

# Thai opposition vows to shut down Bangkok

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Thailand's political crisis is coming to a head, following more than two months of protests against the Pheu Thai government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

The opposition Democrat Party and the Peoples Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) have vowed to "shut down" Bangkok starting next Monday. Former deputy Democrat leader Suthep Thaugsuban, who leads the PDRC, said they would blockade government buildings and 20 major intersections until the government steps down.

Last month, Yingluck tried to defuse the crisis by calling an early election for February 2. The Democrats, however, are boycotting the election, which they would almost certainly lose. Assisted by sections of the state bureaucracy and judiciary, they aim to create the conditions for a military coup. The PDRC wants the government replaced by an unelected "people's council" that would rule the country for up to two years.

The crisis increasingly resembles the lead-up to the 2006 coup, which toppled the government of Yingluck's brother Thaksin Shinawatra. The PDRC's predecessor, the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), held a series of protests that exploited popular anger over the billionaire Thaksin's corruption, abuse of democratic rights and privatisation of state-owned assets. When Thaksin tried to shore up his rule by calling elections, the opposition boycotted the poll, creating a constitutional crisis that provided the pretext for military intervention. Thaksin fled the country to avoid being jailed for corruption.

The 2006 coup was fuelled by deep divisions within the Thai ruling elite, which have repeatedly resurfaced. The Democrats and PDRC speak for sections of big business, monarchists, the military and the state bureaucracy that are deeply hostile to Thaksin and Yingluck, who have made limited handouts to the poor.

These include the expansion of healthcare and a rice buying scheme, which have won Pheu Thai a base of support in the country's rural north. These measures, combined with Thaksin's moves to open the economy to foreign investment, cut across the existing networks of patronage among Thailand's traditional elites. The proposed "people's council" would be tasked with dismantling the "populist" reforms, implementing austerity cuts and ensuring pro-Thaksin parties are barred from power.

Anti-Thaksin forces within the Bangkok bureaucracy intervened this week to assist the PDRC's campaign to derail the elections.

In a blatantly anti-democratic move, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) announced on Tuesday that it would press charges against 308 lawmakers, including 223 from Pheu Thai, who it says acted illegally by supporting a bill that would have made the Senate, parliament's upper house, an all-elected body. In November the Constitutional Court struck down the proposed amendment.

Under the constitution imposed after Thaksin was ousted, nearly half the senators are appointed by a committee that includes high-ranking members of the judiciary and the Electoral Commission. If the NACC affirms the guilt of the lawmakers, they could be suspended or even banned from politics.

Anti-Thaksin protesters last month blocked access to candidate registration sites in the country's south, preventing 29 Pheu Thai candidates from registering. The candidates appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court to allow them to run, but on Wednesday the court declared it had no jurisdiction in the matter. If the Electoral Commission refuses to register the candidates, the election would not be able to deliver enough MPs to meet the quorum needed to open a new parliament, creating a constitutional crisis.

While the military has adopted a pose of neutrality

and previously declared its support for elections, it has refused to intervene to help police to secure candidate registration facilities.

This week the army moved tanks, artillery and troops into Bangkok, officially to prepare for Children's Day exhibitions on Saturday and for the January 18 Army Day parade. This is the first year that a parade of military vehicles has been scheduled for the day. Major General Wara Bunyasit told the *Bangkok Post*: "This is not a preparation for the army to stage a coup, as rumoured, and I ask the people not to panic."

Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-Ocha was more equivocal, telling reporters that people should not be "scared of something that hasn't taken place yet." On Thursday, Prayuth wrote on Facebook that the army would intervene "to protect the country ... [i]f one side breaks the law and another side also breaks the law and responds with violence." Last month he declared: "The military does not shut or open the door to a coup, but a decision depends on the situation."

The *Bangkok Post* reported on Tuesday that for the first time the government, via its deputy spokesperson Sunisa Letphakkawat, openly accused the PDRC of having a "secret" plan to "lure the military into staging a coup." According to the paper, the alleged plot would involve staging "a small violent attack on the protesters ... which will set the coup in motion."

PDRC leader Suthep denied the allegation, while making clear that the PDRC supports a coup. He told the paper that "if a coup happens, it would result from the [failings] of the government."

The military is reluctant to openly support the PDRC because it fears provoking more widespread unrest among the urban and rural poor, who make up the base of support for Pheu Thai. The 2006 coup was a bloodless one, but the bitterness generated by the past seven years of political turmoil make bloody conflict and civil war more likely.

In 2010, the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) led protests against the military-backed Democrat government, attracting mass support from oppressed urban and rural people. In Bangkok and elsewhere the "Red Shirt" protesters began to raise their own demands for social equality that went well beyond the UDD leadership's calls for elections. The protests ended with a violent military crackdown that killed 90 people.

Every section of the ruling elite fears the return of Red Shirt protests, which the government and the UDD could be unable to control. Monday's editorial in the *Bangkok Post* expressed concern that the PDRC's protests could provoke broader unrest. While praising Suthep's push for "much needed" political reform, the paper said the planned shutdown of Bangkok was a "step too far" that would be bad for business and could lead to "violence."

The *Post* blamed Red Shirt protesters for provoking the 2010 bloodbath, but noted that Suthep, who was deputy prime minister at the time, was "personally and deeply involved" in the events. It stated that he "had no plan then and has no plan today" to prevent violence by "third hands or fringe supporters."

Despite the real danger of a coup, the Yingluck government and the UDD have avoided mobilising the Red Shirts. The UDD has announced counter-protests against the "shut down" next week, but only in the country's northern provinces, not in Greater Bangkok. Pheu Thai and the UDD leaders have instead appealed to the military, the banks and big business to support the government's re-election as the best means to impose austerity policies.



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