

Thailand: Anti-government protests disrupt election

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Millions of people were prevented from voting in Thailand's election yesterday, as anti-government protesters blockaded ballot stations. According to the Electoral Commission, polls did not open in 42 of the country's 375 electoral districts, affecting an estimated six million voters in parts of Bangkok and several southern provinces.

The disruption demonstrated the government's tenuous hold on power. A state of emergency declared last month has had no effect in quelling protests. Around the country about 130,000 police were mobilised yesterday, as well as 5,000 soldiers in Bangkok, but they did not intervene to end blockades of voting stations.

At some polling venues people were unable to vote because the Electoral Commission, which the government accuses of tacitly supporting the protesters, failed to organise enough staff and ballot papers. Electoral Commission member Somchai Srisuthiyakorn, who previously called for the election to be postponed, wrote on Facebook on Thursday that the poll would be an "embarrassment" and might have the lowest turnout in history.

The protests were organised by the so-called People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which has blockaded Bangkok streets and government buildings for the past three months. It aims to topple Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's caretaker government and replace it with an unelected "people's council," which would essentially be a military-backed junta. The opposition Democrat Party resigned from parliament en masse in December to support the PDRC's campaign and also boycotted the election.

The Democrats and PDRC represent sections of the ruling elite—including the military high command, ultra-royalists and the state bureaucracy—who are hostile to

Yingluck and her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire, was ousted in a military coup in 2006 after he alienated sections of big business by opening the country to increased foreign investment and undermining the longstanding systems of patronage involving the military and state apparatus.

Thaksin and Yingluck also angered the traditional Bangkok elites by implementing limited reforms aimed at securing support from the country's urban and rural poor. These include an increased minimum wage, cheaper healthcare and subsidies for rice farmers. The anti-government protesters have largely been drawn from sections of the Bangkok middle classes and from Democrat strongholds in the country's south.

Thousands of people across the country held rallies to oppose the PDRC's anti-democratic campaign. At some Bangkok polling booths "Red Shirt" protesters organised by the pro-government United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) confronted PDRC blockades and demanded their right to vote.

When officials responded to an altercation at the Din Daeng polling station by closing it, Red Shirt protesters were furious. One quoted in the *Guardian* declared: "This is ridiculous. Why didn't anyone figure out how to deal with this before the day of the election? The Election Commission should let us vote to see who will win and who will lose."

While no violence was reported yesterday, on Saturday nine people were injured in a shoot-out that began when Red Shirt protesters demanded that the PDRC end its blockade of a polling station in the Bangkok suburb of Lak Si. Gunfire reportedly came from both sides, but no one was arrested. UDD chair Tida Thawornseth declared at a press conference yesterday that "soldiers sat watching what was

happening, doing nothing.” She questioned whether the military itself staged the attack.

The incident follows a string of attacks on PDRC rallies and protest leaders in recent weeks by unidentified people. The PDRC blames the government and its supporters, but the PDRC has the most to gain by staging a provocation to provide the pretext for a military intervention. Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-Ocha previously indicated that the military would step in to prevent widespread violence.

Yingluck pushed ahead with an early election in an effort to shore up her rule following the Democrats’ resignation from parliament. Even though her Puea Thai Party will almost certainly win a majority, the country’s political crisis will intensify, however. The Electoral Commission announced it would conduct by-elections for areas where polling booths did not open, but this could take several months.

In December, protesters prevented any candidates from registering in 28 constituencies by blockading registration sites. Unless the EC agrees to re-register candidates, the next parliament will not be able to fill 95 percent of seats as required under the constitution and cannot convene to install a new government. The Yingluck government will remain in caretaker mode, with limited powers.

The Democrats announced that they will apply to the Constitution Court to declare the election invalid. The opposition is attempting to re-run the events leading up to the 2006 coup. At that time, the Democrats similarly boycotted an election, which was then annulled by the court. The ruling created a constitutional crisis that paved the way for the military to oust Thaksin.

The government already faces legal challenges from a judiciary that largely supports the opposition. The National Anti-Corruption Commission is fast-tracking an impeachment case brought by the Democrats against Yingluck, based on allegations that she failed to prevent losses linked to the government’s rice subsidy scheme. The NACC has also accused 308 law-makers, mostly from Puea Thai, of acting illegally by attempting to amend the constitution to make the Senate a fully-elected body. If found guilty, they could be banned from politics.

Underlying the increasing tensions between rival factions of Thailand’s ruling class is a rapidly worsening economic crisis. The stock market has fallen

10 percent since November and the government has slashed its economic growth estimates for this year from 5.1 percent to 3.1 percent since December. The *New York Times* noted on January 30 that Thailand’s unrest “comes just as investors are pulling their money from emerging markets worldwide” as a result of the US Federal Reserve’s decision to “taper” its quantitative easing program, which had kept down interest rates in the US and sent investors looking for better returns in countries like Thailand.

Domestic and foreign capitalists are demanding that the political crisis be resolved so that the economic crisis can be imposed on working people. A recent report by HSBC bank, entitled “ASEAN Perspectives: A sputtering domestic engine,” called on Thailand to carry out “structural reforms” to improve its competitiveness, including the scrapping of “excessive subsidies, including the rice programmes.”

Yingluck is just as committed to this austerity agenda as her opponents. She has repeatedly appealed to big business and the military to support her re-election as the best means to carry out this agenda. While the ruling Puea Thai government postures as a defender of democracy, it is equally ready as its opponents to resort to anti-democratic measures to impose the demands of big business and foreign investors.



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