



Thai Elites, Military Play a Dangerous Game

Settling in for political stalemate

By Hunter Marston

Thai military during the coup in May 2014. Photo from Wikimedia → (through user Takeaway)

The impeachment of former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra signals a troubling new phase in Thailand's political stalemate. After two weeks of rushed hearings before a military-appointed legislature, the National Assembly on January 23 voted 190-18 to impeach the deposed Yingluck.

This time, however, the royalist elite, represented by the Yellow Shirts – the People's Alliance for Democracy and the military, may have gone too far in order to guarantee the rural Red Shirts and backers of the Shinawatra dynasty never hold power again. During the Red Shirts to give up their demands for political representation in the form of a Pheu Thai majority is a dangerous calculus. Prayuth may be ushering in his own downfall, or worse, triggering violent unrest in the streets and potentially massive bloodletting.

While opponents of the Shinawatra clan might perceive the impeachment decision as a victory, Yingluck's ouster does not bode well for long-term stability in Thailand. In fact, the forced suppression of Pheu Thai and Red Shirts-affiliated parties, which have won clear majorities in every election since 2001, may lead to further political unrest.

Essentially banning the Pheu Thai party from politics will not silence the popular will for greater political participation forever. The regime of Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, who assumed power as prime minister in August 2014 following a military coup in May, is merely delaying a final political reckoning with the opposition. In the event of an eventual return to elections, the Yellow Shirts and their political party the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) will still lack a majority consensus to govern.

Yingluck's brother Thaksin Shinawatra, who came to power as prime minister in 2001 with his Thai Rak Thai party, was overthrown by a military coup in 2006 and has since resided in Dubai to avoid corruption charges that have dogged him since 2008. Yet, despite his self-imposed exile, Thaksin continues to exercise influence from afar despite having gone quiet in the wake of the coup. His sister's Pheu Thai party, with his backing and that of his massive following in the Red Shirts, won elections in 2011. Yingluck largely continued his populist policies widely favored by the rural north. Unsurprisingly, the political establishment and military-royal elite impeached her over similar corruption charges tied to a rice subsidy plan, accused of massive fraud and economic mismanagement. With the Shinawatra political machine temporarily derailed, the military has centralized power, stripped the National Assembly of any real independent authority, and deliberately postponed elections, most likely until at least 2016.

In the absence of credible elections, the two factions may find each other once again doing battle in the streets. Thailand has a long history of domestic turmoil followed by military coups and royal intervention and has been unable to escape a vicious cycle of all-out urban warfare in this century, with one side deposing the other in quick succession.

Add to this political stalemate the much-anticipated royal transition following King Bhumibol Adulyadej's imminent passing (the king is 87 and reputedly ailing), and the sum is a national political catastrophe in the making. The palace may be quietly engineering a formula for royal succession behind the scenes, but the political reality of the subject is so little discussed among the Thai public except in fearful whispers due to harsh lèse-majesté laws. Any discussion of the Thai monarchy by journalists or academics can lead to imprisonment, intimidation, or the threat of force.

What will come to pass in Thailand in the next year remains a subject of great speculation. However, one thing is certain: the military-royalist elite's policy of silencing the opposition will only lead to further violence and popular uprisings. As a first step in Thailand's quest to find its national identity in a post-Bhumibol, post-Thaksin era, Thai leaders would do well to start thinking more pragmatically about solutions for political power-sharing.



Hunter Marston is an independent Southeast Asia analyst.

He holds an MA in Southeast Asia Studies from the University of Washington, and has spent a significant amount of time living and working in Thailand.