

Thai protest leaders demand government step down

By John Roberts and Peter Symonds
2 December 2013

After a week of anti-government protests in the Thai capital, protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban reportedly met Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra at a secret location in the presence of army, navy and air force commanders. The meeting, held at the urging of army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha, reached no resolution.

Following the meeting, Suthep declared there had been “no negotiation and no compromise.” He declared: “I told Yingluck that this is the only and last time I see her until power is handed over to the people. There will be no bargaining and it must be finished in two days.”

Suthep, who was deputy leader of the opposition Democrat Party before resigning to head the protests, is calling for the appointment of an unelected “People’s Council” to replace the government. Such a council would be nothing but a façade for sections of the military, monarchy and state bureaucracy that are bitterly opposed to Yingluck’s brother, former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by an army coup in 2006.

Seizing on a proposed government amnesty bill, Suthep, the Democrats and their backers have mobilised sections of the Bangkok middle classes and supporters from the country’s south to demand that the government go. The government’s legislation, as well as providing amnesty for Democrat and military leaders for their role in the past seven years of political turmoil, would have allowed Thaksin to return from exile.

Suthep had declared that Sunday would be “V-day” in forcing Yingluck to step down. According to police, some 30,000 anti-government protesters attempted to take over about eight government buildings in the city—down from 100,000 the previous Sunday. This weekend, at least three people were killed and dozens injured.

Yesterday morning, for the first time, police guarding the Government House administrative centre used tear gas and water cannon against protesters trying to gain control of the building. Riot police also used tear gas against a group of about 3,000 who tried to break through barriers at the Metropolitan Police Bureau.

At least two people were killed in clashes on Saturday between pro- and anti-government demonstrators around Ramkhamhaeng University. According to the *Bangkok Post*, a brawl involving about 3,000 people broke out as pro-government “Red Shirts” were making their way to the Rajamangla Stadium to show their support for Yingluck.

According to media reports, some 70,000 people attended the Red Shirt rally, organised by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), and tens of thousands more were on their way from pro-government strongholds in the country’s rural north and north-east. The UDD yesterday told its supporters to go home. One UDD leader said it did not want to complicate the government’s handling of the political crisis.

A significant aspect of yesterday’s protests was the presence of soldiers on the streets of Bangkok for the first time since the bloody 2010 crackdown on Red Shirt protests against the then Democrat government. The Centre for the Administration of Peace and Order requested 2,730 soldiers, navy and air force personnel, including 180 military police, to be deployed around Bangkok.

The mobilisation of military personnel, at present unarmed, ostensibly to protect key government offices and TV stations, could provide the basis for ousting Yingluck and her administration. As in the 2006 coup, the anti-government protests are aimed at creating the political climate for the military to intervene. At this

stage, publicly at least, army chief Prayuth has indicated that the armed forces are not taking sides.

Behind the political turmoil are bitter divisions within the country's ruling elites over economic policy and patronage. While the traditional elites backed the installation of the billionaire Thaksin as prime minister in 2001, they turned against him when he further opened up the Thai economy to foreign investors and cultivated a social base of his own among sections of the rural poor through limited handouts.

Following the 2006 coup, the military junta attempted to reimpose national economic controls, provoking a financial crisis. It called fresh elections in late 2007, which the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won despite a revised constitution aimed at preventing it from taking power. Anti-Thaksin, or "Yellow Shirt," protests in 2008 set the stage for the ousting of two PPP prime ministers through the courts and the installation of a Democrat administration, backed by the military.

The political crisis culminated in 2010 in a brutal military crackdown on Red Shirt protesters against the Democrat government, leaving more than 90 dead and 1,500 injured. Amid fears that the working class and rural poor were beginning to press for their own class demands, the rival factions sought to reach a compromise. A secret deal was struck between Thaksin and the army and the king to allow Yingluck to form a government if her Puea Thai party won the 2011 election. Under the arrangement, the government would not intervene in the affairs of the military or the monarchy.

Yingluck has largely abided by the deal. Her government's amnesty legislation not only provided for Thaksin's return from exile, but also exonerated military and Democrat leaders for their role in the 2010 killings. After the bill was defeated in the Senate, constitutional amendments designed to establish a fully-elected upper house were struck down by country's Constitutional Court. Hardline elements of the anti-Thaksin camp exploited the situation to initiate protests calling for the government's ouster.

Big business is expressing anxiety over the unresolved political conflict. On Saturday the Thai Chamber of Commerce urged talks, a call backed by organisations representing foreign investors in Thailand. Underlying the tensions in ruling circles is a sharp downturn in exports and the country's economy.

The tense standoff continues. Protest leaders called for a general strike today of government and non-government workers following the failure of Sunday's "V-day." For her part, Yingluck declared on Saturday that she would not stand down. "I will not flee anywhere. I may be a woman but I have the courage to face all possible scenarios," she insisted.

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