

# Nearing the end of the countdown

Yingluck's days as Thailand's  
prime minister could be numbered

Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra leaves the National Anti-Corruption Commission office in Nonthaburi province, on the outskirts of Bangkok on March 31. Yingluck had shown up to defend herself against charges linked to a ruinous government rice pledging scheme that could lead to her removal from office. – Reuters.

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR/ Bangkok

The names of former foreign and finance ministers are attracting the interest of the political cognoscenti in Thailand. One of them is Surin Pitsuwan, the suave foreign affairs veteran when the opposition Democrat Party was in power and, until last year, the secretary-general of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

They are on a list being circulated of possible candidates to be Thailand's next prime minister – a “neutral” and non-elected figure. That prospect looms if a political vacuum emerges at the helm of government with the possible ouster of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, enabling Article 7 of the Constitution to be invoked. Under that clause, the king can appoint a “neutral” prime minister.

That is what Suthep Thaugsuban has been agitating for since he triggered the now five-month-long street protests to overthrow Yingluck's elected administration. Suthep's would-be revolutionaries have been hostile toward holding new elections, which Yingluck offered as an olive branch after dissolving parliament in December to find a way out of the political mess.

On Saturday, Suthep declared at a park in downtown Bangkok that a “final battle” looms after Songkran, the annual water festival in mid-April.

“When that day comes, we will seize the ruling power immediately based on the constitutional provision that sovereign power belongs to the people,” he bellowed in defending his planned power grab. “We will appoint the prime minister of the people and submit the name to His Majesty to be countersigned by me.”

While it is no laughing matter, one observer quipped, “Suthep has lost it.” Such revolutionary rhetoric threatens



Anti-government protesters rally at the Royal Plaza near the Government House in Bangkok on March 29. – Reuters



Anti-government protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban (2nd R) waves to supporters as he leads thousands marching through Bangkok on March 29. – Reuters



Members of the pro-government "red shirt" group wave Thai national flags during a rally in Nakhon Pathom province on the outskirts of Bangkok, on April 5. They said they were prepared to thwart any move to dismiss Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra who faces mounting legal cases that could see her removed from office in coming weeks. – Reuters

to raise the ante in a political battle that has pit Thailand's ultra-royalist establishment figures and a large swathe of Bangkok's middle class (both of whom are for suspending elections) against the country's most powerful political clan – the Shinawatras. The latter, headed by former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Yingluck's elder brother now in exile following his ouster in a 2006 military coup, represent the pro-election camp.

This fault line, which has precipitated deep divisions and periodic spasms of political unrest since 2006, is understandable. Pro-Thaksin parties, including the Pheu Thai (For Thais) Party that Yingluck heads, have won every election since 2001.

The last triumph was at the February 2 general election, which was boycotted by the Democrats and, subsequently, annulled by the Constitutional Court in a controversial judgement in late March.

The same court holds the fate of Yingluck's future in a case involving blatant nepotism. In the dock is not only Yingluck but her first Cabinet, which assumed office in August 2011. It was during those early months in power that the Yingluck administration secured the job of national police chief for Police Gen. Prieupan Damapong, Thaksin's brother-in-law.

For that plum post to be cornered, senior civil servants had to be moved around, including Thawil Pliensri, then



An election official greets a woman in a wheelchair as she casts her ballot at a polling station in Bangkok on March 30. – Reuters

head of the powerful National Security Council.

A miffed Thawil fought back, even taking to a protest stage of the ironically named People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), the official name of Suthep's movement, to rally sympathy. In February, Thawil got his day, when a superior court ruled that he be reinstated to his former job. And this month, the Constitutional Court accepted a petition by an unelected anti-government member of the Senate, accusing Yingluck of abusing the power of her office over Thawil's transfer.

It is this case that has emboldened Suthep to raise the ante. And reactions from the government's ranks towards a court that has a record of judgements against pro-Thaksin parties suggest panic. After all, this court has already toppled two prime ministers of pro-Thaksin parties.

One of them, Samak Sundaravej, a one-time celebrity chef, was brought down by a judgement that faulted him for receiving payment for appearing on a television cooking show while serving as prime minister.

"I hope the court will act fairly in this case," Yingluck appealed this week, as the countdown continued for the 15 days, ending in late April, that the court has given her to mount her defence. But a court official has already reminded the government of the odds Yingluck faces. Her situation, he said, has some parallels with the Samak case.

More than the other legal battles Yingluck is facing, this case could be fatal, admitted a senior Pheu Thai official. No wonder the party's legal team has mounted a challenge with a post-Yingluck scenario in mind. They ask: Who has the authority to decide on a successor for Yingluck?

The Constitutional Court, one lawyer argues, has no standing to decide on the next prime minister. One of the current deputy prime ministers, not in the Cabinet when Thawil was transferred, should step into the void.

Yet, such rules may not play out. After all, recent rulings and statements by the court and so-called independent agencies, such as the elections commission and the anti-graft commission, have stood reason and the law on their heads.

# A fight for Thai democracy, **not** Thaksin

**J**atuporn Promphan is the new leader of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), the red shirt-wearing grassroots movement that has thrown its lot behind political parties close to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The stocky political activist has earned his stripes in the rough and tumble of protest culture. First, he joined thousands raging against a former military dictator in the early 1990s. Then, he rallied with other Red Shirt leaders from 2008-2010 as they took on the conservative, ultra-royalist establishment, who had toppled from power several elected, pro-Thaksin governments.

*The Edge Review's* correspondent Marwaan Macan-Markar interviewed the 48-year-old on the side-lines of his first Red Shirts rally as UDD leader. Some 50,000 UDD supporters from Bangkok and the provinces filled two

broad boulevards in western Bangkok last Saturday.

**The Edge Review: You have a reputation as a firebrand. Is UDD planning to be more hard line now that you are in charge?**

**Jatuporn:** People who are not close to me will think that way. The reason for the image that I look violent is because I never surrender. And our fight will always be within the political arena, and not on military terms.

**TER: Are you expecting a political fight after Songkran (the annual Thai water festival in mid-April)?**

**Jatuporn:** Yes, and it will be different from what it was the last time, in 2010, when we were on the streets against the then (Democrat Party-led) government. We had many emotions then. This time we have to do more,



Jatuporn Promphan (C), leaves the criminal court with a police escort in Bangkok in this July 26, 2007 picture. A Thai court charged Promphan and eight other leaders of a weekend anti-coup protest that turned violent with organising an illegal demonstration, instigating unrest and obstructing police. – Reuters

to plan our strategy. I think after April 18 onwards we may see big changes pushed through by the elites for undemocratic measures. And we are planning to resist that. It means for the Red Shirts to be ready to be on the streets for a long time.

**TER: Does that mean opposing moves for an appointed prime minister?**

**Jatuporn:** Suthep [Thaugsuban, who is leading the anti-government protests] is only a medium for the elite people. And now we hear that the new prime minister must be chosen by Suthep and the new Cabinet must be chosen by Suthep, and even the unelected body, the people's council. Actually, when they say they want reform, it is a lie. They want to take over power. And we will not allow that.

**TER: So, the violence we have seen since the protests started – over 20 dead and over 700 injured – may get worse?**

**Jatuporn:** I believe one thing: if events become undemocratic, Thai people will no longer surrender to those people using the name of a 'people's revolution' to

describe their actions. We have evaluated the situation and it could lead to a civil war. And Thailand will never be the same any longer.

**TER: Where does your latest protest fit in?**

**Jatuporn:** We want to show the elite that we will not surrender any longer. We have learnt that even though it may appear we have a government that won an election, the real power is never in our hands. This can be seen by the independent organisations trying to get rid of Prime Minister Yingluck (Shinawatra). They have rushed to go after her cases, but not done so with cases affecting the Democrat Party.

**TER: So you are not fighting because of Thaksin, which was the case when your movement began in 2008 and true in 2009 and 2010?**

**Jatuporn:** In 2008, people came out for the first time because they felt Thaksin was unfairly ousted by the 2006 coup. But this moment is different. Now we have come to the point where democratic issues are central to our movement. People know already that the fight this time is not about Thaksin.

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***Play it  
again,  
general***

***Never mind the Constitution,  
it's coup No. 19 for Thailand***



# A COUP UNMASKED

Thailand's military overthrows civilian government, takes power

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR / Bangkok

**I**t was inevitable. When Thailand's military declared martial law in the early hours of Tuesday, many said it was a coup in all but name. Now the military has obliged with a full-blown putsch. That is how events unfolded over three dramatic days, ending with the powerful army chief, Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, declaring he was the supreme leader of the country at 4.30pm on Thursday.

The surprise first act was staged by the time Thailand woke up Tuesday morning. Hours earlier, while the nation slept, Prayuth had unilaterally assumed power. The famously outspoken four-star general

appeared in uniform at 3am on a military-owned television channel to declare that he was imposing martial law.

The timing was loaded with irony. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the draconian 1914 law that Prayuth invoked to impose martial law – a relic from the time when the country was known as Siam and was ruled by an absolute monarchy.

What followed were scenes on Bangkok's streets that often unfold in the first flush of military coups – Thailand has had,

General Prayuth.



The main gate of Government House (back) in Bangkok is locked on May 22. – AFP

until now, 11 coups and seven attempted coups since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. But Prayuth insisted his actions were not a coup. Heavily armed troops and military vehicles fixed with menacing looking machine guns were visible at busy intersections by early Tuesday morning. Soldiers took on traffic duties at some points. The police had evaporated.

There was an element of suddenness in the general's actions. Throughout the day, a steady stream of official orders was issued from the commander-in-chief to justify his actions, which gave the impression that he had no

other choice. Prayuth cited the need to “maintain peace and order” after nearly seven months of political instability on the capital's streets, even defending his order for blanket media censorship, as the military occupied most of the country's television stations.

And on Wednesday, Prayuth extended his defence of his power grab, presenting himself as a political powerbroker. He summoned the key players in the country's deeply polarised political divide to a round of talks at the Army Club in northern Bangkok. That meeting achieved little on the first day, with hardly a hint of compromise from the two main camps at loggerheads.

They were the leaders of the anti-government agitators, who had been protesting for over seven months in downtown Bangkok to overthrow the elected, caretaker administration, and leaders of the pro-government protesters, the so-called Red Shirts, who had been staging rallies elsewhere, in western Bangkok.

But that was not the only hurdle in the way of Prayuth's battle plans. His authority was also called into question on Wednesday and Thursday, when another round of talks was held, by the acting caretaker Prime Minister Niwatthamrong Boonsongpaisan. Niwatthamrong refused to attend both sessions, sending instead a delegation of middle-level Cabinet ministers.

Niwatthamrong was not going to take orders from the general, said a senior Cabinet minister. A message had also been conveyed to Prayuth that the caretaker administration would not cave in to a demand the army chief made on Thursday for the caretaker premier and his entire Cabinet to resign.

Such defiance in the face of Prayuth's agenda presaged Thailand's latest coup. The site for the putsch was the Army Club, where the second day of talks had broken down in acrimony by mid-afternoon.

"Okay, if nobody wants to give away anything, I will arrest you now," thundered an irate Prayuth, according to a military insider following the bitter exchanges. Pandemonium then ensued as the military arrested the key leaders across the political divide attending the talks.

Over 20 of them, government and opposition party leaders and heads of both protest movements, including Suthep Thaugsuban,



Thai soldiers stand guard after army chief General Prayut Chan-ocha met with anti-government and pro-government leaders at the Army Club in Bangkok on May 22. Thailand's army chief announced in an address to the nation that the armed forces were seizing power after months of deadly political turmoil. – AFP

leader of the protests against the pro-Thaksin government, were placed under the custody of Maj. Gen. Apirat Kongsompong, the hawkish commander of the First Regiment, a corps of the Kings Guard that has always taken the lead role in the country's coups.

Orders then followed for the protesters at both sites to disperse. And, as night fell, there were reports of gun shots heard near the rally of the Red Shirts.

Within hours of Prayuth's power grab, the six names of the new junta members were announced. They included the heads of the air force, navy and police. Left out in the line-up were the generals who ran the ministry of defence, many of whom were close to the caretaker government's de facto leader, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who lives in self-imposed exile after being ousted from power in a September 2006 putsch.

The first actions taken by the junta – imposing sweeping censorship, announcing a nighttime curfew, and ordering the arrest of political figures – were an echo of what unfolded in 2006. The only difference, for now, is that the junta leaders have not followed their predecessors in tearing up the existing Constitution. Prayuth's strongmen have announced, instead, they are "temporarily suspending" the charter.

But little of that will help usher in peace and



Microphones of reporters working for TV stations sitting on a table ahead of a press conference by an Army spokesman following talks between Thai Army leader General Prayut Chan-ocha and representatives of warring political rivals at the Army Club in Bangkok. When Thailand's generals declared martial law to suppress months of political bloodshed one of the first casualties was freedom of information with a swift crackdown on any murmurs of dissent on television and social media. – AFP

stability, warn analysts. The coup has crossed a line for those who wanted some kind of democracy to remain in place, even after martial law took away many rights. It has exposed the powers of the country's ultra-royalist elite and establishment—of which the military remains the most powerful pillar. They have been found, once again, to be unable to compromise and negotiate along democratic lines.

“There has been a lot of talk of resistance against a coup over the past six months in the government's strongholds of the north and northeast,” says David Streckfuss, an American academic specialising in Thai politics. “There is a good chance that this coup may precipitate many forms of resistance, even from extreme elements who may take to violence.”

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This screen grab taken from footage broadcast on Thai television on May 22 shows Thailand's army chief Prayut Chan-ocha (C) announcing in a televised address to the nation that the armed forces were seizing power after months of political turmoil as Police Chief Police General Adul Saengsingkaew (L), Commander-in-Chief of Royal Thai Air Force Air Chief Marshal Prachin Chantong (2nd L), Commander-in-Chief of Royal Thai Navy Admiral Narong Pipattanasai (2nd R) and Thai Deputy Supreme Commander General Worapong Sanganetra (R) look on. – AFP



A Thai soldier holds hands with a member of the pro-government “Red Shirts” group at an encampment in Nakhon Pathom province on the outskirts of Bangkok on May 22. – Reuters

## Political crisis in Thailand

**2006**  
Sept Prime minister **Thaksin Shinawatra** ousted in a bloodless coup. More than a year of military rule follows

**2007**  
Dec Thaksin allies, The People Power Party, wins elections and forms coalition government

**2008**  
Sept State of emergency after violent clashes between pro- and anti-government "Yellow Shirt" groups

Jan-Apr PM Samak Sundaravej stripped of powers by Constitutional Court; Thaksin's brother-in-law Somchai Wongsawat takes his place

Oct Exiled Thaksin sentenced in absentia to 2 years in jail for corruption

Nov-Dec Yellow Shirts blockade Bangkok's airports. State of emergency for two weeks

**2008**  
Dec Somchai's party dissolved by Constitutional Court  
Abhisit Vejjajiva becomes premier in army-backed coalition

**2009**  
"Red Shirt" Thaksin loyalists stage major protests, state of emergency in Bangkok in April

**2010**  
Mar-May Red Shirts stage mass rallies, street clashes between protesters and troops leave more than 90 dead, protests end in military crackdown

**2011**  
Jul Thaksin allies sweep to power in elections on wave of Red Shirt support. Parliament in August elects Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra

**2012**  
Nov Clashes erupt at first major street protests against Yingluck's government

Dec Authorities announce Abhisit Vejjajiva to face murder charges linked to 2010 crackdown  
24 Red Shirt leaders go on trial for charges linked to 2010 protests

**2013**  
Oct Thousands of demonstrators join daily rallies in Bangkok to protest an amnesty bill that opponents fear would allow Thaksin to return

Nov 1 Lower house passes political amnesty bill, triggering protests, upper house later rejects it

Nov 24 Up to 180,000 people join opposition protests in Bangkok

Nov 25-27 Opposition protesters besiege ministries in a bid to topple the government

Nov 28 Yingluck survives parliamentary no-confidence vote

Nov 29-Dec 3 Protests escalate, five killed and over 200 injured

Feb 2 2014 Polls open for snap elections called by Yingluck in December. Opposition demonstrators block voting at 10,000 polling stations

May 7 Constitutional Court dismisses Yingluck and nine ministers from office for abuse of power  
Cabinet appoints new caretaker premier Niwattumrong Boonsongpaisan

May 9 Alleging that the caretaker government lacks legitimacy, anti-government protest leader Suthep Thaugsuban calls for the Senate to appoint a new prime minister

May 15 After an overnight grenade and gunfire attack at a central Bangkok protest site kills at least three people and injures about two dozen, army chief Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha says the army may intervene to restore order if the violence escalates

May 20 Gen. Prayuth declares martial law nationwide

May 22 Army stages coup

Anti-government protesters in Bangkok, Feb 19  
Photo: Pongchai Kittiwongsakul



Thai pro-government "Red Shirts" protesters at their camp site on the outskirts of Bangkok on May 22. - AFP

## Economy takes a hit

Thailand's political turmoil is wreaking greater damage on the economy than analysts had estimated, adding to fears the country is sliding into recession.

Gross domestic product (GDP) contracted 2.1 per cent in January-March from the previous quarter, when it expanded a revised 0.1 per cent, and was 0.6 per cent smaller than a year earlier, the state planning agency NESDB said.

In the first quarter, private consumption and investment growth were worse than expected, "signalling that the impact from the current political impasse on the economy may have been greater than we thought", said DBS economist

Gundy Cahyadi.

Thai consumer confidence is at a 12-year low, tourists are staying away from Bangkok and public spending has slumped. Tourism accounts for about 10 per cent of GDP and visitors dropped about five per cent in January-April from a year earlier.

Public sector investment fell 19.3 per cent in the first quarter from a year before and private investment fell 7.3 per cent, the NESDB said, with overall spending down 9.8 per cent.

Expansion in the rest of Southeast Asia highlights the political drag in Thailand; Malaysia reported annual growth of 6.1 per cent in the first quarter while Indonesia, the largest economy in front of Thailand, grew 5.2 per cent.

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**TWO-  
FACE  
RULE**

*Thai junta using threats and promise of hope to consolidate power*

**MALAYSIAN LAND RECLAMATION PLAN TROUBLES SINGAPORE**

# STARTING with a STRONG ARM

Thailand's junta consolidates its power with threats and appeals to hope

Thai soldiers take control of a street during an anti-coup protest at Victory Monument in Bangkok on May 26. Thailand's coup leader received royal endorsement to lead the politically divided kingdom on Monday and quickly issued a stark warning that he would brook no further opposition to his takeover following a weekend of angry protests. – AFP

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR / Bangkok

**T**wo faces of Thailand's junta are becoming more visible as Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, the new strongman, tightens his grip. One aims to sow fear; the other promises stability.

So far, heavily armed troops have only served a limited role as the military dictatorship reclaims the streets after seizing power on May 22. The National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), as the regime is called, has played the larger role by ominously summoning a growing list of prominent people – over 200 in the first six days following the coup – to report to the NCPO.

The country's business elite have not been spared the call to appear before the country's new leaders, which has seen political figures on both sides of the country's political divide spending as much as five days in military detention after they have handed themselves in.

Among the business leaders

summoned by the government have been Anant Asvabhokin, president and chief executive of Land & Houses, the country's largest property firm. His financial clout as a US dollar billionaire, and his history as the country's richest stock investor for seven consecutive years, clearly didn't matter to the junta.

Others summoned included Premchai Karnasuta, president of Italian-Thai Development, one of the largest construction firms, and Srettha Thavisin, president of Sansiri, a listed property developer. So too were businessmen linked to a rice-trading company facing charges of alleged corruption from the rice

subsidy scheme that was a flagship programme of the overthrown Pheu Thai (For Thais) Party government.

Why they were summoned exposes one rationale behind Prayuth's power grab. They are all linked to Thaksin Shinawatra, the former prime minister who was ousted in the previous 2006 coup. And the NCPO is going after them with the same gusto as it is going after politicians, academics, intellectuals, activists and journalists in its dual mission: purge Thaksin's influence on the body politic and silence critics of the putsch.

The scale of these purges has sent an ominous message that worse could follow. After all, former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's youngest sister who headed the elected Pheu Thai government until she was forced to step down by the country's Constitutional Court in early May, was kept incommunicado for three days at an undisclosed military camp.

## Thailand's latest Junta

Headed by General Prayut Chan-ocha

Measures:

- Former premier Yingluck Shinawatra and other government leaders detained for up to a week
- Senate disbanded, junta assumes law-making powers
- Any offence against the monarchy and national security faces prosecution in military courts
- 155 people including ex-leaders banned from leaving country
- Nationwide night-time curfew: 10pm - 5am
- Demonstrations forbidden - no more than 5 people gathering for political reasons
- TV and radio stations ordered to air only army announcements
- Junta warned it would block social media platforms that hold anti-coup contents

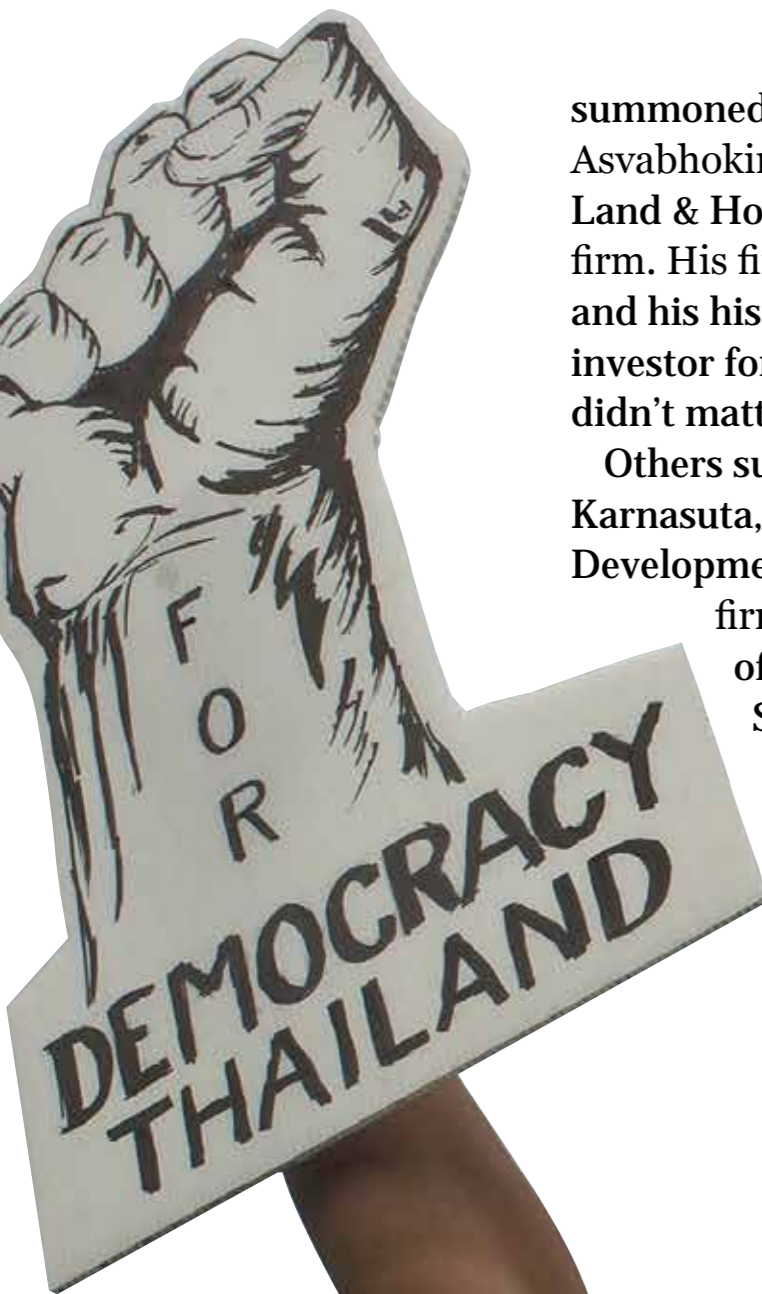


A history of coups



Sources: WB/TransparencyInternational

AFP



An anti-coup protester takes part in a gathering at the Victory Monument in Bangkok on May 27. From teachers and tour guides to financial consultants, a small band of anti-coup protesters from a spectrum of Thailand's divided society is taking to the streets to defy the kingdom's new junta. - AFP

# THAI-EU FTA IN THE CROSSHAIRS

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR

- Suddenly, Thailand's ambitions to be a commercial and manufacturing powerhouse in mainland Southeast Asia faces an uncertain journey. It is a turn that could weigh heavily on the blueprints for the ASEAN Economic Community.
- One likely barometer is the fate of the free trade agreement (FTA) between Thailand and the European Union (EU). Only three rounds of talks have been held, and a fourth, planned for April, was suspended because a caretaker government was in power and Thailand lacked a head for the negotiating team.
- The latest coup adds a new twist, applying pressure on the EU.
- Diplomatic sources say that the European governments will find it difficult to embrace the

- military dictatorship as a legitimate government and negotiating partner.
- Thai commerce ministry officials are putting on a brave face, asserting that the coup will not affect trade relations. "Only military aid" will be affected, they note, adding that the private sector's role has not been touched by the putsch.
- Bangkok's failure to make headway for a Thai-EU FTA by 2015 will be a double blow to local exporters catering to the European markets.
- The clock will run out by the end of this year on the reduced tariffs Thai exporters enjoyed under the Generalised Scheme of Privileges (GSP) agreement.
- The end of tax benefits worth US\$ 2.6 billion

under the GSP will hit canned and processed food sectors, agriculture products such as sugar and rice, and textile, electronics and computer parts factories.

- Thai shipments to the EU hit US\$20 billion last year, nearly 8.73 per cent of annual exports.
- Vietnam, of Thailand's mainland Southeast Asian neighbours, stands to profit most from the coup and its possible consequences on the Thai-EU FTA deal. It is a major competitor for agriculture products. And Hanoi has already completed six rounds of talks with Brussels.
- The impact of the coup will also weigh on Thai sectors competing with other regional neighbours for the EU market. Malaysia is in the final stretches of an FTA deal with the EU, which would give its manufacturing sector an edge over Thai companies.
- The junta's grip on power will be tested by international trade talks, observes one trade analyst, since the loss of export market share will have an impact on jobs and incomes. "Thailand could see cheaper manufacturing countries like Myanmar and Cambodia increase their market share in Europe because of pricier Thai exports," he says.

The Economy:

**GDP** contracted **2.1%** for the first three months in 2014 from the previous quarter.

**Tourism**, which contributes **9%** to the national economic output, is a big loser.

**Arrivals for conferences,**

exhibitions and business are estimated to have fallen by **8-10%** for the first three months compared with the same period last year.



A protester against military rule throws a garbage bin at soldiers during a scuffle at Victory Monument in Bangkok on May 28. There have been daily protests in Bangkok against the coup and on Wednesday about 200 people confronted troops and police at the Victory Monument. Protesters jeered and threw plastic water bottles and spray-painted "Get Out" and "No Coup" over an army Humvee. – Reuters

Since her release, she has been forced to live a life common only in a police state: she is subject to constant military surveillance, travel restrictions and is reportedly barred from speaking to the media.

"Not every coup in Thailand entailed widespread purges and severe suppression from the beginning like this one," says Thongchai Winichakul, professor of Southeast Asian history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in the United States. "This coup is similar to the more authoritarian ones from the (Cold War years) the 1958 coup and the 1976 coup."

But this coup – the 12th successful putsch out of 19 since the country became a constitutional monarchy in 1932 – is being welcomed in some economic quarters. It has ended seven months of political instability that gripped the country after anti-Thaksin agitators took to Bangkok's streets to "overthrow the Thaksin regime." The cheerleaders have ranged from Prasarn Trairatvarakul, governor of the Bank of Thailand, to the heads of the chambers of

commerce and industry.

There are some good reasons for such optimism. The uncertainty about government spending and the national budget for the 2014-2015 year has ended. And one of the junta's first economic measures, scoring brownie points with the rice farmers, the largest constituency in the country, is being hailed. An order has gone out to the Bank of Agriculture and Agriculture Cooperative to pay the tens of thousands of farmers owed 90 billion baht (close to US\$3 billion) for their recent harvest.

The junta also has the power to end the bottlenecks at the Board of Investments (BoI), where millions of dollars in new investments were frozen since the BoI lost its authority after Yingluck dissolved parliament in early December and called fresh elections in the hope of ending the street protests.

Yet policy challenges will haunt the country's new military leaders.

The most daunting: what will be the fate of the many pro-poor programmes that had been implemented by the successive pro-Thaksin governments that have won



A Thai soldier stands guard while Buddhist monks beg for alms outside a temple near Government House in Bangkok on May 23. – Reuters



Thai soldiers with roses they received from coup supporters at a military base in Bangkok on May 27. – AFP

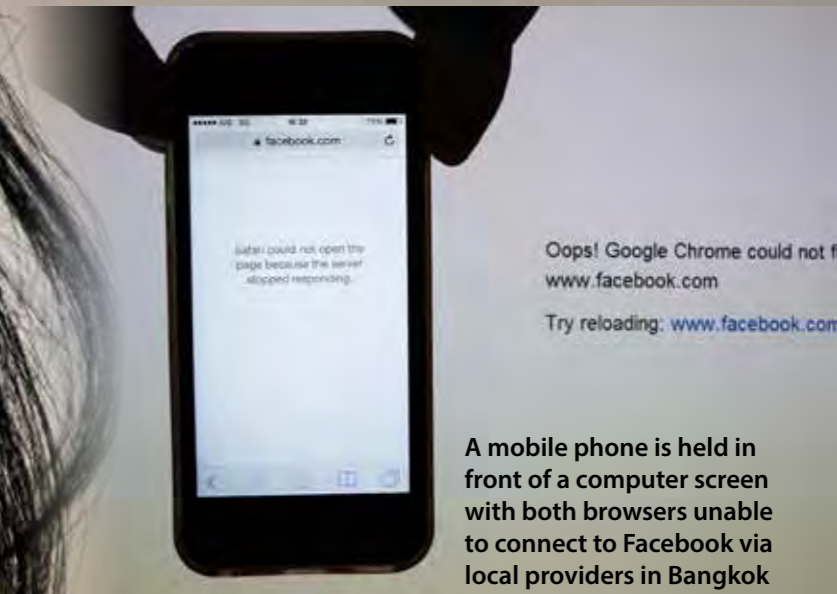
every election since 2001? To end the rice subsidy – which some technocrats at the finance ministry are toying with – could precipitate a backlash. After all, household debt in rural Thailand is a centrepiece of the country’s economic woes – national household debt stands at 77 per cent of gross domestic product.

“This coup is not the final word in Thailand,” warns a foreign financial analyst. “High income Thais in the stock market are supporting the coup and think the junta will come up with quick reforms and have a technocratic-style government like Singapore. But the foreigners are selling heavily.”

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An anti-coup protester takes part in a gathering at the Victory Monument in Bangkok on May 27. – AFP



A mobile phone is held in front of a computer screen with both browsers unable to connect to Facebook via local providers in Bangkok on May 28. Access to the site was blocked at the request of the military. – Reuters

# GRUFF AND READY: THAILAND'S STRONGMAN

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR

In taking control as the supreme leader, Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha is removing all doubt that he wears his power on his sleeve. His first press conference was an eye-opener: it was short and peppered with sharp and blunt answers to the only three questions he permitted. And even that exchange on Monday got under his skin. Two of the Thai journalists who questioned him were subsequently hauled up by a junta for embarrassing the leader.

In the week since he grabbed power, Prayuth has threatened to remain "indefinitely" as the head of the junta. Such boldness stems from the unlimited power he enjoys after tearing the Constitution, shutting down the Senate (the upper house in parliament), refusing to reveal if the country will have a prime minister and imposing martial law to gain absolute control.

He has justified his actions to end the bitter political divide that has polarised the country and restore peace and order. To back those words, heavily armed troops have been put into action to drive away the growing pockets of anti-coup protests that have erupted in Bangkok and other cities. Troops have also been stationed along the country's borders, some of which have been occasionally closed since the coup.

Military analysts are now casting Prayuth as a strongman in the mould of the junta leaders during the Cold War years, particularly Gen. Sarit Thanarat. The latter staged a coup in 1958 and remained as the strongman till his death in 1963. In the interim, he awarded himself the mantle of prime minister of the government and field marshal of the army.

The parallels emerged on the morning of May 20, when Prayuth had assumed command by invoking the 1914 martial law hours before dawn, setting the stage for the coup two days later. Sarit was the last strongman who had turned to that century old relic to seize power.

"This act has only rarely been used," says Paul Chambers, a Thai military expert at Chiang Mai University's Institute of Southeast Asian Affairs. "Of all the security acts, this one destroys the power of elected civilians most forcefully. Civilian control and democratic accountability are out of the window, so to speak."

Prayuth is a veteran of coups, having played a pivotal role leading his influential infantry regiment – the Queen's Guard – in the last putsch in 2006. The then Maj. Gen. Prayuth was the deputy commander of that regiment.

REGION

Thailand



# WHY BOTHER WITH ELECTIONS?

Thai junta takes steps to roll back elections of local officials

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR / Bangkok

**N**othing, it appears, has been left to chance in post-coup Thailand. In the military's relentless march to roll up the map of electoral politics in the country, the junta initially began by appearing to place faith in monks and magic. It was a two-step exercise aimed to "cleanse" the elected heads of local councils.

The first step was unveiled weeks after the May 22 putsch. In some north-eastern provinces, chief executives of tambon

administration organisations (TAOs), which is the name of the smaller municipalities in the totem pole of Thai local administrations, were ordered to attend government indoctrination sessions led by Buddhist monks. The intention was to lure the TAO leaders away from the idea of polls.

Then came the magic. Two weeks ago, some council heads were summoned to a public event in the north. The main feature was the release of clusters of black balloons. This was apparently an exercise in exorcism aimed at driving away “divisive electoral democracy,” the military regime declared – in all seriousness.

By August 4, these soft power exercises to undermine the role of elections as a route to political legitimacy gave way to the real thing. Two small TAOs in Chiang Mai, a northern province known as a bastion of support for the junta’s nemesis, the Shinawatra clan, became the first local bodies forced to ditch elections to fill vacancies in their administrations, since their terms had run out.



Newly appointed National Legislative Assembly members sign documents during a registration session at Parliament House in Bangkok on August 1. Thailand’s junta named a majority of active and retired members of the security forces to an interim legislature of 200 people, as it seeks to keep tight control over the body it will task with enacting sweeping reforms. – Reuters

The new councillors to fill the seats in the TAOs will now be chosen by the junta, as it stipulated in the 85th edict it issued since the putsch.

That edict is a charter for entrenching bureaucratic power. It authorises a selection committee, chaired by the provincial governor,

an appointee of the powerful interior ministry, to usurp the role of voters and do the needful. In addition, the pool of potential councillors was restricted to a small number – two-thirds have to be senior serving or retired government bureaucrats.

According to the electoral calendar,

250 village, town and city councils out of the 7,750 elected local bodies across the country will face the same fate as Chiang Mai's TAOs by the end of this year, as their terms run out. The National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), as the junta is known, wants all of them to be filled by appointees screened for their "behaviour, morality, honesty and political neutrality".

Left unsaid was the implication that the candidates will be determined by the junta and its idea of political friends and demons. The strongmen who overthrew the elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra want to destroy the dominance that her popular Pheu Thai (For Thais) Party had enjoyed among voters in the north and north-east regions.

But, in targeting the lowly elected councils that rarely figure on the national political radar, the NCPO stands exposed for laying the foundations of a highly centralised, military-dominated polity. After all, the creation of these councils in the mid-1990s became a yardstick

Thai well-wishers hold portraits of Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej while waiting for his arrival at Siriraj hospital in Bangkok on August 6. Thailand's revered but elderly King is due to return to Bangkok for the first time in just over a year for a medical check-up. – AFP



to measure the county's young democracy.

They came to symbolise the fresh wave of decentralisation and a greater voice for people through elections. The reforms, in fact, were themselves a backlash against the military-dominated "guided democracy" of strongmen and pseudo-democratic leaders of previous decades in Thailand.

"The reforms in the 1990s gave budgetary power and political power to local councils. And the rural voters got a new and diverse experience of voting and learning about democracy," notes a German academic specialising in Thailand's local governance, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisal by the government which has banned criticism of the NCPO. "But, by targeting the local councils now, the NCPO is saying it does not want politics and elections at any level."

The local councils, however, have been spared direct military domination. That has been reserved for the new, 200-member National Legislative Assembly (NLA), chosen

by Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, the NCPO strongman. Over 70 per cent of the appointees to the NLA are from the armed forces.

They include 40 of the 1,600 serving generals who warm chairs in the military bureaucracy that commands 305,806 troops. Thailand has one of the highest ratios of generals to troops in the world – one general for every 191 troops compared with the US Army's ratio of one general for every 1,764 troops.

Prayuth's choice of so many military representatives for the NLA has invited inevitable comparisons. After the 2006 coup, the army filled only 26 per cent of the seats in the military-appointed legislature.

Prayuth's parliament has also bettered the legislature of Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat, a former dictator who held the country in his grip from 1957 until his death in 1963. The army's quota in Sarit's parliament of 1959 was 55 per cent compared with Prayuth's 70 per cent.

Thailand's King Bhumibol



Thailand's Deputy National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) chief General Paiboon Koomchaya gestures in a traditional greeting during a news conference on details of the interim charter, at Government House in Bangkok on July 23. The military has ruled Thailand since a coup on May 22 and analysts have said General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who leads the ruling military council, could remain the country's leader until a general election tentatively due in the second half of 2015. – Reuters



Thai journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk flashes a V-sign as he stands with his mouth taped outside a military base in Bangkok where he had been summoned by the junta on May 25. – AFP

Adulyadej approved formation of the parliament last week. But the NLA isn't the only arena in which the military dominates. The country's 19th Constitution, also blessed by the palace in late July, includes one article among its 48 that gives Prayuth sweeping powers to override any decisions by the legislature, executive and judiciary that he finds disagreeable.

The provisions in Article Four of the new Constitution – guaranteeing human rights, freedom and equality – “sounds like a lullaby, until you reach Section 44 (which enshrines Prayuth's power),” wrote Sarinee Achavanantakul, a respected media activist, on her Facebook page. “There will be no need to file any charge against the NCPO leader in court, because everything he does will be absolutely constitutional.”

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## Gunning for Yingluck

Impeachment decision will indicate direction junta wants Thailand to take

# Moment of **TRUTH**

A looming decision by Thailand's rubber-stamp parliament over impeaching former prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra will offer clues to the junta's future plans

Ousted Thai prime minister  
Yingluck Shinawatra. – AFP

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR / Bangkok

Shortly after flying home from a recent holiday in Japan and China, Yingluck Shinawatra, Thailand's last elected prime minister, posted a picture onto Facebook. A pair of adults and a young boy posing with a cuddly panda, it evokes an innocent family vacation. Within days, it had nearly 300,000 "likes".

In post-coup Thailand, though, even holiday snaps provoke complaints. The main grumbler is Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, leader of May's military coup and self-appointed prime minister. He is pressuring local media to spike the picture, given the two adults in it: Yingluck and her elder brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, himself a former prime minister and 2006 military coup victim, who continues to live in exile.

Prayuth's prickly response is not out of step with the strongman image he tries to project, being tough on the two main political camps in this deeply polarised country. That image will be tested on November 12 as the National



This handout picture, taken on October 30 and released to AFP by the administrators of deposed Thai prime minister Yingluck Shinawatra's Facebook page, shows Yingluck (L), her brother and former premier Thaksin Shinawatra (C) and Yingluck's son (R) posing for a picture with a panda at a zoo in Chengdu in China's Sichuan province. – AFP

Legislative Assembly (NLA), until now a rubber-stamp parliament, will decide if it has the authority to accept a motion to impeach Yingluck over alleged mismanagement of an extravagant rice-subsidy programme run by her administration.

In one of his toughest threats, Prayuth has warned supporters of the Shinawatras, Thailand's most politically influential clan, and the anti-Shinawatra bandwagon who loathe them, to refrain from staging political rallies timed for the decision.

But there is more at stake. The NLA's 220 members may all be Prayuth appointees, but its vote will reveal which faction within it wields most heft. This significance is not lost on seasoned political observers, who say the case will suggest the direction the powerful military wants the country to head while the generals are in charge.

Attention will naturally fall on the 131 NLA members with military ties in the chamber. Their votes will be crucial if the Thai parliamentary tradition of 60 per cent of votes is needed – 132 in this case – for the

impeachment motion to triumph.

Already, Gen. Noppadon Intapanya, an influential NLA lawmaker, has pitched in with a point that should offer some relief to Yingluck. The NLA, he argues, lacks the authority to accept the case as it rests on a violation of the 2007

Constitution, which was ripped up after the latest coup. And the new charter – the 19th Constitution – lacks provisions for impeachment.

The question now is whether Gen. Noppadon's advice to "comply with the law," as he has been quoted as saying in the Thai press, will be

followed by other serving and retired officers in the NLA's military faction.

The case has evolved into a stark lesson in power politics that continues to threaten Thailand's stability. Trying to nail the country's first female leader is the National Anti-Corruption Commission



Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha salutes members of the Royal Thai Army after a handover ceremony for the new Royal Thai Army Chief, General Udomdej Sitabutr, at the Thai Army Headquarters in Bangkok on September 30. – Reuters

A couple with a baby enter a military vehicle as soldiers, deployed to control protesters against military rule, help them out of a protest area in Bangkok on May 26. According to a soldier at the scene, the family was helped out of the protest area where traffic was blocked. – Reuters



Yingluck Shinawatra is greeted by her supporters gathered outside the Permanent Secretary of Defence office in Bangkok in this May 7 picture. – Reuters

(NACC), a supposedly independent watchdog agency.

Weeks before the coup, it had indicted her for “dereliction of duty” in the costly rice subsidy scheme. The NACC revealed that this 689 billion baht (US\$21 billion) pro-poor initiative of the Pheu Thai party government she led was plagued with corruption.

But the anti-graft commissioners have been stumped since then over how to exact a judicial price from the Shinawatra clan. The NACC’s members appear to despise them,

and have thus exposed their bias, its critics say. First to stand in the way was the Office of the Attorney General, the public prosecutor, which in early September refused to indict Yingluck on the NACC’s charges, saying the 4,000-page dossier submitted to it lacked sufficient evidence.

A worse embarrassment followed from the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), a respected conservative think tank. A longtime and trenchant critic of the Pheu Thai rice subsidy policy, it

nevertheless distanced itself from the NACC’s use of TDRI research.

“The NACC should not refer to the TDRI’s academic work as evidence against someone because academic evidence has different characteristics from evidence in criminal or political cases under the responsibility of the NACC,” said TDRI president Somkiat Tangkitvanich.

For her part, Yingluck is fighting the NACC’s case by asking two questions: how can she be said to have violated the 2007 Constitution as it does not now exist, and, perhaps more obviously, how is impeachment

even possible given that she stepped down as prime minister before the coup and holds no public office?

The NACC is sticking to its guns as the prime mover in getting the NLA to accept the impeachment case.

Either way, the NLA’s ruling on Yingluck will pose a challenge to Prayuth’s immediate plans for Thailand.

“He believes in the need for stability, and he is trying to control the conflicting pressure groups,” says Kasit Piromya, a former foreign minister. “This way he can plot his reform agenda.”