

Tense standoff in Thailand after government calls election

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10 December 2013

Protests backed by the opposition Democrat Party continued yesterday in Bangkok, with an estimated 150,000 people marching to Government House. The turnout was among the largest since protests began about two weeks ago against the Puea Thai government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. So far, five people have been killed and 300 injured in clashes with police and pro-government protesters.

Monday's rally went ahead after Yingluck dissolved parliament, following the mass resignation of Democrat MPs. In an attempt to defuse the crisis, Yingluck has called an early election for February 2.

The pro-government United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), the so-called Red Shirt protesters, welcomed Yingluck's announcement and cancelled a mass rally planned for today in Ayutthaya. The UDD pledged to call further rallies if the pro-Democrat People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) tried to oust the government. Puea Thai, which won a landslide victory in 2011, would almost certainly win an election due to its support base in the country's rural north and north east. The Democrat Party has not been elected to office in two decades.

Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva has not said whether his party will take part in the elections or boycott them. A boycott would escalate the country's political crisis and could provide a pretext for the military to intervene and topple the government, as it did in 2006.

Suthep Thaugsuban, former deputy Democrat leader and PDRC leader, declared on Monday that rallies would continue in order to overthrow the "dictatorship of the majority". Addressing protesters, he demanded that Yingluck's government step down during the caretaker period and be replaced by an unelected "people's council", which would postpone elections

for at least eight months while it rewrites the constitution.

Suthep stated that the council would ban the sort of populist policies implemented under former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's billionaire brother. This is nothing but a recipe for a fundamental assault on the social position and democratic rights of the working class and rural poor, who gained some very limited handouts under Thaksin.

The phrase a "people's council" is simply to camouflage the anti-democratic character of the demand: in effect, a call for a royally appointed junta, backed by the military. An *Asia Times* article by veteran journalist Shawn Crispin reported that the demand originated in royalist circles, with lists of "good people" to form the council already circulated. One list sighted by the *Asia Times* included a collection of right-wing royalists, ex-generals and former Thaksin allies who deserted him after the 2006 coup.

The right-wing character of the protests is underscored by their composition. According to the *New York Times*, Monday's protests included "a large contingent of graduates from the country's most prestigious universities; members of an ascetic Buddhist sect; [and] ultra-royalists". Previous protests have included far-right groups such as the Peoples Democratic Force to Overthrow Thaksinism, led by retired senior military officers. According to the *Times*, many protesters were particularly hostile to the government's subsidies for rice farmers—a scheme designed to shore up Puea Thai's base and stimulate the economy.

The tense standoff between the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps is part of a long-running feud which reflects sharp divisions within Thailand's ruling class over economic policy and the spoils of office. The

Democrats speak for the traditional elites, including the military, monarchists and the state bureaucracy, that are bitterly hostile to Thaksin. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006 after his policies, which included opening the economy to more foreign investment, cut across longstanding systems of political patronage. He fled to Dubai to avoid being jailed for corruption.

Thaksin's ousting has been followed by one political upheaval after another. In 2010, the then-Democrat government used the army to crush Red Shirt protesters who were enraged by the anti-democratic removal of the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party, which had been elected in 2008. At least 90 people were killed and 1,500 injured.

The current protests began when the Democrats seized on the government's motion for an amnesty that would have allowed Thaksin to return from exile. The amnesty would also have extended to military and Democrat leaders who were responsible for the brutal crackdown in 2010.

In contrast with three years ago, the military has so far not intervened in the current protests and claims it does not support either side. Behind the scenes, however, it is deeply involved in the political manoeuvring. In a *Bangkok Post* report, Army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha denied rumours that he pressured Yingluck to dissolve parliament. The dissolution, however, followed a meeting of military commanders last week, which reportedly discussed ways to resolve the crisis.

On Friday, Yingluck held talks with Admiral Samuel Locklear, commander of the US Pacific Command, and the US Ambassador to Thailand, Kristie Kenney. Thai armed forces commander General Thanasak Patimaprakorn also met Locklear and supported the government's and Washington's calls for "dialogue" to resolve the conflict with the Democrats.

Neither the military nor the US government—which tacitly backed the 2006 coup—has any commitment to democratic rights. If the military is currently reluctant to intervene in support of the Democrats, it is because it fears provoking mass popular opposition. In 2010, Red Shirt protesters in Bangkok and other parts of the country, including thousands of rural and urban poor, began to raise demands for an end to social inequality—going well beyond the UDD leadership's limited calls for democratic elections.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, Director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn University, told Agence France-Presse that if Yingluck is overthrown in a coup "we will see most likely the return of the Red Shirts to Bangkok and when they unleash their wrath this time it will be much more cataclysmic than what we saw in the uprising in 2009-2010".

All factions of the ruling elite—pro- and anti-Thaksin—are united in their fear of the working class and rural masses organising independently to advance their own interests.



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