

Thai military dispenses with caretaker government

Tom Peters
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Army Chief General Prayuth Chan-ocha formally seized power yesterday afternoon and announced himself as prime minister, two days after imposing martial law and taking control of Thailand. The army has now dissolved the elected Pheu Thai government, suspended the constitution, imposed a curfew from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m., taken over all radio and TV stations and banned gatherings of more than five people.

The army ordered the caretaker prime minister Niwattumrong Boonsongpaisan and his cabinet to report to its newly-established National Peace and Order Maintaining Council. It has also summoned 23 other Pheu Thai members, including former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, and members of her family.

Leaders of the pro-government United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) and the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) were detained immediately after the coup was announced, along with several members of Pheu Thai and opposition Democrat Party leader Abhisit Vejjajiva.

The army had brought the parties and protest leaders together, ostensibly for a second day of talks to resolve the country's long-running political crisis. Military sources told the *Bangkok Post* that Prayuth declared he would "seize power" after Justice Minister Chaikasem Nitisiri said the caretaker government would not resign.

The coup is the culmination of almost seven months of anti-government protests led by the PDRC and supported by the Democrats. It follows the anti-democratic removal of Prime Minister Yingluck by the Constitutional Court on May 7, on a trumped up charge of abuse of power. The court previously annulled the February 2 election, which was boycotted by the Democrats and disrupted by the PDRC.

PDRC rallies in Bangkok cheered and applauded news of the military takeover. According to the *New York Times*, Samdin Lertbut, a leader of the PDRC-aligned Buddhist sect, the Dharma Army, declared: "This is a victory day for the people. The military have done their job and we have done our job."

The aim of the PDRC's protests, blockades of government buildings and polling booths, has always been to create an atmosphere of chaos that would provide the pretext for military intervention. Its openly anti-democratic goal is to install an unelected "people's council" backed by the military.

Soldiers fired shots into the air as they dispersed a UDD rally on the outskirts of Bangkok, where thousands of the government's Red Shirt supporters had been camped since May 10 to protest the ousting of Yingluck and the drive to dictatorship. According to the *Bangkok Post*, soldiers have been ordered to arrest all UDD co-leaders across the country and take them to military camps.

The crackdown is not targeted primarily at the government and UDD leaders but against the urban and rural poor. These layers benefited from limited concessions such as cheap health care, micro-loans and subsidies for rice farmers under Yingluck's government and the 2001–2006 government of her brother Thaksin Shinawatra.

The PDRC and Democrats represent factions of the ruling elite—the monarchy, the state bureaucracy and the military—that supported the 2006 coup that overthrew Thaksin, a telecommunications billionaire. The country's traditional rulers turned against Thaksin after he moved to open the economy to further foreign investment, cutting across their own interests. They also bitterly oppose the Shinawatras' social reforms, which the PDRC equates with "vote buying" and

“corruption.”

General Prayuth, who played an important role as a deputy commander during the 2006 coup, announced yesterday that his junta would “reform the political structure, the economy and society.” While he released no details, this program will undoubtedly include drastic attacks on living standards, in line with demands from local and foreign investors to impose the burden of the country’s severe economic crisis on working people.

Data released on Monday showed that the economy contracted sharply in the first quarter and is expected to slide into recession. According to the *Bangkok Post*, business leaders, including the Federation of Thai Industries, “lauded the military action for breaking the prolonged political impasse and paving the way for the Thai economy to revive growth.” The *Wall Street Journal* noted that Fitch Ratings and the Australian-based ANZ Bank believed the military takeover would “bring stability” to the country.

US Secretary of State John Kerry issued a statement saying he was “disappointed” and that there was “no justification for this military coup.” He said it would have “negative implications” for US-Thai relations, but did not announce any immediate sanctions. State department and Pentagon spokespersons said they were “reviewing” a small amount of aid given to Thailand and its military.

No one should be taken in by these false expressions of concern. The Pentagon has not decided whether to cancel joint exercises involving the Thai and US navies in the Pacific, which began on Monday. Washington has longstanding connections with the Thai military and considers it an important ally in the encirclement and preparations for war against China.

It is inconceivable that the Thai military carried out a coup without the green light from Washington. In 2006 then-Army Chief General Sonthi Boonyaratglin informed US Ambassador Ralph Boyce more than two weeks in advance that he planned to carry out a coup, according to cables released by WikiLeaks in 2010. The US gave its tacit approval and afterwards cut a modest \$29 million worth of aid to the Thai military, and suspended joint exercises. Ties were fully restored after the military organised an election in late 2007 under a new, anti-democratic constitution.

Last month, US Assistant Secretary of State Daniel

Russel made a little-publicised visit to Bangkok, where he met Yingluck, opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva and other “leaders and stakeholders.” He did not criticise the PDRC’s campaign to overthrow the elected government, declaring that the US “is not taking any side.” The US did not condemn the Constitutional Court’s decisions to annul the February election or remove an elected prime minister.

The coup is a damning exposure of Pheu Thai and the UDD leadership, which have over the past seven months sought to suppress the rising anger of their own supporters over the anti-democratic machinations of the Bangkok elite. Right up to the last moment, they sowed the fatal illusion that the army did not want a coup and would be restrained by Washington. In doing so, they opened the door for the military coup.

As the Red Shirt rally site was surrounded by soldiers on Tuesday, the UDD and Pheu Thai accepted the imposition of martial law, denied that it amounted to a coup, and urged their supporters to cooperate with the army. On Wednesday, leading UDD member Thida Thavornseth praised the army-led “crisis talks.” She told Agence France-Presse: “The atmosphere at the meeting was good. At least we had a chance to talk to each other.”

Pheu Thai is a big business party which is far more afraid of an independent uprising of the working class and rural masses than of a military coup. It repeatedly tried to convince big business and the army to support its re-election as the best means to impose austerity and suppress opposition.



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