

Thailand's political crisis continues

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Thailand's Election Commission (EC) met on Tuesday with leaders of the Pheu Thai Party caretaker government and more than 50 minor parties to discuss possible dates for a fresh election. The February 2 election, which was undoubtedly won by Pheu Thai, was nullified in an anti-democratic ruling by the Constitutional Court last month. The pretext was that voting did not take place in 28 constituencies where candidate registration was disrupted by anti-government protesters.

Tuesday's talks did not resolve the country's political deadlock, which has continued for the past six months. Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the main opposition Democrat Party, declared at the last minute that he would not attend because he feared for his safety. Democrat spokesman Chavanond Intarakomalyasut was quoted in the *Bangkok Post* saying that an "armed group" was planning a "suicide mission to attack Mr Abhisit", but this has not been substantiated.

The Democrats boycotted the February poll and supported the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), which is seeking to overthrow the government and install an unelected "people's council"—essentially a military-backed dictatorship. The PDRC has organised numerous protests and occupations of government buildings in Bangkok since November.

The Election Commission, which sympathises with the PDRC and failed to organise enough staff during the February election, said on Tuesday that it would not organise another poll before July 20, and possibly as late as September. Even then, the result could be nullified again by the courts. EC member Somchai Srisutthiyakorn told Tuesday's gathering that if the opposing sides did not "settle their differences... the risk of having a failed election will be very high."

The PDRC has vowed to disrupt voting, while the

Democrats' Chavanond told the *Nation* on April 20, "Our country is having a political crisis and is not ready to have the election."

Meanwhile multiple efforts are underway to oust the government via a judicial coup before any election can be held. The Constitutional Court, which supports the PDRC, could remove Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra on the trumped-up charge that she unlawfully transferred a senior security official from his post. The court has given Yingluck until May 2 to prepare her defence.

The Constitutional Court was created by the military junta which in 2006 overthrew the government of telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's brother. In 2008 the court removed two pro-Thaksin governments clearing the way for the Democrats, backed by the military, to be installed.

The Democrats and the PDRC represent Thailand's traditional ruling elites, including the monarchy, the military, and the state bureaucracy, who were alienated by Thaksin's policies—particularly his moves to open up the economy to further foreign investment. The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), a predecessor of the PDRC, organised protests against Thaksin, paving the way for the 2006 coup. It exploited popular hostility to Thaksin's anti-democratic methods and his privatisation of state-owned assets.

The PDRC is intent on dismantling Yingluck's and Thaksin's limited social reforms, which gained the Shinawatras a base of popular support in the country's rural north. These measures, which the opposition labels "vote buying", include subsidies for rice farmers and cheap healthcare.

The National Anti-Corruption Commission has accused Yingluck of "neglecting her duty" by failing to prevent government losses linked to the rice scheme. If found guilty, she could be banned from politics.

On Thursday, PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban—a

former deputy prime minister in the military-backed Democrat government—told supporters to prepare for a mass protest on April 30, which would be the “final battle” to bring down the government.

In recent weeks Suthep has spoken to high-ranking public service bureaucrats. He declared that he had gained support from the heads of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, the Metropolitan Electricity Authority and the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives. The permanent secretaries of the Health, Justice and Defence ministries have all held talks with the PDRC, in defiance of the government’s orders. Several public sector trade unions are also supporting the PDRC’s anti-democratic campaign.

The military, for its part, clearly sympathises with the PDRC and Democrats. Abhisit announced on Thursday that he will meet General Tanasak Patimapragorn, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, on Monday to discuss “our country’s future.”

Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha has repeatedly refused to rule out leading a coup. The military still has more than 170 checkpoints and 5,000 soldiers stationed throughout the capital, despite requests from the government to scale them back.

However, all factions of the ruling elite, including the army and the government itself, are nervous about provoking Pheu Thai’s supporters, the Red Shirts. The Red Shirts, who are drawn from the rural and urban poor, staged protests in Bangkok against the military-backed government in 2010, in which they called for social equality and an end to poverty. They were brutally suppressed by the army, which killed 90 people and injured thousands.

The Red Shirt leadership, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), held a rally earlier this month in the outskirts of Bangkok which attracted more than 100,000 people. UDD leaders say they will hold another rally on May 6, the day before the Constitutional Court is expected to rule on Yingluck’s future.

In an interview with the *Financial Times* on Thursday, Abhisit warned of “the accumulated frustration and suffering and loss of opportunity for the country” and called for a meeting with Yingluck to discuss “reform... with elections an integral part of the process.”

There are increasing calls from local and foreign capitalists for the political deadlock to be resolved, one way or another, in order to impose the country’s economic crisis on the working class. Tourist numbers have plummeted in recent months, while foreign companies have delayed investment, and the government is unable to spend money on infrastructure while it remains in caretaker mode.

On Wednesday the Bank of Thailand slashed its growth forecast for the year to just 2.7 percent, down from 4.8 percent in October. Paiboon Kittisrikangwan, assistant governor at the bank, told the *Wall Street Journal*: “Our survey has found that the number one issue among entrepreneurs is political uncertainties in the country.”

While Yingluck has so far not said if she will meet with Abhisit, she is just as willing as her opponents to carry out the right-wing “reforms”, including the scrapping of subsidies, which are being demanded by big business. She has appealed to the army and businesses to support her re-election as the safest means to implement this agenda. The UDD leaders, who include many Pheu Thai members, are also limiting their demands to a fresh election.



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