

Thai Government imposes State of Emergency

By [Peter Symonds](#)

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Amid continuing anti-government protests, the Thai government has imposed a state of emergency on Bangkok and surrounding provinces in a bid to ensure national elections scheduled for February 2 proceed. The emergency, which begins today, lasts for 60 days and gives security officials sweeping powers to impose curfews, ban political gatherings of more than five people, censor the media and detain suspects without charge.

The protest organisation, People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), and the opposition Democrat Party have opposed the election and are demanding the installation of an unelected "people's council" to rule the country. The PDRC is calling for "reforms" to ensure that the ruling Puea Thai party, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, are excluded from power.

The PDRC, which has staged months of protests, launched new demonstrations this week designed to "shut down" Bangkok by seizing control of key road intersections and blockading major government buildings. Far from being an exercise in "people's power," the protests are aimed at creating the pretext for the army to seize control in a re-run of the military coup that ousted Thaksin in 2006.

Over the past five days, a series of bombings and shootings directed at the protests have killed one person and injured another 70. While the PDRC blames the government, it is more likely that elements of the opposition or its military supporters staged the incidents as an excuse for the security forces to intervene. During the past week, the army has boosted its presence in Bangkok.

The bulk of the protesters are drawn from the Bangkok middle classes and from Democrat strongholds in the country's south. The PDRC and the Democrats are functioning as a front for the country's traditional elites—the monarchy, the military and state bureaucracy—that are bitterly hostile to Thaksin, a telecom billionaire and right-wing populist.

In office from 2001 to 2006, Thaksin further opened up the country to foreign investors and built a base of support among the urban and rural poor, particularly in the north, through limited social reforms, including low-cost health care. His policies increasingly cut across the interests of the Bangkok elites and the established systems of patronage. Thaksin was just as ruthless as his rivals in suppressing opposition and trampling on basic democratic rights, including an anti-drugs campaign involving the extra-judicial killings of hundreds of alleged drug dealers.

Yingluck's government has imposed the state of emergency, but it is unclear whether it will be able to enforce any of its measures. The military made no comment yesterday on the announcement. Army chief Prayuth Chan-Ocha appealed again for restraint from protesters

and security officials. While publicly posturing as “neutral” in the confrontation, the military top brass is sympathetic to the opposition.

The PRDC and Democrats have repeatedly refused government offers of negotiations, ensuring that the political crisis continues and deepens. PRDC leader Suthep Thaugsuban, former Democrat deputy leader, declared that the protests would continue despite the emergency. “If they come to disperse us, we will sit down and pray,” he said. “If they storm in, we will retreat orderly without any panic.”

The government is tentatively moving to implement the emergency. Yingluck told reporters yesterday that the government would focus on using the police force, which is regarded as more sympathetic to Puea Thai. Labour Minister Chalerm Yubamrung, who is in charge of enforcing the state of emergency, claimed the government would not use force. “We have no policy to disperse them [the protests] and we haven’t announced a curfew yet,” he said.

The government is under siege on other fronts. Even if the election takes place, its constitutionality is in doubt as protests in the south of the country prevented the registration of candidates. The unfilled seats ensure that the election result cannot deliver the minimum of 95 percent of seats needed to convene parliament.

Puea Thai is also facing opposition and protests from farmers who have not received payment for their crops under the government’s price subsidy scheme. Falling international prices have meant that the government has been unable to sell its huge stockpiles of rice. The PRDC, the Democrats and sections of business have condemned the scheme as “corrupt.” Last week, the country’s National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) announced an investigation into whether Yingluck neglected her duty by failing to prevent financial losses—another potential legal lever for her removal.

In a further challenge to the government, the NACC announced two weeks ago that it would press charges against 308 lawmakers, including 223 from Puea Thai, who it claimed acted illegally by supporting a bill that would have made the Senate, parliament’s upper house, an all-elected body. In November the Constitutional Court struck down the proposed amendment.

The worsening political confrontation has raised concerns in business circles over the economic impact. The Thai Finance Ministry has warned that economic growth could fall as low as 3 percent if the unrest continues—compared to 6.4 percent in 2012. Toyota, the largest auto maker in Thailand, indicated this week that it might reconsider plans to invest \$600 million to expand manufacturing. Thailand is the largest auto producer in South East Asia and the world’s ninth largest.

While the political crisis is compounding the country’s economic woes, the sharp downturn over the past year is the product of the deepening global slump, which is hitting export-dependent countries like Thailand hard. The economic slowdown is a major factor fuelling the acrimonious factional infighting in Thai ruling circles that has all but ended the unsteady truce that allowed the 2011 election to take place.

Neither the pro- nor anti-Thaksin factions represent the interests of the working class and urban and rural poor. Both sides agree that working people must bear the burden of the worsening economic crisis and would rapidly come together to suppress any independent movement of workers and the poor fighting for their class interests.

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