

The growing danger of dictatorship in Thailand

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The March 21 ruling by Thailand's Constitutional Court to void the February 2 election underscores the great danger of a return to dictatorship.

The court decision is part of a five-month campaign to oust the Puea Thai Party government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. Behind the protracted political standoff there is a deepening economic crisis. As growth rates and exports fall, the ruling class is demanding deep inroads into the social position of the working class and rural poor.

The court displayed its utter contempt for basic democratic rights. Its ruling brushed aside the 20 million votes that were cast, on the pretext that voting did not take place in 28 out of 375 constituencies. Polling did not take place in those constituencies because candidate registration was blocked by anti-government protests, with which the court sympathises. Although the results have not been released, no one disputes that the government won the election, called in a bid to end the country's protracted political crisis.

The ruling demonstrates that, behind the facade of democracy, real power remains concentrated in the hands of the country's traditional elites: the military, the monarchy and state apparatus including the judiciary. The Constitutional Court was created by the military junta that overthrew the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's brother, and seized power in the 2006 coup. The same court was instrumental in ousting two pro-Thaksin governments through what amounted to judicial coups, and enabling the installation of the Democrat Party, backed by the military.

Another regime-change operation is now underway, spearheaded the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which had led months of anti-government protests. The PDRC includes right-wing

student groups, Buddhist fundamentalists, far-right royalists and ex-military officers and makes no secret of its anti-democratic aims. Its central demand is for the elected government to be replaced by an unelected "people's council."

The present political crisis is the continuation of a bitter factional struggle in the ruling class that began with the ousting of Thaksin in 2006. The layers gathered around Thaksin are no more democratic than their rivals. While in power, Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire, suppressed media critics, launched a "war on drugs" involving 3,000 extra-judicial murders by police, and deployed the army to brutally suppress Muslim separatists in the south of the country.

Thaksin built a base of support among layers of the urban and rural poor, particularly in Thailand's north and north east, through a series of limited handouts. His sister Yingluck introduced a subsidy scheme for rice farmers. While she has already indicated her willingness to wind back these concessions, her opponents are demanding an immediate end to what they brand as "vote buying" measures.

Both factions of the ruling class are deeply fearful of an eruption of the working class and rural poor. The pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) or "Red Shirt" organisation has deliberately prevented any mobilisation of their supporters in Bangkok to challenge the moves to oust the government.

The government and the UDD leadership are terrified of a repetition of the 2010 Red Shirt protests against the military-backed Democrat government that began raising class demands for an end to poverty and inequality, which went well beyond the UDD's call for a fresh election. The UDD leaders fled as the army

moved in May 2010 to crush the protests, leaving their supporters to their fate. Troops opened fire killing more than 90 and wounding 1,500.

The latest Constitutional Court ruling has not been condemned by any government. The Obama administration, which has just engineered the fascist-led coup in the Ukraine, has declared it will not “take sides” between the elected Yingluck government and the blatantly anti-democratic PDRC. The US maintains very close ties with the Thai military, which it considers a key ally in its “pivot” to Asia, aimed at encircling and preparing for war against China.

The events in Thailand are a sharp warning to workers throughout the region and internationally of the turn to autocratic methods of rule. The so-called “emerging” economies in Asia are being hit by a slowdown in China, stagnation in the US and recession across Europe. In country after country, the democratic façade is rapidly being dropped as the ruling class deepens its assault on the working class.

In Malaysia, the autocratic Barisan Nasional government—described by US Secretary of State John Kerry as “a model for the world”—“won” last year’s election on the basis of a flagrant gerrymander. It is now seeking to decapitate the opposition via the courts by overturning the acquittal of its leader, Anwar Ibrahim, on trumped-up charges.

Indonesia, which is routinely hailed as a democracy by the US, is still dominated by Suharto-era generals. Ex-general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who has ruled as president for 10 years, is about to step down. The frontrunner in the July presidential election is Jakarta governor Joko Widodo who touts himself as a “man of the people.” Joko became governor with the support of Prabowo Subianto, ex-commander of the notorious Kopassus special forces.

The political crisis in Thailand confirms the correctness of Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution, which demonstrated the organic incapacity of the bourgeoisie in countries of belated capitalist development to meet the democratic aspirations and social needs of working people. The Thai ruling class, which has a long history of military dictatorships, can no longer tolerate even the trappings of parliamentary democracy.

Trotsky concluded that the democratic tasks fell to the working class, which would win the peasantry to its

side in a political struggle against all factions of the bourgeoisie. Once in power, the working class could not limit itself to democratic tasks, but would be compelled to begin the socialist transformation of society, which could only be completed as part of the world socialist revolution.

The Theory of Permanent Revolution remains the indispensable guide to revolutionary strategy in Thailand and throughout Asia. The fight for this perspective requires the building of new revolutionary leaderships in the Asia-Pacific region as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement.



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