

Thai military tightens its grip on power

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Following last week's military coup, Thailand's National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) is continuing its crackdown on political opponents and tightening its grip on power.

The junta mobilised about 1,350 police and soldiers yesterday at Bangkok's Victory Monument, where hundreds of anti-coup protesters had gathered the day before. According to the Associated Press, "a Belgian man was detained for displaying a T-shirt saying 'PEACE PLEASE', and two Thai women were taken away in a police truck after they showed signs with anti-coup messages." The NCPO has given itself the power to detain anyone, and to try civilians in military courts.

All international TV channels remain blocked, while local channels are under strict censorship. A number of websites are barred, including the Thai page of the US-based Human Rights Watch. Facebook experienced a temporary and partial shut-down on Wednesday, and the military has instructed it and other social networks to collaborate in censoring anti-regime posts. A curfew remains in force from midnight to 4 a.m. and gatherings of more than five people are banned.

The regime has summoned more than 250 people to hand themselves in since the coup, mostly members and supporters of the former elected Pheu Thai government. Some academics, journalists and protesters have also been detained. Ousted Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and some other members of the former government have been released but more than 70 people remain in custody.

On Tuesday morning, soldiers raided the Warorot Grand Palace hotel in Chiang Mai, which doubles as a radio station for the Pheu Thai-aligned United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), or Red Shirts. They seized computers and documents. About a dozen Red Shirt activists from Chiang Mai have been arrested since the coup.

Also on Tuesday soldiers arrested former education

minister, Chaturon Chaisang, the only minister who had refused to turn himself in. Chaturon was dragged from the stage at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Bangkok, where he had given a press conference criticising the coup. He will be court martialled for failing to surrender.

Elections have been indefinitely suspended, with army chief of staff General Chatchalerm Chalermsook telling the Associated Press voting was "impossible... at the moment" because "some people want to create turmoil." Coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who has been endorsed by the king as the country's prime minister, appointed a 10-member advisory board on Wednesday, including several generals who led the last military coup in 2006.

In 2006, the army toppled the government of telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's brother. Thaksin, who represented a faction of big business, cut across the interests of the entrenched Bangkok elites, particularly the military and the monarchy, when he moved to open the country to more foreign investment.

The traditional elites were also bitterly hostile to Thaksin and Yingluck for passing limited reforms—including cheaper healthcare, a higher minimum wage and a scheme to pay rice farmers inflated prices for their crops. These measures gained the Shinawatras a base of support among the rural and urban poor.

Last week's coup followed a seven-month campaign by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), supported by the opposition Democrat Party and the courts, to replace Yingluck's government with an unelected "people's council"—essentially a military-backed dictatorship. An election in February, which was undoubtedly won by the Pheu Thai Party, was widely disrupted by the PDRC, boycotted by the Democrats, and then annulled by the Constitutional

Court. On May 7 the court ousted Yingluck and nine cabinet ministers on trumped up charges, paving the way for the military to step in.

The PDRC, which includes arch-royalists and militarists, reacted with jubilation to the coup, which is being used to purge the state apparatus of anyone associated with the so-called “Thaksin regime.” The *Bangkok Post* reports that the NCPO has removed 13 provincial governors, several high-ranking civil servants and 16 senior police officers “thought to have close links to the Shinawatra family.”

At least two of the generals appointed by Prayuth—Prawit Wongsuwan and ex-army chief Anupong Paochinda—are known supporters of the PDRC. Anupong led the 2006 coup and was central to the subsequent interventions by the military to undermine the elected pro-Thaksin government formed in 2008. Anupong helped install a Democrat-led government in late 2008 and was army chief during the 2010 crackdown on protracted protests by pro-Thaksin Red Shirts against the Democrats. At least 90 people were killed and 1,500 wounded.

The main target of the new regime is the working class and rural poor.

In a transparent publicity stunt, the junta has begun to pay rice farmers who were owed a total of over \$2.8 billion by the ousted government. However, according to today’s *Bangkok Post*, Prayuth has emphasised that while “the needs of the people” must be met, the country’s budget “must not create financial burdens on future governments while fiscal and financial discipline must be maintained.”

“Fiscal and financial discipline” means brutal austerity measures to impose the burden of the country’s deep economic crisis onto the working class and rural poor. This will undoubtedly include scrapping the rice-buying scheme, which millions of farmers depend on, and which has been denounced by both local and foreign business as an intolerable drain on funds.

Pheu Thai and the UDD leadership opened the door for the coup by demobilising their supporters. The junta released UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan and other detained UDD members on Wednesday, after they signed an agreement not to start any political movement or speak against the regime. Despite claiming for months that they would retaliate against a

coup, the UDD has completely capitulated.

The coup undoubtedly went ahead with the tacit support of the US government, which also backed the coup in 2006. Washington did not condemn the nullification of February’s election, the judicial ousting of Yingluck, or the imposition of martial law. The US has since suspended a token \$3.5 million in aid to the Thai military and called for early elections.

Thailand remains a key ally in the Obama administration’s “pivot” or “rebalance” to Asia, which is aimed at subordinating and militarily encircling China. In a speech yesterday, US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Russel stated that “over the last five-plus years” the US had “strengthened and reinvigorated” its military relations with Thailand, along with other US treaty allies in the Asia-Pacific region—Australia, Japan, South Korea and the Philippines. He described the coup in the mildest terms as an “unfortunate” development and “unforeseen challenge” that would “strain relations.”

Far from being “unforeseen,” it is inconceivable that the US—which maintains constant contact with the Thai military—received no advance notice of the coup. Russel himself visited Bangkok in April for talks with Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva and other unnamed “stakeholders.” He refused to condemn the PDRC’s anti-democratic campaign.



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