

Thai opposition forms overseas anti-coup organisation

Ben McGrath**7 June 2014**

The military regime in Thailand is continuing to consolidate its power, assisted by the lack of any concerted opposition by the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) leadership that was aligned with the ousted Pheu Thai government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

On Thursday, 15 Pheu Thai politicians announced that they would form an overseas anti-coup organisation, but it would not be called a government-in-exile. According to sources cited today by the *Bangkok Post*, exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the billionaire brother of Yingluck, opposed the formation of a government-in-exile.

The newspaper stated that Thaksin's calculations were primarily driven by concerns for his own extensive business interests and by the reactions of the major powers, which, led by the US, have given tacit support to the coup.

According to Thaksin, "reactions from foreign countries to the military takeover were not strong enough to apply pressure on the junta," it reported. "Also, being seen to openly embrace a government-in-exile could seriously harm the Shinawatra family's political and business interests."

To declare an alternative government would mean challenging the power not just of the military but of the monarchy and the traditional political establishment, which has backed the coup. Despite representing a rival faction of the ruling elite, Thaksin, the central figure behind Pheu Thai and the UDD, has been cautious about alienating the monarchy and the military.

Above all, Thaksin shares the fears of the ruling class as a whole that the mobilization of UDD or Red Shirt protests could unleash social forces—layers of the working class and rural poor—that it could not control. That is precisely what began to develop in 2010 during

Red Shirt rallies against the previous military-backed Democrat Party government that were abruptly ended with a brutal military crackdown.

Jakrapob Penkair, one of those involved in the overseas group, stressed that it would confine itself to limited protests. "We aim to create an organisation for all groups protesting the coup inside and outside Thailand," he stated. "This would be a non-radical group using civil disobedience."

Jakrapob, a businessman involved in bringing the 7-Eleven chain to Thailand, served in one of the governments led by Thaksin, who was overthrown in an earlier military coup in 2006. Jakrapob spoke from Phnom Penh, Cambodia where he lives in exile after fleeing from charges levied against him under Thailand's reactionary *lèse-majesté* laws.

Other UDD leaders have more openly accepted the decrees of the military high command. Last Friday, coup leader General Prayuth Chan-ocha declared that the military would remain in power for at least the next 15 months and called on the public to "give us time to change attitudes, values and many other things."

The junta's program will involve imposing austerity measures to force the working class to pay for the country's economic crisis. Local and foreign capitalists are pushing for the complete dismantling of Thaksin's limited reforms, including subsidies for rice farmers, a micro-loan scheme and cheaper healthcare, which provided him with an electoral base of support. The junta is also seeking to refashion the constitution to ensure Pheu Thai does not regain power in any election.

Pichit Tamoon, a coordinator for the Red Shirts in 17 northern provinces stated after General Prayuth's address: "So we must give him some time, a honeymoon period, to see if it's good for the people. But if after four months, six months, Khun Prayuth is

addicted to power, we will have to think about different things ... there might be blood."

Another organiser, Sunai Julapongsathorn, said: "In three months, the military will have relaxed its grip. That is when we will move. This won't be quick. It will take a long time."

Despite this talk of resistance in the future, the UDD has no intention of allowing any mass struggle against the junta. Similar empty rhetoric was used throughout the period before the May 22 coup. In reality, the Red Shirt leadership held back the mounting popular hostility to the creeping coup that was already being carried out against Yingluck's government through the courts.

From all accounts, the Red Shirts have been largely absent from the small anti-coup protests in Bangkok and other centres over the past fortnight.

According to today's *Bangkok Post* report, the coup has split the Pheu Thai Party into differing groups. Some members have said they will fight the junta's National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) while others—including politicians and businessmen—have opted not to resist the military, afraid of having their assets frozen if they breach agreements signed with the NCPO not to aid a political movement. A third group has decided to "wait and see" how the political situation unfolds before they react.

Since the coup, approximately 300 government officials, academics, journalists, and activists have been arrested and released only after signing a pledge to refrain from engaging in politics. Pichit, the Red Shirt coordinator, was released from custody last week after signing such a pledge.

The junta came to power following a seven-month campaign against the elected government, led by the so-called People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and supported by the opposition Democrat Party and the country's courts. The PDRC occupied government buildings, blockaded intersections and disrupted the February election, which was then annulled by the Constitutional Court. On May 7, the court removed Yingluck on trumped-up charges that she abused her position—paving the way for the military to intervene.

The PDRC and Democrats both represent Thailand's traditional ruling elites—the monarchy and the military—who bitterly oppose the Shinawatras. Thaksin,

a telecommunications tycoon, cut across the entrenched interests of the Bangkok elites when he moved to open the country to further foreign investment.

The regime is continuing to clamp down on opposition. The junta has threatened to break up any anti-coup demonstrations, arrest those taking part, and potentially put them on trial in military courts.

On Thursday evening, the junta detained Sombat Boonngamanong, a mid-level Red Shirt leader who had been ordered to report to the military but instead went into hiding. He was arrested in Thailand's eastern Chonburi Province. Sombat had used social media to encourage his supporters to organise "flash mobs" or small, sporadic protests against the government.

Sombat's promotion of such stunts highlights the UDD leadership's duplicitous role in ensuring that widespread anger and opposition does not develop into a mass movement against the junta.



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