

Thai king endorses military coup

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Thailand's coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday announced he had received the official endorsement of King Bhumibol Adulyadej to rule the country. The announcement declared the coup necessary "to maintain the peace and order of the nation and the reconciliation of the people."

The king's approval of military dictatorship exposes once again the myth that the monarchy sits above politics. While King Bhumibol has always been closely associated with the armed forces, his supposedly "neutral" status has in the past been utilised to defuse political crises. In 1992, the monarch stepped in to broker a compromise to end a confrontation between a military-backed regime and mounting street protests in Bangkok.

In 2006, however, the monarchy supported the military coup that toppled the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire, fell foul of the more powerful Bangkok elites—the monarchy, the military and the state bureaucracy—when his attempts to open up the economy to more foreign investment threatened to cut across their business interests.

Numerous royalists supported the seven-month campaign by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) to topple the elected Pheu Thai government, led by Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra, and install an unelected "people's council" to run the country. In February the *New York Times* noted that one of the PDRC's leaders, T-news agency owner Sonthiyarn Chuenruethai-naitham, was an advisor to the Crown Property Bureau, which manages the monarchy's \$30 billion business empire.

King Bhumibol remained silent after the PDRC disrupted the February election, which was boycotted by the opposition Democrat Party and later annulled in an anti-democratic ruling by the Constitutional Court. The king also said nothing when Yingluck was

removed by the court on May 7 on trumped up charges.

The PDRC and Democrats want to re-write the constitution to prevent parties linked to the Shinawatras from coming to power again. Thaksin and Yingluck introduced a series of limited reforms, including cheaper healthcare, micro-loans and subsidies for rice farmers, which gained them a base of support among the urban and rural poor. The PDRC has called for these concessions—which it labels "vote buying"—to be permanently scrapped, and for the country's deepening economic crisis to be imposed on workers and the poor through drastic austerity measures.

The coup-makers will no doubt implement this program, which is being demanded by foreign and local business, and cannot be carried out democratically. At a press conference yesterday, General Prayuth gave no time frame for holding an election, declaring that it would be held "when the situation permits." In the meantime, the junta would "set up new organisations to reform every aspect that causes problems and conflicts" and crack down on "resistance or any action that disrupts peace in the country."

On Sunday the National Council for Peace and Order empowered military courts to try cases involving civilians accused of insulting the monarchy or of "security offences." According to the *Bangkok Post*, citizens can be brought before the courts for instigating riots, disturbing the peace, instigating work stoppages, insulting the state, conspiring to commit sedition, and for any violation of NCPO orders.

The military has so far summoned 250 people, mostly members and supporters of the Pheu Thai Party and its protest arm, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). More than 200 people have been detained in army camps, including several academics and journalists accused of criticising the new regime. Ousted Prime Minister Yingluck was released on Saturday after three days in custody and now has

soldiers guarding her home.

PDRC leader Suthep Thaugsuban, who was detained on Thursday, has also been released. Small groups of PDRC supporters have held pro-coup rallies in Bangkok with banners that read “We love the army.”

Strict media censorship and curfews are in place, and gatherings of more than five people are banned. Despite this, hundreds of people have taken part in daily protests against the junta in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, and other centres such as Pattaya and Khon Kaen. Sunday’s rally in central Bangkok attracted about 1,000 people. Protesters shouted “Dictators get out!” and “we want elections!” as they faced off against hundreds of soldiers.

The *Nation* reported that 11 alleged protest organisers were arrested in Bangkok yesterday. According to Agence France-Presse, more than 10 people were arrested after the protests in Chiang Mai, and 20 in Khon Kaen, who, the army alleges, were found with bombs and bullets. In a televised address General Prayuth warned that he would “use force and impose the law strictly” if protests did not cease.

In 2010 the military brutally cracked down on pro-Thaksin protests in Bangkok, killing 90 people and injuring thousands.

The UDD, known as the Red Shirts, who led the 2010 protests, have not held any rallies since last week’s coup. Despite claiming for months that they would mobilise their supporters, drawn from the rural and urban poor and retaliate against a coup, the Pheu Thai-aligned group has effectively shut down.

Amnuay Boontee, a Red Shirt co-ordinator in Buriram province, told Agence France-Presse: “The Red Shirts do not know what to do ... we have to wait and see what the army does and what our leaders in other provinces and districts say.” When General Prayuth seized power, almost all the core UDD and Pheu Thai leaders turned themselves in to the army.

Pheu Thai and the UDD are both capitalist organisations, whose leaders are much more afraid of their own supporters and of the working class than the military.

Over the past seven months the UDD leaders demobilised their supporters, while the PDRC and the courts disrupted elections and destabilised the government, paving the way for the military to intervene. The Red Shirts did not hold a single mass

rally in central Bangkok; instead, the leaders appealed to the courts and the army to protect the government.

The US government, the closest ally of the Thai military, has issued a mild statement of “disappointment” with the coup, and called for elections. Joint naval exercises have been cancelled and a token \$3.5 million in military aid suspended. The Obama administration considers its alliance, including access to Thai air bases and seaports, vitally important for the US “pivot to Asia,” which is aimed at encircling and preparing for war against China.

On Sunday, Thai Army deputy spokesman Colonel Winthai Suvari told the *Nation* that US Pacific Fleet commander Admiral Harry Harris had spoken to General Prayuth after the coup “as both countries were old allies.” According to Winthai, “Harris expressed concerns but as a military officer he understood the situation.” The US embassy dismissed the report and stated that Harris did not call Prayuth.

Washington was undoubtedly informed well in advance of the coup and tacitly approved it, as it approved the 2006 coup. At that time the US ambassador Ralph Boyce met General Sonthi Boonyaratglin weeks before the coup. Boyce expressed his understanding of the situation, and informed the coup leader that the US would have to make some minor and temporary aid cuts to the junta.



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