

Thai political crisis worsens as four killed in clashes

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As the political crisis in Thailand continues, violent clashes between anti-government protesters and riot police in Bangkok yesterday have resulted in four dead and dozens injured. The government suffered another blow yesterday after the National Anti-Corruption Commission announced that it would summon Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra to answer charges of mismanaging the country's rice subsidy scheme.

The government has been besieged since last November by protesters led by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which is demanding the imposition of an unelected people's council—in essence, a military-backed junta. The PDRC is a front for the interests of traditional Thai elites—the military, monarchy and state bureaucracy including the judiciary—that are bitterly hostile to Yingluck and her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006.

Yesterday's clashes took place as police attempted to clear protest sites around Government House in central Bangkok and other public offices in the north of the city. At least 15,000 police were involved in the so-called "Peace for Bangkok Mission" organised by the government's security organisation, the Centre for Maintaining Peace and Order (CMPO).

The fatalities occurred as hundreds of riot police advanced on the Phan Fa bridge district. Reuters reported seeing clouds of tear gas, followed by a gun fight in which three protesters and one policeman were killed. The police accused the protesters of firing the tear gas and claimed that they had come under fire from grenades and a sniper on a nearby rooftop. All four of those killed died from gunshot wounds, according to the Erawan Emergency Medical Service Centre, which put the total number of injuries at more than 60. Nearly 200 protesters were arrested yesterday.

From the outset, the PRDC's aim has been to create conditions of chaos that would provide the military with a pretext to intervene. The military, while clearly sympathetic to the protesters, has to date maintained a nominally "neutral" posture. At the same time, however, army commanders have warned that they will intervene in the event of violence, creating a clear incentive for the anti-government forces to stage provocations and provoke clashes with the police.

As well as attempting to paralyse government operations in Bangkok by blockading key buildings and road intersections, the PDRC and opposition Democrat Party supporters have used the courts to mount a series of legal challenges aimed against Yingluck and the ruling Puea Thai party. The courts removed two pro-Thaksin governments in 2008 on trumped-up charges of corruption, in what were effectively judicial coups.

The latest National Anti-Corruption Commission indictment against Yingluck is similarly contrived. She is accused of "neglect of duty" over her government's rice subsidy scheme, in which farmers were paid a subsidised price for their crop. While the commission claims that Yingluck turned a blind eye to corruption, big business and the Bangkok elite have opposed the program in principle as a waste of money pitched to Puea Thai's base of support in the rural north of the country. The scheme has accumulated large stockpiles of unsold rice and debts of at least \$6 billion.

The government's difficulties have been compounded by the inconclusive outcome of national elections on February 2, which were boycotted by the Democrats. The Election Commission will not announce the results until by-elections are held in areas where opposition protests prevented polling booths from opening. As a result, the government is still in caretaker mode with limited powers, including to raise

finance.

The government's efforts to raise funds suffered a further blow on Monday when the Government Savings Bank announced that it would not extend further loans to the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives, which manages the rice subsidy scheme. The bank had made an initial loan that led to the withdrawal of nearly \$US1 billion by depositors registering their opposition to the subsidies. The bank run is another indication of the support of well-off sections of Bangkok's middle classes for the moves to oust the government.

Yingluck is due to appear before the National Anti-Corruption Commission on February 27. If the commission finds against her, the verdict could be forwarded to the Senate for impeachment proceedings, and to the office of public prosecutors to prepare criminal charges.

The political paralysis in Bangkok is compounding the country's economic crisis. Already hard hit by the global economic slump, the Thai economy registered a growth rate of just 0.6 percent in the final quarter of 2013—the worst result since early 2012, when heavy flooding hit the manufacturing sector. Annual growth for 2013 was just 2.9 percent, down from 6.5 percent in 2012.

Last month, the country's central bank cut its growth forecast for this year to 3 percent or less, down from 4 percent. This week's data confirmed the negative trend. Exports, on which Thailand is heavily dependent, fell by 3.6 percent in the last quarter of 2013 compared to the previous three months. Factory output dropped in December, marking the ninth straight monthly decline. The benchmark SET stock index has also fallen by 7.4 percent since early November.

The economic slowdown is helping to fuel the bitter infighting between the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions within the country's ruling class. Thaksin, a telecom billionaire, was ousted in 2006 after his policies of opening up the country to foreign investment and offering limited assistance to the urban and rural poor cut across the interests of the traditional Bangkok elites. Like his opponents, Thaksin had no qualms about resorting to anti-democratic methods to suppress criticism and implement his policies.

The factional warfare has continued virtually unabated over the past seven years. A temporary truce

was only reached to enable the 2011 election to proceed, after a military crackdown on pro-Thaksin supporters in 2010 threatened to unleash widespread social unrest. What is now underway—sustained anti-government protests, legal challenges and a looming constitutional crisis over this month's election—closely parallels the lead-up to the 2006 military coup.



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