

Thai government to hold election amid ongoing crisis

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National elections are due to take place in Thailand this Sunday after Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra rejected calls by the Election Commission to postpone the poll for up to four months. The government will deploy 200,000 police nationwide, including 10,000 in Bangkok, where anti-government protesters have vowed to disrupt the poll.

Yingluck called the early election two months ago in an effort to shore up her rule after the opposition Democrat Party resigned en masse from parliament and joined protests led by the so-called Peoples Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). The Democrats are boycotting the election and the PDRC has blockaded major intersections and government buildings over the past fortnight.

The PDRC is demanding the formation of an unelected “people’s council” that would be nothing but a front for the country’s traditional elites—the monarchy, the military and sections of the state bureaucracy. This faction of the ruling class is deeply hostile to Yingluck and her brother, former prime minister and telecom billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006.

The factional warfare in the Thai ruling elites has continued since the 2006 coup. The hostility of the anti-Thaksin elites stems from his pro-market policies, which cut across their business interests and patronage networks to the benefit of his own cronies. His government also undermined the base of opposition parties by making an appeal to the urban and rural poor through a series of limited reforms, including cheap health care and micro-loans.

While Yingluck’s Puea Thai party will almost certainly win a majority in Sunday’s election, this will not end the political crisis. The government’s hold on power is extremely tenuous and it faces many legal

challenges from state bodies, including the courts, that tacitly support the opposition. A government source told the *Bangkok Post* on Wednesday that it would not be surprised if a petition to nullify the election were filed with the Constitution Court.

The PDRC blockaded candidate registration sites in 28 out of 500 constituencies—meaning the election will not produce the quorum of 475 members required by the constitution to open the parliament. The Electoral Commission refused to register candidates at alternative locations.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) is investigating allegations by the Democrats that Yingluck acted corruptly by failing to end a rice subsidy scheme for farmers, which has accumulated annual losses of at least 200 billion baht (\$US6.1 billion). If found guilty, Yingluck could be banned from politics. The NACC has also accused more than 200 Puea Thai law-makers of breaking the law by supporting an amendment to the constitution that would have made the Senate a fully-elected body.

On Tuesday, PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban told supporters at the Pathumwan rally site in Bangkok that the PDRC would “prepare to use all means not to let the election be a success,” and “we will escalate our protest to oust Yingluck and her subordinates before February 2.” A PDRC source told the *Nation* that protesters would “besiege” ballot stations in Bangkok.

The state of emergency announced by the government last week in an effort to quell the protests has had no effect. Protesters are blockading postal distribution centres in the Democrat’s southern stronghold, preventing ballot papers from being distributed to at least six provinces.

Last Sunday, the PDRC shut down all 50 of Bangkok’s advance polling stations. Nationwide, early

voting did not take place in 11 out of 77 provinces. According to the Electoral Commission, this means another round of voting will take place in late February and the final results will not be known for months.

No one has been arrested for several violent attacks on protesters over the past month—including the murder of Suthin Tharatin, leader of the Peoples Democratic Force to Overthrow Thaksinism, which is aligned with the PDRC. The government and opposition have blamed each other for the attacks.

The last election, in 2011, only took place after behind-the-scenes negotiations between Thaksin and the military and royalists reached a compromise to allow Puea Thai to form a government if it won. In return, Yingluck guaranteed a hand-off approach to the military and respect for the prerogatives of the King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Both factions of the ruling class were deeply concerned that protests in 2010 by the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) against the military-backed Democrat government threatened to trigger a wider movement of the working class and rural masses. The military violently suppressed the “Redshirt” protests, killing more than 90 people and injuring 1,500 more.

Writing on the *Asia Times* web site yesterday, veteran journalist Shawn Crispin reported the failure of secret talks between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions to reach a deal to stabilise the political situation, as in 2011. Prominent military figures aligned with the monarchy, including former army commander General Prawit Wongsuwan, have formed an informal grouping—a “council of elders”—who have been negotiating with Thaksin.

Unlike 2011, the military-led establishment is not offering a compromise, so much as an ultimatum. According to Crispin, since the dissolution of parliament on December 9, “top royalists have bid to leverage the two-sided squeeze of anti-Shinawatra street protests and legal impeachment pressure to force Yingluck’s resignation and Thaksin’s acquiescence to the formation of an appointed ruling council.” The only “concession” has been an offer to suspend scrutiny of Shinawatra business interests for a year, allowing the family to liquidate assets and move their money offshore. As the article explained, Thaksin has so far rejected what can only be described as “lose-lose

propositions.”

Crispin pointed to deep concerns within the royalist establishment about the potential interference of a pro-Thaksin government in the succession process that will follow the death of the aging king Bhumibol. While this may be a factor in the flare-up of factional infighting, there are deeper driving forces, including the country’s deepening economic reversal. Economic growth plunged last year to less than 4 percent, from 6.5 percent in 2012.

Like other capitals throughout the region, Bangkok is also the focus of geo-political rivalry between the United States and China. While Thailand is a formal American ally, China is a major trade partner and has longstanding ties with sections of the military. In 2006, the US implicitly supported the military coup. Similarly, Washington’s virtual silence in the course of the past two months of political turmoil is in effect endorsement of the creeping coup by the royalist establishment to oust the Yingluck government.

Neither faction of the Thai ruling class represents the interests of the working class and rural poor. In power, the right-wing populist Thaksin was just as ruthless as his opponents in suppressing any criticism and implementing his pro-business agenda. Whatever the political make-up of the next government, it will inevitably seek to impose the burden of the worsening economic crisis on working people.



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