join hands to help move the country forward," he said.

Whether the call for new elections will end the protests remains to be seen. The bitter divisions in Thai ruling circles between the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps are fuelled by the country's rapid economic slowdown and declining exports. Both sections of the ruling class seek control of the state apparatus for their own economic advantage and to maintain the patronage networks on which they depend.

At the same time, the ruling class as a whole is deeply fearful of the emergence of an independent movement of the working class that would draw in sections of the urban and rural poor. In 2010, at the height of pro-Thaksin or Red Shirt protests against the then Democrat government, a brutal army crackdown threatened to trigger widespread social unrest. Both wings of the ruling elite pulled back and eventually reached a compromise that allowed the 2011 election to take place and Yingluck to be installed as prime minister.

There is no doubt that those leading the present anti-government protests are seeking to set the stage for an army coup and the establishment of a military-backed "people's council." The army's reluctance to step in is driven, not by support for democratic norms, but rather fear of what such a move might unleash. Last week, the government sought to damp down the political turmoil by sending home some 70,000 of its own Red Shirt supporters gathered at Bangkok's Rajamangla Stadium. If the army seized power, the political situation would likely become more unstable, not less.

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