

# Grenade attack as Thai political crisis continues

Tom Peters  
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More than 30 people were injured when a grenade was hurled from a building at a protest march in central Bangkok yesterday, the latest in a series of attacks on anti-government protesters over the past week. The explosion took place in broad daylight. Police and army personnel rushed to the scene, but no one was arrested.

The government and opposition have blamed each other for the attacks, which include grenades thrown at the homes of key opposition supporters and shots fired on anti-government demonstrators. However, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which is organising the protests, and the opposition Democrat Party have far more to gain from the incidents than the government. The attacks provide a pretext for the army to intervene, which has been the PDRC's aim since it launched the protests last November.

The PDRC called the latest round of protests, starting on Monday, to "occupy Bangkok" and force Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her Puea Thai government to resign. The PDRC, backed by the Democrats, is demanding the establishment of an unelected "people's council"—in essence, a front for a military junta. Protests leaders have repeatedly rejected government calls for negotiations. The Democrats are boycotting national elections called for February 2, which they would almost certainly lose if they contested.

The protests began on Monday with an estimated 100,000 people, who blockaded major intersections and rallied outside the national police headquarters and government ministries. The demonstrations have continued, but the *New York Times* reported on Thursday that "their numbers were far lower than they were earlier in the week."

As the protests dragged on, opposition leaders

escalated their threats. PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban threatened on Tuesday that if the government did not step down "we will detain the prime minister and other ministers." Co-leader Sathit Wongnongtoey announced on Thursday that a team of 500 people would be tasked with tracking down Yingluck.

For all their claims to "represent the people," the PRDC and the Democrats are acting on behalf of the Thai traditional elites—the monarchy, military and state bureaucracy—who are deeply hostile to Yingluck and her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Those taking part in the protests are mainly drawn from sections of the Bangkok middle classes and the Democrat's strongholds in the country's south.

Thaksin, a telecom billionaire and right-wing populist, built an electoral base among layers of the urban and rural poor through limited social reforms and micro-loans. These policies, as well as his decisions to further open up the country to foreign investment, alienated the traditional elites, who feared their privileges and economic interests were being undermined. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006 and lives in exile in Dubai.

The PRDC has declared that its "people's council" would scrap the Shinawatras' "populist" policies, including a subsidised rice-buying scheme for farmers that costs the state more than \$9 billion per year.

Yingluck has refused to step down and reiterated yesterday that the February 2 election would proceed, despite concerted attempts by sections of the state bureaucracy to derail the poll. Electoral Commissioner Somchai Srisuthiyakorn again urged the government yesterday to postpone the election and implement measures demanded by the PDRC. He told the *Nation*: "The government seems to opt for a war by pushing

ahead with the February 2 election. If we remain stubborn, we will see hell before us.”

On Thursday, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) announced it was investigating whether Yingluck neglected her duty by failing to prevent financial losses linked to the government’s rice-buying scheme. Two of Yingluck’s former ministers have been charged with corruption over the scheme. The NACC has also accused hundreds of Pheu Thai legislators of acting illegally by supporting changes to the constitution intended to make the Senate a fully-elected body. If found guilty, Yingluck and her party members could be banned from politics.

Even if the election goes ahead and Pheu Thai wins an overwhelming majority, as it did in 2011, the poll will not resolve the political crisis. PDRC blockades last month successfully disrupted candidate registration in 28 southern seats, meaning that an election would be unable to fill 95 percent of parliament, as required by the constitution. A constitutional crisis would provide another pretext for the military or the courts to intervene against Pheu Thai.

Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha has postured as “neutral” and urged both sides to negotiate, but has refused to rule out a military coup. In fact, the army’s “neutrality” simply underlines the fact that it does not support the democratically-elected government or February 2 elections. Amid continuing coup rumours, the *Bangkok Post* noted that “the so-called Burapha Payak (Tigers of the East) group of army officers, to which Gen Prayuth belongs, favour Mr Suthep’s side.” A source told the *Post* that the group has “been lobbying senior civil servants to stop taking orders from Ms Yingluck.”

Amid a slowing economy, sections of business are increasingly concerned about the political deadlock and have urged a compromise between the government and opposition. Pornsilp Patcharintanakul, vice chairman of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, yesterday called for Yingluck to stand down and for all parties to discuss “reforms” before the election.

On Thursday, the *Nation*’s editor Suthichai Yoon warned: “If the government refuses to reach out for a breakthrough by holding talks with the other side, the country will be heading towards ‘failed state’ status at a very dangerous speed indeed.” The opposition, however, has refused to engage in negotiations with the

government.

If the army has not intervened so far, it is because of the fears in the ruling class that a coup would provoke mass opposition from sections of the urban and rural poor that the Pheu Thai and pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) could not control. In 2010, tens of thousands of people took part in “Red Shirt” UDD protests against the military-backed Democrat government that the military violently suppressed, killing 90 people.

The Pheu Thai government has sought to assure big business leaders that if re-elected it will implement their demands for cost-cutting to impose the economic crisis on working people. Last month, Yingluck proposed to appoint a panel, including representatives of the military, the Chamber of Commerce and the judiciary, to recommend pro-business reforms.



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