

Thailand's military coup

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Thailand's military yesterday carried out a coup in all but name. In the early hours of the morning, as troops were fanning out across Bangkok, army chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha declared martial law throughout the country and took control of the country's entire security apparatus, including the police.

The military absurdly declared that its actions were "not a coup" and were only taken to "preserve law and order" after six months of acute political crisis in Bangkok. The military chiefs did not consult the government, disbanded its top security committee, took over TV stations and assumed sweeping powers of censorship, arrest, search, and to ban public gatherings.

Asked about the status of the government, General Prayuth joked to reporters: "And where is this government?" Key sections of the military top brass, like the courts, state bureaucracy and monarchy, have been sympathetic to the anti-government protests organised by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and opposition Democrat Party, and their demand for the ouster of the elected Pheu Thai government.

The government itself is in caretaker mode, with limited powers, following a court ruling in February that annulled the results of a February election, which Pheu Thai clearly won. On May 7, the Constitutional Court carried out what amounted to a judicial coup, removing Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and nine cabinet ministers on the basis of a trumped-up charge of abuse of power. The government faces further challenges from the Senate and the courts that could bring it down, if the military does not directly assume power first.

The Obama administration is backing the coup, just as it tacitly supported the removal of Yingluck. US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki insisted the army's actions were not a coup and that martial law "is allowed for in the Thai constitution." In fact, General

Prayuth justified his actions, not on the basis of the 2007 constitution drafted by the military, but by reference to an obscure century-old law from the time of Thailand's absolute monarchy.

The military clearly worked out its plans in consultation with Washington. US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Russel was in Bangkok last month to meet with "a range of leaders and stakeholders" over the country's political crisis. The Obama administration regards Thailand, especially the country's military, as an important component of its "pivot to Asia" aimed at subordinating and militarily encircling China. The Pentagon is boosting its collaboration with the Thai military and is seeking access to Thai air bases, which were used in the 1960s for saturation US bombing during the Vietnam War.

Yesterday's coup follows eight years of political instability that began with the military coup that ousted Yingluck's brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, as prime minister in 2006. The bitter factional infighting in the ruling elites has its roots in the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis that severely impacted on the Thai economy. Having initially backed the telecom billionaire Thaksin to counter the International Monetary Fund's savage restructuring demands, the country's traditional elites, centred on the monarchy, turned on him when his economic measures began to cut across their business interests and patronage networks. They were particularly hostile to his limited populist hand-outs to the urban and rural poor.

The main target of the martial law decree is not so much the pro-Thaksin caretaker government, but the working class and the rural masses. Amid an accelerating economic slowdown throughout Asia, and negative growth in Thailand, both the government and opposition are committed to imposing austerity measures, including winding back Thaksin's limited social concessions. At the same time, all sections of the

ruling elite are deeply fearful that the political infighting at the top will give way to a social upheaval from below.

Both the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the bourgeoisie recoiled in shock as sustained, militant “Red Shirt” protests in 2010 against the military-backed Democrat government threatened to spiral out of control. While nominally under the leadership of the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), the rural and urban poor, who made up the backbone of the protests, began to raise their own class demands. The military responded with a brutal crackdown that killed at least 90 unarmed protesters and injured 1,500 more.

The ruling class as a whole is desperately seeking to avoid a social explosion. Over the past six months, government and UDD leaders deliberately demobilised their Red Shirt supporters. They were deeply concerned that the industrial working class gathered in large factories in and around Bangkok would start to enter the fray.

Far from denouncing yesterday’s martial law decree, acting justice minister Chaikasem Nitisiri told the media: “It’s good that the army is looking after the country’s security.” UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan declared that martial law was “fine” and urged his supporters to cooperate with the troops.

This craven capitulation will only encourage the anti-government forces to complete the process of establishing a military-backed dictatorship, launching a far-reaching assault on the living standards of the masses and ruthlessly cracking down any resistance by the working class.

Washington’s support for the Thai military’s dismantling of parliamentary democracy is a sharp warning to workers and youth throughout the region. In its military build-up and preparation for war against China, the US will not hesitate to back or install right-wing, autocratic governments unconditionally aligned to Washington and willing to resort to police-state measures to impose an agenda of militarism and austerity.

As Leon Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution established, the bourgeoisie in countries of a belated capitalist development is utterly incapable of meeting the social needs and democratic aspirations of working people. Throughout the region, the threadbare facade of

democracy in countries like Thailand, South Korea and Indonesia is being rapidly stripped away.

The working class is the only social force capable of leading the urban and rural poor in a struggle to defend democratic rights and living standards. To wage such a political fight, workers have to establish their political independence from all factions of the bourgeoisie—in Thailand, the royalist camp as well as Thaksin, Pheu Thai and the UDD. The struggle is international in character. Only by turning to workers throughout the region and in the major capitalist centres, especially in the United States, can the working class fight imperialist domination, intrigues and interventions.

Above all, the working class requires a new revolutionary leadership based on the lessons of the twentieth century and the struggles of the international Trotskyist movement against bourgeois nationalism and Stalinism. Sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International must be built in countries throughout Asia.



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