Thailand: Ex-PM faces impeachment on bogus “negligence” charge

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The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) yesterday upheld charges against ousted Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra that she “neglected her duty” by allowing financial losses linked to her government’s rice buying scheme. The NACC recommended that the Senate impeach Yingluck, and ban her from politics for five years.

The ruling follows the Constitutional Court’s removal of Yingluck from office on Wednesday on the equally bogus charge that she violated “moral principle” by transferring the National Security Council chief from his post in order to promote a relative. Nine cabinet ministers who approved the transfer were also removed.

The NACC’s ruling is transparently political. NACC spokesman Vicha Mahakun told the *New York Times* that “the evidence is not clear that the accused took part in corruption or whether she allowed corruption or not.” Rather, the commission held her responsible for “devastating damage to the country” caused by the scheme, under which the government paid farmers more than 50 percent above the market rate for their rice, and accumulated $21 billion in debt as a result.

The NACC and Constitutional Court rulings represent a judicial coup. Both bodies support the campaign by the People’s Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and the opposition Democrat Party to topple the Pheu Thai government and install an unelected “people’s council.” The PDRC has blockaded streets and government buildings in Bangkok for the past six months. The Democrats boycotted the February 2 election, which was disrupted by the PDRC and then annulled by the Constitutional Court.

For now, the Pheu Thai Party government remains in office, with restricted caretaker powers. The courts and much of the state bureaucracy support the opposition. Pheu Thai undoubtedly won the February election and wants to hold a re-run as soon as possible. A poll was scheduled for July 20, but the Election Commission (EC)—another pro-opposition body—announced after the NACC ruling that this could be delayed even further.

The EC is due to meet the government on Wednesday. Even if the poll goes ahead, the Democrats and the PDRC will undoubtedly seek to disrupt it, paving the way for it to be annulled again.

The PDRC and the Democrats represent Thailand’s traditional elites, the military and the monarchy, which supported the military putsch that overthrew Yingluck’s brother Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006. Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire, fell foul of these powerful vested interests when he attempted to open the country’s economy to more foreign investment.

The Shinawatras also implemented limited reforms, including an increased minimum wage and the rice subsidy, which gained them a base of popular support but alienated the political and business establishment. The PDRC’s proposed “people’s council” would outlaw Pheu Thai’s “populist” policies and implement other sweeping attacks on living standards.

The PDRC’s program is driven by demands from international and Thai businesses for the burden of the country’s worsening economic crisis to be imposed on the working class. The economy is expected to have contracted in the first quarter of the year, with foreign investment and tourism hit hard by the protracted political infighting. Stocks have fallen since Yingluck’s dismissal, while the International Monetary Fund warns that it might have to cut its growth outlook for Thailand this year to below the current 2.5 percent. Credit ratings agency Standard & Poor’s stated that “the longer the political uncertainty persists, the more

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damage it will inflict" on the economy.

The PDRC campaign, which began in November, aims to generate chaos to provide the military with a pretext to carry out another coup and restore "certainty" for big business. The protest group has thousands of paid security guards—including soldiers and Navy Seals—some of whom have engaged in shoot-outs with police and pro-government Red Shirt protesters.

There have also been numerous attacks on PDRC supporters by unidentified gunmen and grenades. Both sides blame the attacks on each other, but the PDRC has more to gain by provoking military intervention. Four grenade attacks were reported early Thursday morning, including one thrown at a Constitutional Court judge's house. No one was injured. No one has been arrested for any of the attacks.

The PDRC began another mass rally today, described by its leader Suthep Thaugsuban as the "final all-out battle" to topple the remnants of the government. Another spokesman, Akanat Promphan, told Agence France-Presse that they would "take steps towards appointing a new government." A source told the *Bangkok Post* that the PDRC plans to seize Government House, Parliament, the Interior and Defence Ministries and the police headquarters.

The pro-government protest group, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), has announced a counter-protest tomorrow on the northern outskirts of the capital, which is likely to attract large numbers of "Red Shirts" outraged by the removal of Yingluck.

The UDD leaders—many of whom are Pheu Thai members—are anxious to maintain control over their supporters. They have repeatedly refused to mobilise the Red Shirts against the PDRC's occupations and its disruption of elections. Pheu Thai is just as committed as its opponents to imposing the dictates of big business, including eliminating subsidies for rice farmers—which the government tried to cut last year and allowed to expire in February.

The military build-up in Bangkok and the threats of the PDRC indicate the real danger of another coup. The UDD has repeatedly downplayed that possibility, however. In an interview with Voice TV on April 17, leading UDD member Thida Thavornseth declared that "the situation is very different from 2006" because "many foreign countries ... don't support the idea of another coup and ... have correct attitudes on democracy."

In reality, Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha has repeatedly refused to rule out staging a coup if violence erupts between the UDD and PDRC. From today, about 15,000 soldiers and police officers are being mobilised in the capital for the protests.

Thida's claim that unspecified "foreign countries" oppose a coup is false. Thailand's most important ally, Washington, has refused to condemn the court's removal of Yingluck and, before that, its nullification of the February election. US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel visited Bangkok last month and spoke to both Yingluck and Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva. While stating that the US opposed a coup, he refused to criticise the campaign by the Democrats and the PDRC to install a non-elected government and postpone elections.

The US tacitly supported the 2006 coup and did not condemn the 2010 massacre of more than 90 Red Shirt protesters by the military-backed Democrat government. The Obama administration regards the Thai military as a critical part of its "pivot to Asia," aimed at encircling and preparing for war with China. In February, Washington showed its "attitude to democracy" by supporting the fascist-led coup in Ukraine that toppled an elected pro-Russian government in Kiev.

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