

# Thailand's military holds meeting with government and opposition leaders

Tom Peters  
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After declaring martial law on Tuesday, Thailand's military is further tightening the noose around the remnants of the elected Pheu Thai government.

The army's claims that it has not carried out a coup are absurd. Without consulting the government, it took control of the police, shut down 14 satellite TV stations and ordered all media outlets, Internet service providers and social networks not to criticise the martial law regime. A Bangkok bookshop told Reuters it was ordered to remove political books from its shelves. Soldiers surrounded a pro-government Red Shirt rally in the outskirts of Bangkok and directed demonstrators not to move.

The Pheu Thai government has been rendered virtually powerless. Agence France-Presse reported yesterday that Permanent Secretary of Defence General Nipat Thonglek barred the cabinet from using its "crisis headquarters" at a defence ministry office. One official said it was now meeting at a secret "safe house."

Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha, the country's de facto ruler, yesterday called a meeting of members of the government, leaders of the pro-government United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), opposition Democrat Party leader Abhist Vejjajiva, and Suthep Thaugsuban, leader of the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC). Election Commission representatives and Senate Speaker Surachai Liengboonlertchai, who supports the opposition, were also present.

Three hours of talks ended with no agreement, and the parties will meet again today. The government wants a re-run election held on August 3. The February 2 election, which Pheu Thai undoubtedly won, was boycotted by the Democrats and disrupted by the PDRC, and then annulled in an anti-democratic ruling

by the Constitutional Court.

While the army claims to be "neutral," it clearly supports the PDRC and Democrats. The talks convened by Prayuth are designed to give their openly anti-democratic agenda a veneer of legitimacy. An army spokesman said the government and opposition groups would try to "iron out their differences" and "agreed that a conclusion is needed as soon as possible." The PDRC has repeatedly vowed to disrupt another election and wants the government replaced by an unelected "people's council"—which would essentially be a military-backed junta.

Citing military sources, Reuters reported that "Prayuth is believed to favour the appointment of an interim prime minister by the Senate, who would then shepherd through reforms." The Senate—about half of which is not elected, but appointed by the country's top courts—is pushing for the government to resign. Surachai, the Senate leader, is backed by the PDRC and has held talks with Suthep.

One appointed senator, Paiboon Nititawan, has asked the Constitutional Court to remove the remaining cabinet members. Senator Dej-udom Krairit told the *Nation* a decision is expected in two weeks, adding: "But if we can't wait, I believe Surachai has a way. He has met many people, both in secret and in the open."

Last month, the court removed Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and nine cabinet members on trumped-up charges of abuse of power. She was replaced by acting Prime Minister Niwattumrong Boonsongpaisan.

The Democrats and PDRC represent Thailand's traditional ruling elites—the military, the monarchy and much of the state bureaucracy—who supported the 2006 military coup that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's billionaire brother. Thaksin,

who owned a telecommunications empire, ran afoul of the Bangkok elites by opening the country to more foreign investment and by enacting limited reforms, including cheaper healthcare and subsidies for rice farmers, that secured him a base of support among rural and urban workers.

The PDRC has promised that its “people’s council” would scrap Pheu Thai’s subsidies and concessions—which it labels “corruption” and “vote buying”—and impose harsh austerity measures on the working class.

Amid a severe economic crisis, the PDRC’s program has gained the support of powerful sections of big business, which regard a coup as the only way to carry out attacks on living standards, in order to boost their profits. Thai Board of Trade chairman Isara Vongkusolkiet told the *Nation* that the declaration of martial law “should create a positive outcome” for investors. Asked if the next prime minister should be elected or appointed, Isara said it did not matter.

According to the *Nation*, Nandor von der Luehe, former chairman of the Joint Foreign Chambers of Commerce, “said that whether Thailand had an appointed or an elected prime minister was less important.” The priority for foreign investors was “political and economic reform as soon as possible.”

The United States has endorsed the declaration of martial law, and refused to describe it as a coup. State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki said she was “troubled by restrictions on the media” but hailed the army for organising “dialogue between the parties.” The Obama administration did not condemn the Constitutional Court’s decisions to annul the February election and remove Yingluck as prime minister.

Washington, which supported the 2006 coup, regards the Thai military as an important ally in its “pivot to Asia,” including the military buildup across the Asia-Pacific region against China. The declaration of martial law followed a visit to Bangkok last month by US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel, during which he held talks with the government, Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva and other unnamed “stakeholders.”

Despite their deep divisions, the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elite are both hostile to any independent movement of the working class. Pheu Thai and its protest arm, the UDD, have not criticised

the army’s actions and encouraged their supporters to collaborate with it.

The government has repeatedly appealed to the army and big business to support its re-election as the best means to impose austerity. A Pheu Thai source told the *Bangkok Post* that the party had “confidence that with martial law in place, polls had a greater chance of success.”

Tens of thousands of Red Shirts, mostly drawn from the urban and rural poor, are continuing their rally on the outskirts of Bangkok, determined to oppose the coup. However, since anti-government protests began in November, the UDD has largely demobilised its Red Shirt supporters, confining its limited protests to the north and northeast of the country and the outskirts of Bangkok. The UDD’s actions have only emboldened the anti-government forces, paving the way for the judicial coup against Yingluck, followed by the intervention of the military.



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