Thai junta exploits Bangkok bombing

Tom Peters
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The death toll from Monday night's pipe-bomb attack at the Erawan Shrine, a popular tourist attraction in Bangkok, stands at 22, with approximately 120 people injured. The bombing of the crowded Hindu and Buddhist shrine at the downtown Ratchaprasong intersection was designed to cause maximum carnage. Two unexploded bombs were discovered following the blast.

Marko Cunningham, a paramedic who was one of the first on the scene, told the media: "Everything was shredded, from concrete to bodies, flesh ripped off the bone, absolutely horrific... It wasn't just making a point, they really wanted to kill and maim."

Within 24 hours the attack was followed by an attempted bombing on Tuesday afternoon. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported: "Witnesses said an unidentified man threw a bomb from the Saphan Takin Bridge over the Chao Phraya River onto a footbridge crowded with pedestrians. But they said he missed the target and the bomb landed in the water and exploded. No one was injured."

No one has claimed responsibility for either attack. Police have released blurry CCTV footage of a man wearing a yellow shirt leaving a backpack at the Erawan Shrine. "The yellow shirt guy is not just the suspect. He is the bomber," Police Lieutenant General Prawut Thavornsiri told the Associated Press. He did not elaborate on how this conclusion was reached. No details of the man's identity have been reported.

Thailand's US-backed military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), has moved quickly to exploit the attack to tighten its grip on power and to crack down on political opposition. The *New York Times* reported that within hours of Monday's bombing senior military officials "ruled out any connection to the continuing Muslim insurgency in southern Thailand."

Instead, without producing any evidence, dictator and former General Prayuth Chan-Ocha implied that those responsible were linked to former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in May 2014. He told the media yesterday that police were investigating Facebook posts by two individuals warning people to "be careful" between 14 and 18 August. He claimed that one of the posters—whose names have not been released—"used to be in anti-government groups."

Another NCPO spokesman, Major General Sansern Kaewkamnerd, similarly told the *Bangkok Post*: "It's too soon to jump to conclusions, but the likelihood is that the perpetrators are the same group which lost political benefits and want to create chaos in the country." This is an obvious reference to the pro-Shinawatra United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, known as the Red Shirts.

A major military and police mobilisation is underway. According to the *Nation* newspaper, national police chief General Somyot Poompanmuang announced yesterday that "police and soldiers would set up more checkpoints and step up precautionary checks and patrols in Bangkok to prevent a repeat of the blast."

More than 30 checkpoints were also established throughout the northeast region of Isan, including the city of Khon Kaen. The region is a base of support for Yingluck and her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a previous army coup in 2006.

The Shinawatras, along with their political party Pheu Thai and its protest wing, the Red Shirts, represent a section of the Thai ruling class. Thaksin, a communications billionaire, fell afoul of Thailand's traditional elites—the monarchy, state bureaucracy and the military—when he attempted to open the country to increased foreign investment. These traditional elites are also bitterly hostile to the Shinawatras for providing

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subsidies to rice farmers, rural loan schemes and other limited reforms, which gained them a base of support among the urban and rural poor.

An article in the British-based *Telegraph* raised the question: "[M]ight elements within the military have staged a 'red flag' attack to demonstrate the country's need for them to remain in power to maintain stability, especially with a challenging royal succession in the offing?"

Such provocations aimed at creating chaos to justify military rule are certainly not unknown. The immediate pretext for the 2014 coup was a string of grenade attacks and shootings targeting protest rallies led by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC)—an organisation with links to the military and the monarchy which openly supported the coup. While the attackers were never identified, armed soldiers were present in both the PDRC and rival Red Shirt rallies.

Whoever carried out the Bangkok bombing, its timing was politically convenient for the regime. On September 6 the National Reform Council is expected to pass a draconian constitution that will effectively enshrine military rule, even if elections are held. With a referendum on the constitution scheduled for January 2016, the bombing will be used to mobilise the armed forces and intimidate the working class and the urban and rural poor. Elections are currently scheduled for September 2016, but the junta has indicated that this could be pushed back to 2017 if the new constitution is rejected, or if there is political instability or unrest.

The junta has no intention of restoring democracy and is maintaining a tight grip on power. It is determined to scrap all the limited reforms implemented under the Yingluck and Thaksin governments and force the working class to pay for the economic crisis through a program of austerity.

The military confronts rising social tensions caused by its removal of subsidies for rice farmers, coupled with a collapse in global rice prices and the worst drought to hit the country in a decade. The Thai Rice Exporters Association estimated in July that output had dropped by 15–20 percent since late 2014. Citi economist Jun Trinidad told CNBC on July 26 that the drought had "worsened labor market conditions as farm employment shed 700,000 jobs in June."

CNBC noted that "with more than 40 percent of the country's population engaged in agriculture, the drought has exacerbated troubles in an economy already weighed down by slowing manufacturing, shrinking exports and rising external debt." On Monday the state planning agency cut its 2015 growth forecast for the second time this year from 3–4 percent to 2.7–3.2 percent. The Bangkok bombing will put further pressure on the economy by deterring tourism, which accounts for 10 percent of GDP.

The NCPO is preparing to clamp down on unrest. It has already detained and imprisoned hundreds of people since the coup, including academics, journalists, protesters and political figures linked to the Yingluck government. The regime has censored the media and this month passed a new law banning public gatherings without advance permission from the authorities.

A report this month by the UN Human Rights Commissioner noted that since the coup at least 40 people have been tried in military courts and imprisoned for *lèse majesté* (insulting the monarchy). On August 7 a man and a woman were jailed for 30 and 28 years respectively for comments made on Facebook, setting a new precedent for *lèse majesté* sentences.

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