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Author(s)	Tan, Seng Chye
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Thai Coup: Continued political divide and uncertainty

By Tan Seng Chye

Synopsis

The Thai Military's takeover of the government on 22 May afternoon following the declaration of Martial Law on 20 May 2014, is seen as a move to support the royalist elites to oust the Puea Thai government. Political divide among the Thai people has deepened and the political uncertainty will continue.

Commentary

The Thai military's takeover of the government on 22 May 2014 was foreshadowed by its declaration of martial law on 20 May.

The Thai political situation had reached a critical stage since the Constitutional Court dismissed then Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and nine Ministers from their posts on 7 May 2014. Although Puea Thai Party replaced Yingluck with her former deputy Niwattumrong Boonsongpaisan as acting caretaker Prime Minister they insisted that it remained as the caretaker government and called on the Elections Commission to hold fresh elections initially on 20 July and then 3 August. This dismissal of an elected Puea Thai Prime Minister by the Constitutional Court for the third time since 2006, created great unease among the pro-government United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UFDC) better known as the Red Shirts.

The leader of the royalist People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) Suthep Thaugsuban was determined to drive the Peau Thai Party out of office and vowed to block again any new general elections. The PDRC demanded an appointed prime minister with a new administrative committee to oversee reforms before new elections. PDRC and the Democrat Party have been pressuring the Senate President to appoint an interim prime minister but the latter refused. Similarly the Constitutional Court also refused the request on grounds of a lack of legal basis. This was further aggravated by Suthep's threat to surrender to the Centre for Administration of Peace and Order (CAPO) by 27 May 2014 if the Senate President refused his request for an appointed prime minister.

As the positions of the opposing parties were very wide apart, Suthep's threat to surrender to the CAPO together with other PDRC members, would have worried the Bangkok elites. This could have sparked the urgency for the Thai Military's declaration of Martial Law, General Prayuth's brief mediation with the opposing parties, followed by the hasty coup to oust the Peau Thai government. It reflected the anxiety of the Bangkok elites and it seems clear now that the declaration of Martial Law was just a façade and a prelude to the coup. Many Thai political analysts and researchers and the Peau Thai Party are concerned at the coup and have

reservations about the lack of legal basis for the declaration of Martial Law and the coup. The Palace has been silent so far. The coup has further divided the Thai people as most Thais do not favour a coup and they want democratic elections to elect the government.

The Thai Military has detained the leaders of the PDC and Democrat Party and the leaders of the Red Shirts who were at the mediation meeting but the Senate President and the representative of the Elections Committee were allowed to leave. The Thai Military has suspended all normal TV and Radio broadcasts except for broadcast of Thai Military releases. All protesters were ordered to disperse. Peau Thai Party leaders including caretaker Prime Minister Niwattumrong Boonsongpaisan, Yingluck Shinawatra and the caretaker ministers were asked to report to the National Peace and Order Maintaining Council today. Curfew was imposed from 10 pm to 5 am and the Martial Law has been extended to the whole country.

The Constitution has been suspended but not abolished as in previous coups. The present Constitution especially the Constitutional Court, Anti-Corruption Committee and the Elections Commission are biased against the Peau Thai Party in general elections. This does not augur well for future elections. It can be expected that the Thai Military will pressure the Senate President to submit the nomination of a prime minister to the King for endorsement. It is uncertain how this matter will develop. If a new elections is held in the future, the Peau Thai Party could still win again as it has the support of the North and Northeast regions which have some 60 to 70 percent of voters, most of them Red Shirts supporters. Thus, political uncertainty will prevail for some time to come.

Implications of Coup for Thailand

A number of countries including the UK, Singapore and Indonesia, have expressed concern about the coup. The US has criticised the Thai Military for the coup and may review its aid programme to them. The United Nations and Human Rights Watch have also expressed concern at the coup.

In recent years, the Peau Thai government has not been able to function effectively due to its preoccupation with the domestic political situation and problems and the disruptions caused by the PDC blockade of government buildings including the Prime Minister's Office. Thailand has not been able to play an effective role in ASEAN and in the region and internationally. Its economic situation has also suffered from all the media reports of political of political unrest and uncertainty especially in the areas of tourism and investments.

Thailand which has been the second largest economy in ASEAN is now on the verge of a recession when the latest economic output contracted by the larger than expected 2.1 per cent in the first quarter. Its economic growth has weakened by 0.6 percent year-on-year due to the Thai Government's inability to approve investment and the budget. In the first quarter, GDP was down 2.1%, public sector investments down 19.3 %, private sector investment down 7.3%, and hotel occupancy down 11.8%. The Thai State planning agency, the National Economic and Social Development Board, has cut its full year growth forecast to 1.5 to 2.5 percent from 3 to 4 percent.

The coup is a serious setback for Thailand. It will have a negative impact on the economy and Thailand's role in regional affairs. According to Thai and foreign political analysts, Thailand's political stability will depend on a democratically held general elections to elect the new government as any other outcome which would allow the minority Bangkok elites and middle class to dominate the political scene, will result in continuing political confrontation, unrest and uncertainty.

Tan Seng Chye is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University. He was formerly Singapore's Ambassador to Thailand.