

Former Thai PM flees as junta intensifies crackdown

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29 August 2017

Former Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who was removed by Thailand's current military rulers in the May 2014 coup, fled the country on Friday. She was due to appear in the Supreme Court in Bangkok to hear its verdict on trumped-up charges that could have seen her jailed for 10 years. Yingluck is thought to be in Dubai.

Around 3,000 Yingluck supporters, including some who came from the north and northeast of the country, gathered outside the court to hear the verdict and were confronted with thousands of police and barricades. While the military junta allowed the gathering to take place under strict conditions, it previously threatened to arrest those who gathered at Yingluck's last court appearance in July. Yingluck advised her supporters not to turn up last Friday.

The judges issued an arrest warrant for Yingluck, revoked her bail of 30 million baht or about \$900,000 and ordered it be forfeited. The next court date is set for September 27.

Yingluck was charged over her government's rice subsidy scheme—a measure designed to assist farmers, particularly in impoverished areas. The farmers were paid above market price and the rice was stored in the hope that world prices would rise. Instead prices fell, leaving rice rotting in warehouses and the government facing substantial losses.

The junta exploited the policy failure to bring criminal charges in an attempt to stamp out the influence of Yingluck, and her brother Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted as prime minister in the military coup of 2006, and their Pheu Thai party.

The military rulers represent the country's traditional elites. They are deeply hostile to the Shinawatras, who built a base of support among the urban and rural poor through limited social reforms, including the rice

scheme, a health program and village subsidies. Thaksin also alienated sections of less competitive Thai business by opening up the economy more widely to foreign investment.

The flimsy character of the charges against Yingluck over the rice scheme is underscored by the fact that the military introduced an almost identical subsidy program in November 2016 in order to avoid widespread mass unrest in rice growing areas. Farmers were paid to hold on to their crops for several months until market prices rose.

In addition to seeking a 10-year prison sentence for so-called criminal negligence over the rice scheme, the junta issued an administrative order imposing an unprecedented personal fine on Yingluck of \$US1 billion, supposedly to partially cover the government's losses. She is barred from politics until 2020 after being impeached by the military-appointed parliament in 2015.

Last Friday, the Supreme Court also imposed draconian sentences, ranging from 24 to 48 years in prison, on 20 others, including five former officials in Yingluck's administration, for allegedly profiting from the rice subsidy program. Former Commerce Minister Boonsong Teriyapirom was sentenced to 42 years and his deputy 36 years.

The Trump administration effectively gave the green light for this judicial witch-hunt in early August when US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson became the most senior American official to visit Thailand since the 2014 coup. Former army chief Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the coup leader and prime minister, has been invited to Washington in October to meet with Trump.

Tillerson held discussions with Prayuth and Foreign Minister Don Pramudwinai. He reportedly pressed the regime to further isolate North Korea and discussed

security and trade matters but made no comment on the junta's repressive police-state measures. Tillerson later made perfunctory remarks at the US embassy, saying he hoped elections would go ahead in 2018.

The junta exploited the death of the King Bhumibol Adulyadej last October to postpone national elections for the third time, until sometime in 2018. Bhumibol was key to the coups against elected pro-Thaksin governments. The junta is less than enthusiastic about his son, Maha Vajiralongkorn, now due for coronation in November.

The chief concern, however, is that even with the military's highly restrictive constitution an election could result in a pro-Thaksin victory in the lower house of a new parliament. Pro-Thaksin parties have won every election for more than a decade, in spite of the military's efforts to prevent that outcome.

The military junta has sweeping powers under section 44 of its interim constitution to stop "any act which undermines public peace and order or national security, the monarchy, national economics or administration of state affairs." The section has been invoked more than 150 times. Other measures include a ban on gatherings of more than five people, censorship of Internet activity and trials of civilians in military courts on sedition charges.

More than 100 people have been arrested under the country's reactionary lèse-majesté laws for supposedly insulting or offending the royal family. King Bhumibol was the linchpin of the state apparatus and the country's ruling elites, including the military, state bureaucracy, the courts and sections of business. His death is compounding the political crisis facing the junta, which fears that rising social tensions will lead to mass unrest.

According to the Asian Development Bank, the Thai economy is expected to grow by just 3.5 percent this year, down from around 5 percent a decade ago. A 2017 report by Credit Suisse said Thailand became the third most unequal country in the world in 2016, with 1 percent of the population owning 58.0 percent of national wealth, beaten by India into second place. The highest concentration of poverty is in the rural areas.

The junta is well aware that it is sitting atop a social time bomb and is determined to suppress all opposition. On July 29, ten armed men in black balaclavas physically abducted a vocal opponent of the military,

Wuthipong Kochathamakun, from his home in the Laotian capital Vientiane, where he was living in self-imposed exile.

Wuthipong is regarded as one of the more radical members of the Thaksin-affiliated United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). The UDD led the mass demonstrations in Bangkok in 2010 against what amounted to a judicial coup that removed a pro-Thaksin government in 2008. The army brutally suppressed the protests, killing more than 80 people, but was eventually forced to concede elections that led to Yingluck's victory in 2011.



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