

# Thai military consolidates its hold on power

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After formally seizing power on Thursday, Thailand's generals are tightening their grip on the country. The army's National Peace and Order Maintaining Council (NPOMC) is detaining more than 100 people, mostly members of the elected Pheu Thai Party government—including ousted Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her successor Niwattumrong Boonsongpaisan—and members of the Shinawatra family. Leaders of the pro-government United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship and the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) are also being held.

The army has summoned 155 people in total and ordered them not to leave the country. According to the *Nation*, many of those detained have been taken to army camps in five different provinces.

Significantly, leaders of the opposition Democrat Party who were detained along with the government figures on Thursday were released yesterday. They include Abhisit Vejjajiva, who was prime minister in the unelected, military-backed government from 2008 to 2011.

The junta has imposed a curfew throughout the country from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. and taken control of all TV stations, most of which are now broadcasting non-stop army propaganda. Schools also remain shut.

Hundreds of people protested against the coup in downtown Bangkok yesterday, in defiance of a ban on public gatherings of more than five. According to the *Bangkok Post*, the protest was started by about 50 people, including Thammasat University students, but grew to 400 by the evening.

The demonstrators, who called for elections and chanted "Get out, dictators!" initially refused to disperse when confronted by heavily-armed soldiers. Scuffles broke out and at least three people were arrested as 200 soldiers broke up the rally. A separate anti-coup protest took place in Chiang Mai, involving

100 protesters.

The US and its allies in Europe, Japan and Australia have made perfunctory statements of "concern" and "regret" following the coup—which they all tacitly support. Washington did not condemn Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha's declaration of martial law on Tuesday, which amounted to a coup in all but name. Following Prayuth's formal declaration of a coup on Thursday, the US cancelled a token \$3.5 million in military aid, and has not withdrawn 700 marines and sailors who are in Thailand for joint naval exercises.

The Obama administration considers the Thai military a key ally in its military build-up in the Asia-Pacific, aimed at preparing for war against China. The Thai and US militaries held their annual Cobra Gold exercises in February, which are the largest multinational war games in South East Asia.

Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby told Reuters the US had a "long-standing relationship [with the Thai military], going well back in United States history... [which] we still believe is important." He said the Pentagon had informed the new regime that they expected "a return to democratic principles in Thailand just as soon as possible."

Asked at Friday's press briefing whether the US had any prior knowledge of the coup, State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki was evasive: "I'm not aware of prior notice. I haven't asked that specific question, but I think I'm not aware of it."

It is inconceivable that the Thai military carried out a coup without approval from Washington. Over the past seven months, Washington has not criticised the PDRC's openly anti-democratic campaign to topple the elected government and install an unelected "people's council." It did not condemn the Constitutional Court's decisions to nullify February's election—which was clearly won by the Pheu Thai Party—and to remove

Prime Minister Yingluck this month on blatantly trumped up charges.

The coup follows discussions in Bangkok last month between US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel and Democrat leader Abhisit, who supported the PDRC's campaign. Russel undoubtedly discussed the prospect of a coup with Abhisit and other "stakeholders" during his visit.

According to cables released by WikiLeaks, the army informed the US well in advance of its coup in 2006, which removed the government led by Yingluck's brother Thaksin Shinawatra. The US gave its tacit approval, while it issued public statements of "concern" and suspended military collaboration.

The Democrats and the PDRC represent the traditional Thai elites—the military, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—who supported the overthrow of Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire. These layers were bitterly hostile to the Shinawatras, who cut across their interests by allowing more foreign investment and carrying out limited social reforms. The concessions, including subsidies for rice farmers, cheap healthcare and a higher minimum wage, won the Pheu Thai Party a base of support among the country's urban and rural poor.

The PDRC's upper middle-class supporters on the streets of Bangkok cheered the announcement of a coup on Thursday. General Prayuth yesterday declared that he will appoint an interim technocratic government to draw up "economic, social and political reforms," while the constitution and elections will remain suspended until "the situation is peaceful." The so-called "reforms" will undoubtedly consist of scrapping the Pheu Thai government's "populist" policies and imposing brutal austerity measures as demanded by the PDRC, the Democrats and foreign and local investors.

The country is suffering from protracted economic crisis, exacerbated by the months of anti-government protests, and has likely slipped into recession. Foreign investment, exports and tourism have all suffered. Big businesses have largely reacted positively to the military takeover, which they expect will restore "stability" and increase profits at the expense of workers' living standards.

The Pheu Thai-aligned group, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), has not held any protests since its leaders were arrested on

Thursday, despite claiming for months that it would mobilise in the event of a coup. In reality, the organisation, known as the Red Shirts, opened the door to the coup by demobilising its supporters, drawn from the urban and rural poor.

On Tuesday the UDD leaders accepted the imposition of martial law, denying that it amounted to a coup, and urged their supporters to cooperate with the military. The UDD and Pheu Thai represent a faction of the ruling class, just as committed to imposing the dictates of finance capital as their opponents. They are far more afraid of an independent movement of the working class, for social equality and democratic rights, than of military rule.



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