

Thai opposition vows to continue “shutdown” of Bangkok

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An estimated 100,000 anti-government protesters have rallied in central Bangkok since Monday, blockading seven major intersections and at least one government building, in the latest effort to force the Pheu Thai government to resign and cancel elections scheduled for February 2. Several businesses and some schools closed, and dozens of flights in and out of Bangkok were cancelled.

The protests are led by the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and supported by the opposition Democrat party, which is boycotting the poll. The PDRC wants the government replaced by an unelected “people’s council”—essentially a call for military-backed dictatorship.

Yingluck yesterday proposed a meeting of the government, the PDRC and Democrats, as well as representatives of the courts and business, to discuss the Electoral Commission’s proposal to postpone the election for one month. But former deputy Democrat leader Suthep Thaugsuban, who leads the PDRC, rejected the offer. He told protesters at Pathumwan intersection: “We will shut down the city. We will do it all day and we will do it every day until we win ... No negotiations. No compromise.”

The PDRC represents sections of the ruling elite, including the military and the monarchy, that are hostile to Yingluck and her brother, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Its proposed “people’s council” would scrap the government’s rice subsidies for farmers and other “populist” reforms which have gained Pheu Thai a support base in the country’s rural north. It would also rewrite the constitution and rig the electoral system to prevent Thaksin-linked parties from coming to power.

The government has deployed 12,000 police and 8,000 soldiers in the capital. Army units guarded

several government buildings and TV stations. While this week’s protests have so far been peaceful, on Sunday night an unidentified gunman shot and injured a man guarding a protest camp. Early on Monday, several shots were fired at the Democrat party headquarters. Over the past two months eight people have died in clashes between protesters, police and pro-government protesters.

It cannot be ruled out that the shootings were an anti-government provocation aimed at triggering a military intervention. Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha stated last Thursday that the army would step in “to protect the country ... [i]f one side breaks the law and another side also breaks the law and responds with violence.” The government’s deputy spokesperson Sunisa Letphakkawat last week told the *Bangkok Post* that the PDRC had 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.”

While the military has denied that it is planning a coup, Prayuth last month stated that “a decision depends on the situation.” Prayuth met with other senior military officials on Monday and sources told the *Post* that “their main concern was the violence that could be instigated by unknown groups.”

Tensions will escalate in coming days. The Network of Students and People for Reform of Thailand—a protest group aligned with the PDRC—has threatened to blockade the headquarters of Aerothai, which operates the country’s air traffic control system, unless the government steps down by tomorrow. The group also threatened to seize the stock exchange.

Protesters last month blockaded candidate registration sites in southern provinces, preventing more than 120

candidates from signing up. Names have been submitted for only 94 percent of the country's 500 House of Representatives seats—just short of the constitutional requirement of the 95 percent of seats to convene parliament. As a result, even if Pheu Thai wins overwhelmingly, the empty seats could trigger a constitutional crisis and provide a pretext for military intervention. The army refused to intervene against anti-government protesters to protect candidate registration.

In 2006, Thaksin Shinawatra's government was ousted in a military coup that was triggered when opposition parties similarly boycotted the election and several seats were left unfilled due to low voter turnout.

The protracted political crisis and the "shut down" of Bangkok is generating growing nervousness in big business circles. On December 26, the finance ministry downgraded its growth forecast for 2014 from 5.1 to 4 percent, saying that it could reach as low as 3.5 percent if unrest continued. This is down from 7.8 percent in 2010.

According to the Thai Chamber of Commerce, the Bangkok protests are costing the economy up to 1 billion baht (\$30 million) a day. Stanley Kang, chairman of the Joint Foreign Chambers of Commerce, told the *Nation* that Thailand was "losing its attractiveness" for foreign investors. Tourism, which accounts for 10 percent of the economy, was particularly affected.

A *Wall Street Journal* editorial on Monday spelled out the concerns of global finance capital. It warned that if Yingluck stepped down this could "lead to worse troubles" because Suthep and Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva were "too divisive to head a new government." The "worst case scenarios" included a "division of the country" into north and south and a "protracted civil war." The paper urged the opposition to negotiate with the government on "constitutional reforms" in order to prevent "further unrest."

The *Financial Times* similarly called for the Democrats and PDRC to commit to the electoral process and hold "dialogue" with the government "to put Thailand's constitution on a sounder footing."

Big business, both foreign and local, supports the PDRC's proposals for austerity in order to force workers and the rural poor to pay for the deepening economic crisis. These layers have no commitment whatsoever to democratic rights, but they fear that

imposing their agenda through military dictatorship could provoke widespread social unrest.

In 2010, tens of thousands of workers and rural poor protested in Bangkok against the military-installed Democrat government. While Thaksin and the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) sought to confine the demonstrations to the call for fresh elections, the protesters began to raise their own demands for an end to social inequality and poverty. The "Red Shirt" protests were brutally suppressed by the army, which killed 90 people and injured more than 1,500.

Every faction of the ruling elite fears a repeat of the 2010 protests, which could spiral out of the control of the UDD and Puea Thai. The UDD has called limited demonstrations against the anti-democratic campaign of the PDRC and Democrats, confining its demands to the call for elections to proceed.

On Monday, the UDD organised several anti-coup protests in northern provinces, but refused to mobilise "Red Shirt" protesters in Bangkok. The *Bangkok Post* reported that at a rally in Chiang Mai, UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan downplayed the PDRC's protests, saying they "will last no more than a week since people in Bangkok will start running out of patience." Another UDD leader emphasised the need to avoid a "confrontation" with the PDRC.



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