

Democrat Party to boycott Thai elections

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Thailand's main opposition Democrat Party decided on Saturday to boycott national elections scheduled for February 2. The announcement falls in behind the seven-week Bangkok protest movement led by former Democrat deputy leader Suthep Thaugsuban, who is seeking to install an unelected council to rule the country.

Buoyed by the decision, Suthep claimed that 3.5 million people joined anti-government protests in Bangkok yesterday. Security forces estimated the crowds at 270,000, still making them the largest so far. Suthep urged protesters to block the registration of election candidates and declared that if the election went ahead "we will shut down the entire country and no one will vote." His movement would keep "chasing" Yingluck until she either quit office or "was dead."

The last time the Democrats boycotted elections was in 2006, another period of political stalemate, which culminated with a military coup against ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the now-exiled brother of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Suthep's movement, calling itself the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), is again pushing for military intervention.

The PDRC's aim is to prevent the elections from taking place until an appointed "People's Council" has rigged the country's electoral system so that Yingluck's Puea Thai party-led coalition government cannot return to office. Education Minister Chaturon Chaisang accused the Democrat Party of "setting conditions for a possible coup d'état."

Announcing the boycott, Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, who led a military-supported government from 2008 to 2011, told the media: "Over the past eight to nine years, people have lost their trust in Thailand's political system, and their respect for political parties and elections."

PDRC leader and former Democrat parliamentarian Sathit Wongnongtoey announced that the Democrats would be fighting alongside the protesters. A crowd was sent yesterday to Yingluck's private residence to again demand her resignation but she was away, campaigning in the north east of the country.

Yingluck responded by warning that an election boycott could fuel social unrest, and "the entire country would suffer the consequences of such unrest." Her comments expressed the concerns shared by both sides in the conflict that it could trigger deeper working class discontent amid declining economic growth, rising joblessness and a worsening social divide.

On Saturday, Yingluck sought to accommodate Suthep's demands. Having already called the elections and dissolved parliament on December 9, thus becoming a caretaker prime minister, she formally proposed an unelected "reform council" following the elections. Election candidates would take an oath to support the creation of such a council, which would finish its work within two years.

Suthep's movement largely consists of middle-class Bangkok residents, right-wing monarchist groups and Democrat supporters shipped in from the country's south. Behind them are sections of Thailand's traditional political establishment centred on the monarchy of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the military and the state bureaucracy.

These forces are bitterly opposed to Yingluck and Thaksin, who is accused of pulling the strings in the Puea Thai government. The protests were called after Yingluck proposed an amnesty that would allow her brother to return to Thailand without facing corruption charges enacted against him following the 2006 coup.

In office from 2001 to 2006, Thaksin, a billionaire businessman, alienated the old establishment by opening up the economy to more foreign competition and investment following the Asian economic crisis of

1997–1998. By making modest concessions, including health care and cheap loans for village development, Thaksin built a base of support in the rural areas of the country's north east and north, and among sections of the urban poor, making him independent of the political and economic patronage exercised by the old establishment.

Yingluck's government continued these populist policies, which the opposition equates to corruption and vote buying, with a price support scheme for rice farmers and a small increase in the nation's minimum wage.

Thaksin and Yingluck have no more interest in "democracy" than Suthep. In office, Thaksin showed contempt for democratic rights in his "war on drugs," which involved extra-judicial murders, and in unleashing the security forces against Muslim separatist demonstrators in the southern provinces. Meanwhile, the Shinawatra family and its cronies enriched themselves.

But for the Bangkok-based elite, his greatest crime was arousing the expectations of the rural masses and urban poor, and undermining its political and economic domination.

Suthep's campaign seeks to bring the military into action, as in 2006 and in 2008 when a combination of Bangkok-based protests and political intrigues involving the military removed pro-Thaksin governments.

However the generals, while divided, have been reluctant to openly intervene so far. The violent crushing of pro-Thaksin "Red Shirt" protests, organised by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) in May 2010, resulted in the death of over 90 people and the wounding of a thousand others. This discredited the Democrats' last government and left deep and seething resentment.

UDD "Red Shirt" leaders report that in the current crisis they are having trouble controlling the anger in major rural areas. UDD chairwoman Tida Thawornseth said on Sunday that her followers were watching to see whether "rebels stir up violence or intimidate the candidates." She added: "We will rise to fight only if there is a coup."

In 2011 the military was behind a deal that accepted a Puea Thai election victory as long as the position of the monarchy and military was not challenged. Both sides

were alarmed by the emergence among the 2010 Red Shirt protesters of broader demands for democratic rights and social justice.

On December 14, the military hierarchy, again fearing broader social unrest, declared it would back the February poll. Last Friday, however, army commander Prayuth Chan-ocha warned of civil war if the political conflict continued. He proposed a "people's council" of his own that would exclude government and protest leaders, but include "non-core" representatives of "all colours."

General Prayuth spoke after a meeting of the Defence Council, attended by all the armed forces commanders and presided over by Yingluck, who is also caretaker defence minister. Prayuth did not say if his proposed council would meet before or after the election. He denied that the armed forces had pressured Yingluck to quit.



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