

# Thai junta exploits bombings to clamp down on opposition

Tom Peters  
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Last Thursday and Friday, apparently coordinated explosions in seven of Thailand's southern provinces killed four people and wounded 35. More than a dozen sites were targeted, including the popular tourist destinations of Phuket, Surat Thani and Hua Hin. Among the injured were 20 Thais and 10 foreigners from Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Austria.

Some of the bombs were reportedly concealed in flower beds and roadside plants. They were detonated by mobile phones amid crowds of people. Several unexploded devices were found over the weekend in Hua Hin, Phuket and Phang Nga.

Three small bombs exploded on Sunday in a street in the southern province of Yala. No one was injured.

Police authorities claimed that the bombings, plus a number of suspected arsons, were all orchestrated by a single person. Deputy police chief Pongsapat Pongcharoen told the media: "The events are connected, carefully planned and carried out across many areas and masterminded by one individual."

Although no group has claimed responsibility for the attacks, Thailand's military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), moved rapidly to exploit the tragedies to intensify its crackdown on political opposition.

NCPO spokesman Colonel Winthai Suvaree said suspects would be held without charge and interrogated for seven days, then released if determined to have no connection with the bombings. The *Nation* reported on Monday that police had "detained an undisclosed number of southern political leaders," including some affiliated with the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), also known as the Red Shirts, the protest wing of the Pheu Thai Party.

The military seized power from the Pheu Thai government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in

May 2014. The coup was backed by elites in Bangkok, including monarchists and sections of the state bureaucracy. These elements are determined to prevent a return to power by the wealthy Shinawatra family, whose political parties have won every election since 2001.

Yingluck's brother Thaksin Shinawatra, a communications billionaire, was also ousted in a military coup in 2006. Thailand's traditional elites turned against Thaksin following his attempts to open the economy to greater foreign investment, which cut across their own entrenched interests. Thaksin and Yingluck provoked further hostility in these quarters due to their limited social reforms, such as cheaper healthcare and subsidies for rice farmers, which won them a base of support among the rural and urban poor.

The NCPO has begun to eliminate these subsidies and is planning other austerity measures, including cuts to welfare entitlements for the elderly. It has also rewritten the constitution to effectively establish a permanent dictatorship, even if elections are held next year as promised.

Last week's attacks occurred less than a week after the August 7 referendum, which endorsed the draft constitution by a narrow majority following a military crackdown on opposition. More than 100 people were arrested for campaigning against the constitution, while the NCPO mobilised soldiers to campaign for a "yes" vote. Several explosions were reported during the weekend of the referendum, one of which killed a teacher and injured two police officers.

Speaking to the media on Friday, Prayuth Chan-Ocha, the self-appointed prime minister and former army chief, blamed the string of fatal explosions on "bad people" who opposed the constitution. According to the *Bangkok Post*, NCPO spokesman Sansern

Kaewkamnerd “suggested those behind the blasts could be people who have ‘lost benefits’—code for followers of Thaksin—because of last Sunday’s referendum.”

The regime immediately dismissed suggestions that the attacks were perpetrated by Muslim separatists based in the deep south. Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwon declared on Friday: “This motive can be discarded. I confirm this is not the case.” He did not offer any argument for ruling out the insurgents as suspects.

For more than a decade several armed groups have carried out attacks on civilians and the military, and set fire to hundreds of schools. Since 2004, more than 6,500 people have been killed and 12,000 injured as a result of the conflict in the south.

Police also ruled out the possibility that foreign terrorists, such as Islamic State, were behind the attacks.

UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan denounced attempts to link his organisation to the bombings. He told the *Bangkok Post* that Wichai Padungsaksri, a Red Shirt leader from Ang Thong province, in the centre of Thailand, was arrested by 20 armed soldiers on Saturday morning. Soldiers also arrested Prapas Rojanapithak, a 67-year-old described by the *Nation* as a UDD leader. The *Post* said Prapas denied being a UDD member, but he had “joined 90 other southern academics and activists in signing a statement condemning the May 22, 2014 coup.” Prapas and Wichai were detained without charge.

The Pheu Thai Party condemned claims that Thaksin is behind the bombings as “slander and defamation.” Thaksin, who lives in exile in Dubai, has reportedly threatened to sue anyone making “false accusations” against him.

Police have also arrested Sakarin Karuehas, a 32-year-old oil rig worker originally from Chiang Mai. He is accused of setting fire to a Tesco Lotus supermarket in the southern province of Nakhon Si Thammarat. No details have been released about Sakarin’s interrogation, his background or affiliations.

The NCPO’s actions recall its response to the August 2015 bombing of the Erawan Shrine in Bangkok, which killed 20 people and injured 125. Then, as now, the junta initially implied that the UDD was responsible and used the horrific attack to justify its dictatorship. Two men from China’s Uighur ethnic group were

eventually charged over the bombing and are currently awaiting trial. Both have denied the charges and one claims he was tortured to force a confession.

Whoever carried out last week’s attacks, they have provided a pretext for the junta to further strengthen its grip on power. As it implements drastic austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights, the NCPO is preparing to confront mass opposition in the working class and among poor farmers.

There is widespread and deepening hostility toward the regime. Significantly, the junta has been forced to deny rumours that it was responsible for the explosions. According to the *Nation*, NCPO spokesman Colonel Piyapong Klinphan said on Saturday: “The military will never harm the people. I can vouch for that with my life.”

In fact, the history of the Thai military is soaked in blood, having carried out 11 coups since 1932. Most recently, in 2010, it was called on by the unelected Democrat Party government to brutally suppress Red Shirt protesters, predominantly drawn from the urban and rural poor, who called for fresh elections. More than 90 people were killed and thousands more injured in the crackdown in Bangkok.



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