

Thai opposition calls for Senate, courts to appoint new government

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Suthep Thaugsuban, leader of the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), demanded on Friday that the Senate, the Supreme Court and the Election Commission dismiss the Pheu Thai government and appoint an unelected "interim" regime. Suthep declared that if the three bodies failed to act, "we will do it using our own methods."

In what amounted to a judicial coup, the Constitutional Court last Wednesday removed the Yingluck Shinawatra, the elected prime minister, and nine of her cabinet ministers on trumped-up charges. In a further anti-democratic ruling on Thursday, the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) recommended that Yingluck be impeached over financial losses linked to the government's subsidy scheme for rice farmers.

Since the rulings, the PDRC has held further rallies in central Bangkok in a "final all-out battle" to overthrow the government. On Friday the army, which tacitly supports the PDRC, allowed its leaders to occupy part of Government House. PDRC protesters also rallied outside several TV channels demanding that their messages be broadcast, and outside the offices of the Centre for the Administration of Peace and Order, the government's security agency.

Since last November, the PDRC, supported by the opposition Democrat Party and much of the state bureaucracy, has blockaded intersections and occupied government buildings in its campaign for an unelected "people's committee"—a de facto military-backed regime. When the Pheu Thai government held an election in February, the PDRC disrupted voting and the Democrats boycotted the poll. In a completely anti-democratic ruling, the Constitutional Court then annulled the election.

On Friday evening, the Senate chose as its new

speaker Surachai Liangboonlertchai, who is backed by the PDRC. Nearly half the Senators, including Surachai, are appointed by a committee that includes representatives of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court and the Election Commission.

The previous Senate Speaker, Nikhom Wairatpanich, was deposed last month by the NACC, which recommended him for impeachment, along with 35 other elected Senators. They are among more than 300 lawmakers, mostly from Pheu Thai, accused by the NACC of breaking the law by seeking to amend the constitution to make the Senate a fully-elected body.

The government remains in caretaker mode with very limited powers. Acting Prime Minister Niwatthamrong Boonsongphaisan hopes to hold an election on July 20, but the king has not yet ratified the date. The Election Commission, which will hold talks with Niwatthamrong tomorrow, has said it will postpone the election again in the event of unrest.

Thailand's political crisis is driven by bitter divisions within the country's ruling elite. The PDRC and Democrats represent Thailand's traditional rulers—the military, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—who backed the 2006 military coup that overthrew Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's brother. Thaksin lost the support of sections of big business when he opened the economy to further foreign investment.

The Shinawatras also alienated the Bangkok elites by enacting limited reforms, including cheap healthcare and subsidies for rice farmers, which won Pheu Thai a base of support among the rural and urban poor. The PDRC and Democrats have denounced these policies as "corruption" and "vote buying." They want to scrap the reforms and re-write the constitution to ban Pheu Thai and other parties from making any "populist"

promises in future.

When the pro-Thaksin People's Power Party won the 2007 election, the Constitutional Court ousted two of its prime ministers in 2008, on phoney charges of corruption and electoral fraud. A Democrat government backed by the military was again installed. The Democrats now hope to repeat this operation.

The PDRC is openly calling for the military to intervene. Sondhi Limthongkul, a leading member of the PDRC's predecessor, the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), spoke from a PDRC stage on Friday night. Sondhi played a leading role in protests against Thaksin that paved the way for the 2006 coup. He declared: "The military must take a leading role, with the backing of people. I am not shy about asking the military to come out. A coup is not always a bad thing if it changes the nation for the better."

The military commanders have repeatedly refused to rule out a coup if violence erupts between pro- and anti-government protesters. About 15,000 soldiers and police officers have been mobilised throughout the capital. On Saturday, Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha called for a solution to the crisis "using the law as a tool" but added that the military would "always be there for the country and people to lean on... [as] the last resort."

On Saturday, the pro-government United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) began a mass rally on Bangkok's outskirts. At least 50,000 Red Shirts, mainly drawn from the working class and the rural poor, are occupying a four-kilometre stretch of road. They are outraged by the Constitutional Court's judicial coup and determined to prevent the return of a dictatorship.

The UDD leaders, who include many Pheu Thai members, are doing everything possible to restrain the Red Shirts. They have repeatedly downplayed the risk of another military coup. Fairfax Media quoted UDD leader Natthawut Saikuar saying: "If we don't play into [the military's] hands it is not easy for them to provoke a coup."

Over the past six months the UDD has used this excuse to oppose organising protests in central Bangkok, thereby giving the PDRC a free hand to disrupt elections and stage provocations against government supporters—any one of which could be seized on by the military as a pretext to intervene. Far

from preventing a coup, the demobilisation of Red Shirt supporters is laying the basis for the government's ouster.

The UDD and Pheu Thai ultimately fear their own supporters more than a coup. Pheu Thai is a party of big business and has repeatedly offered to compromise with the PDRC on eliminating subsidies and imposing brutal austerity measures. Both factions of the ruling elite are determined to make the working class pay for the worsening economic crisis. So far, the PDRC has rejected any compromise.

The UDD leaders have limited themselves to making appeals to the very agencies that support the opposition. Speaking to the crowd on Saturday, UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan declared: "I plead with the president of the Supreme Court, *which is one of the three pillars of democracy*, to reconsider thoroughly the demands by Mr Suthep and the subsequent proposal made by the not-yet-validly nominated Senate speaker to hold a meeting and appoint a new prime minister." [emphasis added]

In fact, the Supreme Court is a tool of the Bangkok elites. In February 2010, it lined up directly with the anti-Thaksin wing, stripping the former prime minister of \$1.4 billion in personal assets, sparking nationwide protests led by the UDD. Thousands of Red Shirts rallied in Bangkok for months, where they began to raise demands, for social equality and an end to poverty, that went well beyond the UDD's calls for a fresh election. The military savagely suppressed the protests, killing at least 90 people and injuring thousands.



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