

Thai military leaders support new election to resolve crisis

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17 December 2013

Thailand's military leaders indicated last weekend they would back national elections, scheduled for February 2, in a bid to resolve the political crisis in Bangkok created by weeks of anti-government protests. Protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban has been calling for the replacement of the now-caretaker government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra by a non-elected "People's Council."

The armed forces chief and the commanders of the army, navy and air force met with Suthep at the Royal Armed Forces Headquarters in Bangkok on Saturday. Nobody tried to arrest Suthep, for whom an arrest warrant has been issued on the charge of insurrection.

At the gathering, Suthep repeated his call for Yingluck's replacement by a royally-appointed 400-member council that would hold power for at least a year and introduce "reforms" before any new election. Suthep's Peoples Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) is determined to rig the electoral system to prevent Yingluck's Puea Thai party from repeating its 2011 landslide win.

The PDRC is acting as a front for sections of the traditional elites—the monarchy, the military and the state bureaucracy—that are deeply hostile to Yingluck, and especially her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a 2006 military coup. In office, Thaksin, a telecom billionaire, pursued economic policies that undermined the position of the Bangkok elites and created a base of support in the rural north and north east.

Thaksin is living in self-imposed exile in Dubai to avoid a two-year jail sentence on corruption charges. The trigger for the recent protests was an attempt by the Yingluck government to pass an amnesty law to allow Thaksin to return to Thailand, as well as protect opposition Democrat Party and military leaders from

being prosecuted for their crimes during the past seven years of political turmoil.

Following large anti-government protests last week, Yingluck called early elections, which the PDRC has rejected. At Saturday's gathering of military leaders, Suthep urged the army to be "a hero by siding with the people." In fact, the protests have largely encompassed sections of the Bangkok middle classes, plus Democrat supporters bussed in from its southern strongholds.

Armed forces chief Thanasak Patimaprakorn rejected Suthep, saying, "the best way to solve the problem is through negotiation." But he added: "Neutral observers should oversee the election and make sure it takes place on February 2." This was the first time that a senior military figure had commented on the election since parliament was dissolved on December 9.

The military repeated its apparent support for an election at a forum on Sunday organised by Yingluck to discuss "political reforms" after the election. The meeting was attended by senior state bureaucrats, political figures, business representatives and leaders of the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). The PDRC and Democrat Party refused to attend.

General Nipat Thonglek, permanent secretary at the Defence Ministry, used the forum to state that the armed forces stood by the constitution and supported the February election. But he also warned the army could intervene. "If there are signs that the election will not be fair, the military is ready to make it fair and clean," he declared.

The Thai military is far from united. A Reuters article last Friday, based on Thai military sources, reported that two powerful military figures—former defence minister General Prawit Wongsuwan and ex-army chief Anupong Paochinda—were backing Suthep. Both have

close ties to the current army commander Prayuth Chan-ocha, who effectively controls the military.

Anupong was the central figure in the 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin and the subsequent interventions by the military to undermine the pro-Thaksin governments formed in 2008 after fresh elections. Anupong helped install a Democrat-led government in late 2008 and was army chief during the 2010 crackdown on mass UDD or “Red Shirt” protests against the Democrats. At least 90 people were killed and 1,500 wounded.

A senior military official told Reuters: “Suthep is playing the game on the outside while Prawit tries to play the game on the inside ... General Prawit has been clear about his aspirations to become prime minister.” Another military source told Reuters that Prayuth, the present army commander, was being pulled in two directions—by Anupong and Prawit on one side, and, on the other, the need to restore the military’s image after the 2010 clashes.

In reality, it is not simply the military’s “image” that is at stake. There are fears in both the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps of the Thai ruling elite that another military intervention could trigger a political upheaval that neither side could control. In 2010, the urban and rural poor who joined the “Red Shirt” protests started to voice their own class demands, which went well beyond the UDD’s call for elections.

UDD leader Thida Thavornseth told Voice of America that the main problem for the UDD and Puea Thai is controlling the anger in the north and north east of the country over the moves against the Yingluck government. The deteriorating Thai economy is deepening the social divide between rich and poor, as well as heightening tensions within the ruling class.

Thai and international business representatives have warned of the impact of further political turmoil. Asia Plus Securities chief executive Kongkiat Opaswongkam told the *Bangkok Post* that the economy had a potential to grow at 5 percent, but the final estimates for this year were just 2.9 percent, and 3.6 percent for 2014. Since the protests started last month, foreign investors have withdrawn \$US2.4 billion from Thai equities, which fell 8 percent in six weeks.

Some 40 nations have expressed support for the February election to proceed. European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton on Saturday called for “all involved to seize the crucial opportunity of the

February 2 elections to move forward peacefully.” The opposition Democrats, however, are yet to decide whether to take part in the election or stage a boycott, which could lead to further political upheavals.



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