

# Thai military hints at a coup

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Amid a continued standoff between the Thai government and anti-government protesters, Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday refused to rule out a military coup, warning that the army was at “a difficult crossroad.”

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has called new elections for February 2, but the opposition Democrat Party has declared it will boycott the poll and protest leaders are calling for the installation of an unelected “people’s council” to rewrite the constitution and run the country. Tensions escalated in Bangkok over the past week. On Thursday, about 2,000 people took part in protests throughout the capital, calling for the caretaker Puea Thai government to resign. One group attempted to storm the Thai-Japanese Stadium where candidate registration was taking place for the election. Two people were killed and at least 140 injured in clashes.

The Electoral Commission responded to the violence by urging the government “to postpone the election until a joint agreement from both sides is reached.” The government immediately rejected the proposal, saying a delay would be unconstitutional, and called on the military to provide security for the February 2 poll. Commissioner Somchai Srisuthiyakorn warned on Thai television that the commissioners might resign to prevent the election from going ahead—an anti-democratic move that would deepen the country’s political crisis.

General Prayuth yesterday called an urgent meeting of his senior staff on Friday to discuss the political crisis. Speaking to the media, he repeated that the military had adopted a neutral position and called for an end to violence. He refused to comment on the Electoral Commission’s statement or declare the military’s support of an election. Prayuth simply said: “If the election is held, I will vote.”

When asked about an army putsch, he declared: “The

military does not shut or open the door to a coup, but a decision depends on the situation.”

The People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), led by former Democrat deputy leader Suthep Thaugsuban, has staged anti-government protests for the past two months, precisely to establish the conditions for a coup. In 2006, similar protests and a Democrat boycott set the stage for the military to oust the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, the current prime minister’s brother.

The PDRC and Democrats represent Thailand’s traditional elites—the military, sections of big business, the state bureaucracy and the monarchy—who are bitterly hostile to the Shinawatras. Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire, enacted reforms including micro-lending and cheap healthcare, which gained him a support base in Thailand’s impoverished rural north. These policies, as well as Thaksin’s moves to open the economy to foreign investment, cut across long-standing networks of patronage in the ruling elite.

The Democrats and their backers are deeply hostile to any, even limited concessions, to the country’s rural poor. Speaking to the *Straits Times* on December 21, Suthep said that “the one thing our reform process must abolish” is Thaksin’s and Yingluck’s “indirect vote buying by populist policies.” These forces are hostile to the government’s price support scheme for rice farmers and its small increase in the country’s minimum wage.

General Prayuth’s claim that the army is “neutral” is false. In 2010, the military had no compunction, when called on by the then-Democrat government, in brutally suppressing so-called “Red Shirt” protests by the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). More than 90 people were killed and hundreds more injured in the crackdown.

If the army has not intervened directly so far, it is only because of fears in the ruling circles that it would provoke a political upheaval that could spiral out of

control. On December 20, Prayuth warned that the deep divisions in Bangkok and the provinces “could trigger a civil war.” Among government supporters, particularly in rural areas in the north and north-east of the country, there is already deep anger over the anti-democratic demands of the PDRC’s protests.

Thousands of villages have joined the “Red Villages” movement, aligned with the UDD. Reports from these areas point to profound hostility to the country’s deep social inequality, and a determination to fight for greater gains. On December 17, the BBC quoted a resident of Udon Thani, who said: “There should be no distinction between high or low, between those with education and those who didn’t finish school. We’re all Thais and we’re all equal.”

Another resident, Plern Thienyim, whose brother was killed in the 2010 crackdown, criticised the UDD leadership, telling the BBC: “Our side keeps retreating and still there’s no justice for us. We are not afraid, we will keep on supporting the Red Shirts, but every time we demonstrate it seems we are wrong, that the other side will never accept us.”

After clashes in late November, the government and the UDD demobilised the tens of thousands of “Red Shirts” who had come to Bangkok to oppose the PDRC’s demands. The UDD used Yingluck’s election announcement to call off a planned mass Red Shirt rally on December 10. The UDD leaders, along with the government, are fearful that the “Red Shirt” protesters will start to issue their own demands—as they began to do in 2010.

Despite the “populist” measures of the Thaksin and Yingluck governments, working people face a persistent and worsening social crisis. According to government figures, which undoubtedly downplay the problem, 5.4 million people live below the poverty line and 3.8 million are undernourished. A majority of these people live in rural areas in the north and northeast.

According to the Asia Foundation’s John J. Brandon, “inequality is a problem that is getting worse, not better. The richest 20 percent of Thais possess about 70 percent of the wealth, while the poorest 20 percent hold just 4 percent.” The World Bank estimates that 72 percent of government spending is confined to Bangkok, home to 27 percent of the population. The northeast Isaan region, where 34 percent of the population lives, receives just 6 percent.

Over the past fortnight, the government has been scrambling to convince big business that if it is re-elected it will impose their demands for austerity. On Wednesday, Yingluck proposed that a National Reform Council be created to prepare proposals for “economic and social restructuring” and amendments to the constitution. The 499 council members would be selected by a committee, which would include the Supreme Commander of Armed Forces and representatives from the Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Thai Industries and the Bankers’ Association.

UDD Chair Thida Thavornseth criticised the proposed committee, telling Agence France-Presse that it would represent the “Thai elite.” On December 18, however, UDD leaders met with the Bankers’ Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Thai Industries and the Stock Exchange to appeal to them to support the election.

Underlying the bitter infighting between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling class is a deepening crisis of the Thai economy. The latest Finance Ministry figures put economic growth for 2013 at just 2.8 percent, down from 6.5 percent last year. Factory output fell in November, for the eighth successive month, by 10.6 percent year-on-year. The next government, whatever its form and composition, will be charged with scrapping previous hand-outs and imposing new burdens onto working people.



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