

Thailand: Election fails to resolve political deadlock

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Anti-government protests continued in Bangkok last week, after the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) disrupted the February 2 election, preventing up to six million people from voting. On Friday the PDRC blockaded three ministerial buildings.

The PDRC's election day blockades in Bangkok contributed to a turnout of just 26 percent, while voting did not take place in nine southern provinces. Nationwide, 20.5 million people, 47.7 percent of eligible voters, took part in the election—down from 75 percent in the 2011 election. The ruling Puea Thai Party undoubtedly won, but official results have not been released by the Electoral Commission, which plans to run by-elections in constituencies where voting was prevented.

This process could stretch out for months. In the meantime, the government, which has limited “caretaker” powers, remains highly unstable. Its state of emergency, declared last month, has had no effect in quelling the protests. More than 100,000 police officers were mobilised during the election but they did not intervene to stop the shutdown of 11 percent of the country's polling stations.

Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra called the early election after the opposition Democrat party resigned from parliament in December to join the PDRC's campaign. The PDRC wants Yingluck's government replaced with an unelected “people's council,” which would essentially be a military-backed junta.

This “appointed” council would rule the country and rewrite the constitution to prevent any parties tied to the Shinawatra family from returning to power. The PDRC and Democrats represent Thailand's traditional elites, including the monarchy, military and state bureaucracy, which 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 the Bangkok elites by opening up the economy to more foreign investment and implementing limited reforms, including cheap healthcare, designed to secure a base of support among the country's rural and urban poor.

The opposition wants to end such “populist” policies, including the Yingluck government's subsidised rice buying scheme for farmers. The National Anti-Corruption Commission is investigating trumped up allegations made by the Democrats that Yingluck acted corruptly by failing to prevent billions of dollars in losses linked to the scheme. Yingluck could be banned from politics if found guilty.

The government is also facing Bangkok protests by farmers, mainly from southern Democrat strongholds, who have not been paid for their crop. The rice support scheme has led to significant losses and large stores of unsold rice. The government has limited options in caretaker mode for raising money to pay the farmers and its requests for loans from commercial banks have been turned down.

Yingluck faces other legal challenges. The Democrats boycotted the election and have petitioned the Constitutional Court to declare it invalid on the grounds that candidates did not stand in 28 constituencies, where candidate registration sites were blockaded by the PDRC. The 2006 coup followed a similar boycott and decision to annul the election.

The military, which has staged a total of 18 coups since the 1930s, has formally refused to “take a side,” but is clearly sympathetic to the opposition. According to the *Bangkok Post*, a group of retired generals including Saiyud Kerdpol, a former supreme commander, and Wimol Wongwanich, a former army chief, have suggested a military coup to resolve the

political crisis. On February 4, the paper quoted the current army chief, General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, thanking the group for “giving us moral support.”

Prayuth said he would follow “the rules and regulations” and would not carry out a coup, but he significantly refused to endorse the election, stating: “I would rather not say whether I approve of the election.” In December, Prayuth told reporters, “The military does not shut or open the door to a coup, but a decision depends on the situation.”

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, Director of the Institute of Security and International Studies at Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University, wrote in the *Financial Times* on February 6 that if Yingluck was ejected from office, the “decisive question would be how the pro-Thaksin red shirts would respond. If they rise up, as in 2009-10, their fury at what they see as disenfranchisement could bring violence.”

In 2010, thousands of so-called “red shirt” protesters, led by the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), rallied in Bangkok against the military-backed Democrat government. The protesters’ demands for social equality went well beyond the UDD leadership’s call for free elections, and the demonstrations were violently suppressed by the army, which killed 90 people.

The UDD has held several protests against the PDRC’s anti-democratic campaign, but has sought to avoid a confrontation in Bangkok, confining its rallies mainly to the rural northern provinces. Reports from these areas indicate that millions of people are determined to fight against any attempted coup.

With no end in sight for Thailand’s political crisis and amid deepening economic turmoil, some business figures have indicated that they would support the removal of Yingluck. Isara Vongkusolkrit, chairman of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, told the *Bangkok Post* on Friday that ongoing protests would “prompt foreign investors to shift to other countries.” He called on Yingluck to either resign or reach a deal with the opposition.

Stanley Kang, chairman of the Joint Foreign Chambers of Commerce, told the paper that foreign businesses would not accept a coup, but added that “in the past when a coup happened, many companies understood it.”

The US ruling elite, for its part, is anxious to prevent

a mass upheaval in Thailand that could cut across its strategic interests in the region. A *New York Times* editorial on February 3 warned that the opposition’s “demands for a suspension of democracy could lead to greater chaos.” It declared that as “an American treaty ally, Thailand has been critically important in helping to reduce regional tensions and provided balance to the growing military assertiveness of China by championing trade and economic integration partly through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.”

US State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki stated after the election: “We certainly do not want to see a coup or violence.” But Washington tacitly supported the 2006 coup, and now remains in close contact with Thailand’s military, which it considers an important ally in its drive to encircle and prepare for war with China.



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