

# Thai political standoff continues

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6 March 2014

Anti-government protesters in Bangkok withdrew from several rally sites on Monday and joined the central protest camp in Lumpini Park. The People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which is supported by the opposition Democrat Party, has blockaded intersections and government buildings since November, seeking to topple the Puea Thai Party government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban announced the decision to scale back the rallies amid dwindling numbers of protesters. Last Friday he told supporters that the PDRC would continue to take action to shut down ministries and businesses linked to the Shinawatra family.

According to Reuters, however, a police spokesman said "protesters had managed to shut 82 ministries or state agencies since November but, as of Friday, 63 had reopened, including the finance ministry."

The government's hold on power remains extremely tenuous. An election on February 2, organised in an attempt to shore up Yingluck's rule, was boycotted by the Democrats and widely disrupted by the PDRC. Re-run elections were held in five provinces on Sunday but no date has been set for nine more provinces where voting did not take place.

The Electoral Commission, which sympathises with the opposition, deliberately delayed the process. It is currently seeking a ruling by the Constitution Court to decide how to organise elections in 28 constituencies where the PDRC's blockades prevented candidates from registering. If the seats remain unfilled, the parliament will not reach the 95 percent quorum required by the constitution to form a new government.

The PDRC is continuing to call for the government to be replaced by an unelected "people's council," which would be a front for a military-backed dictatorship. The PDRC and Democrats represent sections of the traditional ruling elite—including the monarchy, the

military and much of the state bureaucracy—that supported the coup against former prime minister and telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006.

The PDRC claims that Yingluck is a proxy for her brother Thaksin, who fled the country in 2008 to avoid being jailed for alleged corruption. The Shinawatras alienated Bangkok's traditional elites by opening the country to further foreign investment and offering limited reforms, including cheap healthcare, a higher minimum wage and a scheme to buy rice from farmers at inflated prices. These measures, which are the basis for the government's support in Thailand's rural north, cut across existing networks of patronage.

The "people's council," if installed, would reverse the "populist" policies and implement deep attacks on living standards.

The military, which has carried out 11 coups since 1932, sympathises with the PDRC. Dozens of soldiers have taken part in the PDRC's protests, acting as armed "security guards," although military commanders insist they are acting in an individual capacity. The army has used a series of attacks on protesters by unidentified gunmen as the pretext for pouring troops into the capital and setting up more than 100 military checkpoints.

Last Thursday, Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha told reporters: "I can't promise whether there will be a coup or not." The next day, he urged both the government and the PDRC to "adjust to one another" and reach a "compromise." Prayuth again did not rule out military intervention, declaring "whether the military will take part, it depends."

On Monday, Prayuth ordered the army to file a police complaint against Petcharawat Wattanapongsirikul, leader of the Rak Chiang Mai 51 group, alleging separatism and treason. This group is linked to the pro-government United Front for Democracy Against

Dictatorship (UDD), the so-called Red Shirts movement. The army alleges that supporters of the group have called for the country to be partitioned.

Deputy Prime Minister Surapong Tovichakchaikul criticised Prayuth and called on him to remain politically neutral. He noted that the army had made no similar moves against the PDRC, despite its anti-democratic demands.

The Yingluck government remains in caretaker mode with limited powers. Last month it discontinued its rice subsidy scheme, claiming it could not legally renew the scheme until the new parliament is convened.

A court ruling banned the government from using force to disband protest rallies, rendering its emergency decree virtually meaningless. The courts also refused to issue warrants for several protest leaders.

Efforts are underway to remove the government through a judicial coup. Siripan Nogsuan Sawasdee, a political analyst at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, told Agence France-Presse on Tuesday that Suthep had scaled back the PDRC protests because he “realises that the fate of the government won’t be determined by his group but lies in the hands of independent organisations—the anti-corruption body and the courts.”

Far from being independent, the courts toppled two Thaksin-linked administrations in 2008 on trumped-up corruption charges and installed an unelected Democrat government. They are now seeking to repeat this operation.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) has ordered Yingluck to appear before it by March 14 to face charges that she neglected her duty by allowing alleged corruption linked to the rice buying scheme. If found guilty, she could be impeached.

The NACC also alleged that hundreds of Puea Thai Party lawmakers violated the law by trying to pass a constitutional amendment to make the Senate a fully-elected body.

Four leaders of a group linked to the pro-government UDD were arrested on Monday, charged with trespassing over a blockade of the NACC’s Bangkok headquarters last month.

NACC deputy secretary-general Witthaya Akhompitak told the *Bangkok Post* yesterday that the interior minister and the deputy commerce minister were both involved in another Red Shirt rally at its

headquarters last week. Witthaya said commissioners were considering criminal charges against the pair, which could result in prison sentences.

Thousands of Red Shirts, mostly drawn from the country’s rural and urban poor, have held rallies in northern provincial centres against the PDRC’s anti-democratic campaign. The UDD leadership has announced a rally in a Chiang Mai stadium on Saturday. So far, however, it has not held mass protests to challenge the PDRC in Bangkok.

Despite the ongoing risk of a coup, Yingluck and the UDD are reluctant to mobilise their supporters. In 2010, thousands of Red Shirt protesters in the capital began raising demands for social equality that went well beyond the UDD’s call for fresh elections.

Instead, Yingluck has appealed the military and big business to support her government’s re-election as the means to impose their demands for austerity measures. Thailand’s Joint Foreign Chambers of Commerce issued a statement this week calling for a speedy resolution to the crisis so that Thailand could take steps to transition into the ASEAN Economic Community. It said changes to labour laws and foreign investment laws required “a functioning parliament.”



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