

Thailand: Navy officers arrested for involvement in anti-government protests

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Police on Tuesday arrested two Navy SEALs officers who admitted to working as armed guards for the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which has staged protests in Bangkok since November. This follows the arrest of three heavily armed Navy SEALs on January 16, found in possession of "supporter cards" for the Network of Students and People for Reform of Thailand—a group allied to the PDRC.

Navy SEALs commander Rear Admiral Winai Klom-in denied that the Navy was giving support to the PDRC, and said those arrested on Tuesday were visiting Bangkok while on leave. Army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha has repeatedly stated that the armed forces are "neutral" in the protracted stand-off between Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government and the PDRC, which is supported by the opposition Democrat Party.

In reality, as the latest incident demonstrates, the military sympathises with the protesters. In January, Klom-in publicly declared that he would not allow the government to use force to break up the PDRC's rallies, and said the public no longer trusted the country's leaders. Prayuth has stated that the army is prepared to intervene if violence between pro- and anti-government forces escalates.

Police Major General Thirirat Nongharnphithak told the *Nation* today there were a "large number of military personnel serving as bodyguards for PDRC leaders." The paper cited an unnamed source who said that around 60 Navy SEALs had formally quit to work for the PDRC.

General Prayuth yesterday ordered increased patrols by soldiers at protest rally sites, at the request of PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban. Military and police checkpoints have been set up at 176 locations. The

pretext for the military buildup is a series of attacks on protests in recent weeks by unidentified men armed with guns and grenades. A total of 22 people have been killed since the protests began, and more than 700 have been injured.

In a televised interview on Tuesday, Sonthi Boonyaratglin, a former head of the Thai army, claimed that both the PDRC and the pro-government United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD)—the so-called Red Shirts—included former soldiers and police officers. He suggested that these elements were responsible for grenade attacks and shootings—an admission which indicates that the attacks may be deliberate provocations aimed at justifying military intervention.

The PDRC and Democrats represent Thailand's traditional ruling elites—including monarchists and the military—who are deeply hostile to Yingluck and her brother, telecommunications billionaire and former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in 2006 led by General Sonthi.

The Shinawatras gained a base of support among the country's urban and rural poor due to their limited reforms, including cheap healthcare and a scheme to buy rice from farmers at an inflated price. These measures, as well as Thaksin's moves to open the country to more foreign investment, alienated layers of the Bangkok elite.

The PDRC calls for an unelected "people's council" to replace the government and rewrite the constitution to prevent Thaksin-linked parties from taking office again. Its four-month protest campaign, which has included blockading major intersections and government buildings in Bangkok, is intended to generate the chaos necessary to provide a pretext for

the military to stage another coup.

PDRC blockades disrupted elections held on February 2, which were boycotted by the Democrats. Millions of people were prevented from voting. The Election Commission has agreed to hold make-up voting on March 2 in five affected provinces, but has insisted that the Constitutional Court must rule on how voting can proceed in 28 constituencies where the PDRC blocked candidates from registering.

Although the ruling Puea Thai Party undoubtedly won the vote, it will be months before the results are confirmed. Meanwhile, the government remains in caretaker mode with limited powers and a tenuous hold on office.

Efforts are underway to remove Yingluck via trumped-up legal cases, by a judiciary that largely supports the opposition and that removed two Thaksin-linked administrations in 2008 on “corruption” charges.

A criminal court yesterday denied a request by the PDRC to revoke arrest warrants for 18 PDRC leaders, including Suthep Thaugsuban. However, it has also denied a police request for 13 more warrants to be issued. Last week, the Civil Court ordered the government not to use force to break up protests or search rally sites for weapons. It declared, falsely, that the protesters were peaceful and unarmed.

Yesterday Yingluck refused to attend a hearing of the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), sending her lawyers instead. The NACC has accused her of “negligence” for allegedly failing to prevent corruption linked to the rice buying scheme. Yingluck, who has left Bangkok and is touring Puea Thai strongholds in the country’s north, has been ordered to appear before the NACC by March 14. If found guilty she could be banned from politics.

In a separate case, the NACC has accused 308 lawmakers, mostly from Puea Thai, of violating the constitution by attempting to pass a law to make the Senate a fully elected body. In 2007, a military-appointed assembly rewrote the constitution to make almost half the Senators appointed by a committee controlled by senior judicial bodies.

A relatively small group of 300 pro-government Red Shirt protesters surrounded the NACC buildings in northern Bangkok yesterday, while soldiers stood guard. The hearing was forced to move to another location.

So far, UDD leaders have not mobilised the Red Shirts in Bangkok against the PDRC’s anti-democratic campaign. Citing an army source, yesterday’s *Bangkok Post* revealed that General Prayuth had asked Yingluck “to persuade the UDD not to bring protesters to the capital to prevent a possible confrontation with the PDRC supporters.”

In 2010, tens of thousands of Red Shirts protested in Bangkok and across the country against the military-backed Democrat Party government. The rural and urban poor who made up the bulk of the Red Shirts raised demands for social equality that went well beyond the UDD leadership’s call for elections. The protests were brutally suppressed by the army, which killed more than 90 people and injured thousands.

Every faction of the ruling elite, including Puea Thai, fears the return of widespread protests by the urban and rural masses, which the UDD could be unable to control. Yingluck has assured Thai and international capitalists that she can be relied upon to implement their demands for austerity measures. Her government has made overtures to the PDRC and military to negotiate a truce in order to impose the economic crisis on the working class and rural poor.



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