

Another reluctant coup hits Thailand



Behind The Headlines by Bunn Nagara

Within days, Bangkok moved from a troubled democracy to martial law to a coup under an army junta without a single shot fired.

LAST Tuesday the Thai military declared martial law, apparently before consulting the government.

Cynics saw a coup in the making, or at least an impending variation of yet another coup in the country's endless political manoeuvring.

However, army chief Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha declared that martial law was meant only to keep warring protest groups at bay, while giving rival political camps more time and space to reach an agreement.

The government of Acting Caretaker Prime Minister Niwuttamrong Boonsongpaisan was still in place. The Constitution was still in operation.

On Wednesday, Prayuth called a two-day reconciliatory meeting at Bangkok's Royal Army Club to try and defuse soaring tension and get the bitterly divided groups to settle their differences.

Niwuttamrong stayed away, implying that as Prime Minister it was beneath him to comply with an army command. Such an attitude seldom goes down well with the army in anxiety mode.

Niwuttamrong was absent again on Thursday, with neither a political agreement nor any sign of compromise between the besieged government and massed protesters on the streets.

At 4.30pm, Prayuth announced a coup as army units moved fully into place. Suddenly Niwuttamrong's whereabouts were unknown, believed to have ducked out of sight.

Leaders of both the main governing Pheu Thai party and the opposition Democrat party were detained. So were protest leaders from both the anti-government People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) and the pro-government United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD).

Meetings of more than five people were banned. All radio and television stations were ordered to suspend regular programming and broadcast only army material.

The Constitution was suspended. A 10pm to 5am curfew was imposed nationwide.

Ministers of the now effectively defunct Cabinet were ordered to report to the National Peace-Keeping Committee by the end of the day.

Evidently the response was poor, so they were summoned again on Friday. Former premier Yingluck Shinawatra and 22 of her close associates were also called to attend a meeting at an army base.

Criticisms of the coup flowed in from abroad: the UN, US, EU, Japan and Australia expressed concern and demanded an immediate release of political detainees with a return to civilian rule.



Public defiance: Thai pro-democracy activists holding up protest messages during a demonstration against the army coup near the Democracy Monument in Bangkok. — EPA

At ground level, opinions remain mixed. Ordinary Thais are either upset, jubilant or just indifferent.

Has the army learned nothing since the last coup in 2006? Is Thai politics back to the bad old days when its under-nourished democracy succumbed again to a military junta?

Unlike the 2006 coup, this one was not aimed at ousting a government leader. Thaksin's divisive tenure then had precipitated massive street demonstrations that eventually triggered the coup.

But like the 2006 coup, this one is another army attempt to wipe the slate clean for civilian politicians to make a fresh start. Unlike other coups elsewhere, or in Thailand before 2006, it is not for the army chief to ensconce himself in power.

However, the rebuke from abroad is that a coup is no way to settle internal problems. Still, many critics forget that "reluctant" army coups are to every party an acceptable form of intervention in Thai political culture.

The rejection comes only when a particular constituency or party sees itself disadvantaged by a coup. But such partisanship aside, army coups have become a de facto part of Thailand's political process.

Coups designed to be anti-democratic just to depose a civilian leader for a politically ambitious general to gain unelected power is something else again.

But Thailand's two latest coups were initiated reluctantly, in hopes that in the intervening period fiery civilian leaders may cool off and be mature enough to return the country to governability.

In 2006, Thaksin's premiership had stoked the fires of controversy through his violent and deadly anti-banditry and "war on drugs" campaigns. Scandals over corrupt business deals and abuses of power also raged.

A massive anti-Thaksin movement centred in Bangkok emerged and threatened to grow indefinitely until it engulfed the capital, paralysing the country. When Thaksin was at a UN meeting in New York, the army struck.

That coup attempted to return the country to a semblance of normalcy, and thus came to be regarded as people-friendly. Practically everyone other than diehard Thaksin supporters rejoiced, with even veteran democrats finding difficulty in condemning it.

The seeds of the latest coup were planted late last year by Thaksin and his sister Yingluck when they plotted to enable his return from self-exile abroad. A controversial amnesty Bill was intended to exempt him from serving his two-year prison sentence.

As protests against the Shinawatra political clan mounted, Prime Minister Yingluck tried to reinvigorate her government by calling an election in early February. Thaksin's political parties have won every election they contested through what critics and opponents call money politics.

Faced with the prospect of another election loss, the PDRC staged demonstrations to block voting and even the registration of candidates. Although voting proceeded in most constituencies, it fell below 95% so the Elections Commission invalidated the election altogether.

Yingluck as Caretaker Prime Minister then planned another election that seemed potentially less controversial. However, PDRC protests again threatened to torpedo the new election and an abuse of power case resulted in Yingluck's dismissal by the Constitution Court.

Enter her Pheu Thai party colleague Niwuttamrong as Prime Minister. The PDRC hoped her entire government would be dismissed, but only a part of her administration was penalised.

The PDRC next pressured the Senate to convene a completely new government to introduce several vaguely defined reforms before calling fresh elections. The protest movement had previously wanted the army to declare a coup prior to forming a new government, but Prayuth was unmoved.

All of the country's institutions – the Senate, Parliament, the Elections Commission, the Constitution Court – said they were not empowered to summarily form a new government. None of that impressed the PDRC, which surrounded Government House and occupied several government premises.

The protesters also wanted the palace to intervene by setting up an interim administration, despite constitutional monarch King Bhumibol Adulyadej having previously chastised such expectations.

Prayuth repeatedly appealed to both pro- and anti-government groups to find some common ground, but in vain. He even tried to play moderator in neutral venues, with one meeting seeing the generals replacing their uniforms with business suits.

No political group was ready to compromise or even be seen to give any ground. Prayuth's assurances that there would be no coup soon came under strain.

Then the tanks started rolling on Bangkok's streets. Leaders of the Democrat party and the PDRC are thrilled, as are some Thais weary of the political stalemate and longing for some resolution.

First closure, then a new opening – maybe. How Prayuth manages the junta now is key.

Classic democrats remain averse to any coup, but worse things could have happened, as Thai watchers know only too well.

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