

# US assistant secretary of state visits Thailand amid push to overthrow government

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US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Russel visited Bangkok on Tuesday and Wednesday amid an escalating campaign by anti-government protesters and the courts to oust Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and install a dictatorship.

Few details of the visit have been released. A State Department press release said Russel met with “a range of leaders and stakeholders to discuss the political situation in Thailand” and “bilateral and regional issues.” According to the US embassy’s Facebook page, Russel met Yingluck and opposition Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva, to whom he gave letters from US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Foreign Minister Surapong Tovichakchaikul told the media that Kerry’s letter emphasised that the US “does not want to see a power grab or military coup, [and] if this should occur, they would not be happy about it.” The letter, however, has not been made public, and Abhisit has not revealed what he discussed with Russel.

According to the Thai News Agency, Russel said: “Washington is not taking any side and we want all Thai parties to negotiate and work out a democratic solution.” In other words, the US does not oppose the openly anti-democratic campaign by the Democrat-aligned People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which wants Yingluck’s Pheu Thai Party government replaced by an unelected “people’s council” backed by the military.

Russel’s reference to a “democratic solution” is completely hollow and hypocritical. The Obama administration did not object to last month’s ruling by the Constitutional Court, which sympathises with the opposition, to annul the February 2 election that was called by Yingluck in an attempt to shore up her rule.

The government remains in caretaker mode, with limited powers to raise funds or pass legislation. The

Electoral Commission, which backs the opposition as well, has said a new election will take several months to organise.

Washington has also remained silent on the court’s efforts to indict Yingluck on blatantly trumped-up charges that she unlawfully transferred a senior security official from his post. The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) is seeking to remove Yingluck on the equally bogus charge that she “neglected her duty” by allowing losses linked to the government’s rice subsidy scheme for farmers.

Last Saturday, PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban, who was deputy prime minister in the last military-backed government led by Abhisit, told supporters that after the NACC or the Constitutional Court ruled against Yingluck “we will seize the ruling power immediately.” He declared that as “the people’s medium” he would appoint a new prime minister, while the “people’s council” would re-write the constitution and “seize the assets of the Shinawatra family.”

This dictatorship would impose the worsening economic crisis on working people, through the removal of subsidies and other austerity measures, which are being demanded by international and local capitalists. Yingluck and her brother, former Premier Thaksin Shinawatra, gained a base of support among the rural poor through limited reforms, including the rice subsidy scheme and cheap healthcare, which the PDRC labelled “vote buying.”

The PDRC and Democrats represent sections of the ruling elite—the military, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—who supported the 2006 coup that overthrew Thaksin. These traditional elites viewed the billionaire Thaksin as an upstart, whose “populist” handouts and moves to open the economy to further foreign investment cut across their own interests. The

PDRC's predecessor, the People's Alliance for Democracy, prepared the 2006 coup by organising protests that exploited popular anger over Thaksin's privatisation of public assets and authoritarian policies.

The military, which has carried out 11 coups, sympathises with the opposition and has not ruled out taking power again. Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha refused a request by the government to condemn Suthep's latest call for insurrection. On April 3, Prayuth told the *Bangkok Post* that the military top brass was discussing the political situation every day. Responding to the PDRC's calls for a coup, he said "it would be best to find a legal way" out of the crisis, but added: "I will see if it is right or wrong or if it's acceptable or not when it's time."

On Wednesday, permanent defence secretary General Nipat Thonglek held talks with Suthep about the PDRC's platform, in defiance of a government order not to speak to the protest leaders.

It has not been revealed whether Russel spoke with military officials, with whom the US has close and long standing ties, or with leaders of the PDRC during his visit. On March 26, however, US ambassador Kristie Kenney told the *Nation* that she had spoken to "all sides," which undoubtedly includes behind-the-scenes talks with the PDRC and military about a possible coup.

Washington's claims to oppose a coup are a sham. Most recently, the US supported a fascist-led putsch to overthrow the elected Ukrainian government, which was aligned with Russia. A leaked telephone conversation between US Undersecretary of State Victoria Nuland and Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt, in which they discussed installing the new regime, exposed the degree to which Washington was manipulating events in the country.

Kenney said the situation in Ukraine was "very different" to Thailand and she would "never compare" the countries. The Yingluck government is an official US ally, and Thaksin supported the war in Afghanistan and allowed the CIA to use secret "black sites" in Thailand to "render" prisoners for torture.

The real US ally, however, is Thailand's military, which the Obama administration is seeking to integrate into its "pivot" to Asia, aimed at encircling and preparing for war against China. In February, 9,000 US troops trained alongside 4,000 Thai soldiers in Exercise

Cobra Gold, the largest multinational training exercise in South East Asia.

Diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2010 revealed that Washington essentially supported the 2006 military takeover, while publicly issuing expressions of "concern." Coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin secretly informed the US ambassador of his plans three weeks before the military's takeover, and encountered no opposition from the Bush administration. After the coup, the US temporarily suspended military aid and joint exercises, which were resumed after the junta organised the 2007 elections under a new anti-democratic constitution. (See: "WikiLeaks cable reveals US role in 2006 Thai coup")

The Constitutional Court—which was created by the military junta—removed an elected pro-Thaksin government in a judicial coup in 2008, installing the Democrats, backed by the military. In 2010, Abhisit, then prime minister, and Suthep both ordered the army crackdown on pro-Thaksin Red Shirt protests in Bangkok, which killed 90 people and injured thousands. Washington did not condemn the government over the bloodbath, and undoubtedly would tacitly support the military if it carried out another coup.



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