

# Anti-government protests continue in Thailand

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The tense standoff continues in Bangkok between the Thai government and protesters demanding that Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra step aside to allow the formation of an unelected “people’s council.” Such a body would be a military junta in all but name, appointed by the king, dominated by right-wing royalists and former military officers, and backed by the army.

Yingluck dissolved the lower house of the Thai parliament on Monday and called early elections, following the resignation en masse of the opposition Democrat Party, which supports the anti-government protests. Former Democrat deputy leader Suthep Thaugsuban heads the self-proclaimed People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) that is organising the demonstrations.

Suthep has rejected the new election, which has been formally set for February 2, and demanded that Yingluck resign as caretaker prime minister. She has refused to comply. The ruling Puea Thai party and its allies won the 2011 election in a landslide and would almost certainly win in February.

Suthep has begun to issue instructions to government officials and police in the name of the PDRC. To date none has complied, but there is undoubtedly sympathy for the opposition protesters in the upper echelons of the state bureaucracy, the police and military, as well as in the monarchy.

These traditional Bangkok elites are bitterly hostile to Puea Thai, Yingluck and above all her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006. In office, Thaksin, a telecom billionaire and right-wing populist, built a base of support in the rural north and north east with a series of limited government handouts.

On Wednesday, Suthep demanded a meeting with the

country’s security chiefs over his demands for a “people’s council.” Initially, it appeared that the army commander Prayuth Chan-ocha had turned Suthep down. Late yesterday, however, while professing their neutrality, the armed forces issued a statement inviting the PDRC leader to a seminar of top military officers on Saturday “to find a way out for Thailand.”

From the outset, Suthep and the PDRC have been seeking to create a climate of political crisis that would set the stage for the military to intervene—as took place in 2006. The military coup has been followed by one political upheaval after another. At stake in the conflict between the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elite are sharp differences over the control of economic policy and political patronage.

The current protest began after the Yingluck government sought to pass an amnesty bill to pardon all those involved in political conflict since 2004, a move that would have allowed Thaksin to return to Thailand a free man. It would also have granted amnesty to Democrat leaders and military officers responsible for the brutal crackdown on pro-Thaksin or Red Shirt protesters in 2010 by heavily armed troops. At least 90 people were killed and 1,500 injured.

The opposition opposed the amnesty bill which was voted down in the Senate or upper house of parliament. The anti-government protests have continued for more than a month demanding that the political system be purged of Shinawatras. The protest on Monday was estimated at 150,000—the largest since the demonstrations began.

The Democrat Party has yet to announce whether it will participate in the February election, or line up with Suthep and call for a boycott. Yesterday Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, who was prime minister at the time of the 2010 crackdown, was formally indicted on

murder charges. While Abhisit appeared in court, Suthep, who was also charged, did not. Suthep was deputy prime minister in 2010 and, as the minister in charge of security, was directly responsible for the bloodbath.

There are deep concerns in business circles over a protracted political crisis. The Asia Development Bank on Wednesday lowered Thailand's expected GDP growth rate for 2013 from 3.8 to 2.9 percent, citing among other things shrinking exports and delays in government investment projects caused by the political standoff.

A Moody's Investors Service report released yesterday noted that the Democrat Party had still not stated whether it would stand or boycott the February 2 poll. It rated the crisis a "credit negative", predicting unrest will follow any election. "Thailand will face continued anti-government protests because protestors do not accept a democratic system based on majority rule by its opponents."

Much hinges on what the army will do. The Thai military has a long record of coups. It not only ousted Thaksin in 2006, but has been instrumental in all the subsequent political upheavals. In 2008, it orchestrated the installation of a Democrat-led government and carried out the 2010 crackdown on Red Shirt protesters. The army leaders were part of a deal brokered in 2011 to try and end the political turmoil—in return for allowing Yingluck to assume office, her government would respect the interest of the military and the monarchy.

This agreement was driven by the fear of both factions that the deep anger in the "Red Shirt" supporters, exacerbated by the bloody events of 2010, would develop into a political movement outside the control of the Puea Thai and challenge the deep social inequality that characterises Thai society.

The reluctance of the military to intervene in the present situation is motivated by the same fear. An article in today's British-based *Economist* magazine pointed to the determination of the "Red Shirts" to defend the democratically elected government. "There are plans, should Ms Yingluck fall, to move the government to the red-shirt heartlands in the north and north-east as a counterweight to Mr Suthep's insurrection in the capital and the south. That would entrench the bitter divisions between the two parts of

the country, divisions that some argue have now made Thailand virtually ungovernable."

It is not so much the geographical divide, but the class divide, that concerns the ruling class. Thaksin was able to tap into the deep resentment and hostility among sections of the working class and rural poor. But if these social layers were to erupt, such a movement could rapidly go beyond Thaksin's feeble populism and issue their own demands for democratic rights and decent living standards as began to happen in 2010.



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