



# Thailand's political turmoil

## A solution in sight?

At the end of May 2007, a Constitutional Tribunal judgement banning former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's populist Thai Rak Thai (TRT, Thais love Thais) party and temporarily disqualifying its key figures from political participation brought a degree of clarity to Thailand's political scene. However, no imminent end is in sight to the instability and uncertainty which have characterised Thai politics since 2005 and which precipitated the military coup of September 2006. A return to constitutional rule is key to maintaining Thailand's economic growth and probably also to finding a solution to the separatist rebellion in Thailand's Muslim-dominated southernmost provinces. However, important obstacles remain in the way of the return to democracy which is supposed to occur at the beginning of 2008.

The military junta which seized power in September justified its ouster of Thaksin's interim government shortly before a set of fresh elections scheduled for October on the grounds of his party's alleged corruption of the political process and its exploitation of social divisions for political gain. The TRT's mishandling of the southern insurgency since January 2004 provided an additional rationale for the coup. Having removed Thaksin (who went into self-imposed exile in London) and his administration, the coup-makers, led by General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, established themselves as the Council for National Security (CNS), promising to oversee the drafting of a fresh constitution and the re-establishment of democracy within a year. The junta appointed a National Legislative Assembly (NLA) as a temporary parliament, together with constitutional drafting bodies, and on 1 October announced the choice of retired army commander General Surayud Chulanont as prime minister to head an interim government. The military also set up a Constitutional Tribunal charged with investigating allegations that the TRT and other parties, notably the

opposition Democrats, had been guilty of gross malpractice in the 2006 election.

Surayud outlined an extensive agenda for the next 12 months, involving political reforms through a new constitution, efforts to reduce social and political tensions particularly in the conflict-racked south, anti-poverty policies, police and judicial reforms to strengthen the rule of law, and more effective anti-corruption agencies. However, disillusionment set in quickly as it became clear that the main beneficiary of the TRT government's ouster was likely to be the conservative Bangkok political establishment rather than the cause of democracy. During early 2007, Surayud became increasingly beleaguered as he faced criticism for his government's alleged ineffectiveness not only from the democracy movement, TRT supporters and activists supporting debt-ridden farmers (formerly the beneficiaries of the TRT's rural largesse, which the junta had withdrawn), but also from Sonthi and the CNS. In late March, Sonthi made clear his preference for emergency rule in response to swelling anti-junta protests. Responding to criticism of his government's lacklustre performance and to the military's fears that Thaksin might return, in early April Surayud revealed that investigations into the former prime minister could be concluded by the month's end. Soon afterwards, an internal leak revealed that the junta was mounting a secret public relations campaign against Thaksin aimed at discrediting him and his former policies. Amid questions over Surayud's health, continuing pressure from the democracy movement, and increasingly public disagreement between Surayud and the CNS, there was speculation that military hardliners within the CNS might stage another coup.

### Draft constitution

In any event, progress towards political normalcy will not be straightforward.

Opponents of Thailand's current military-led administration stage a protest near Bangkok's Royal Palace, 10 June 2007  
Photo © AP

On 19 April, the Constitution Drafting Council (CDC), appointed by the military, published the draft of Thailand's proposed new constitution, which included elements drawn from the post-coup interim charter as well as the 1997 constitution and other past national charters. The intention was that, after being debated by the 200-member Constitution Drafting Assembly, it should be subjected to a national referendum in September 2007. The draft charter included provisions strengthening political checks and balances by better insulating supposedly independent state organisations from government interference, and making it easier to censure the party in power. At the same time, popular political participation would be curtailed. The parliamentary lower house would be reduced from 500 to 400 seats and would include 80 'party list' members intended to enhance representation for smaller parties and to obviate the possibility of a single party dominating parliament as Thaksin's TRT had done. The senate, previously comprising 200 elected members, would be scaled down to 160 appointed members. Another provision was for a National Crisis Council, including the prime minister and senior judges, which would be convened at times of national emergency. Overall, the draft constitution encapsulated the conservative Bangkok bureaucratic establishment's aim of weakening the political parties in reaction to the perceived excesses of Thaksin's TRT. Unsurprisingly, the leaders of both main political parties, the TRT and the Democrats, roundly criticised the draft while pressure groups and academics called on fellow Thais to reject it in the referendum.

Demonstrations by monks demanding that Buddhism (the faith of 90–95% of Thais) should be enshrined in the new constitution as the national religion added a further complication for the interim administration. There were fears that such a measure could exacerbate the alienation felt by Thailand's Muslim minority, particularly in the country's south where a revival of separatist sentiment has erupted in renewed anti-Bangkok insurgency since early 2004. Critics pointed to the way that in the 1970s a similar impulse towards

Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka had stimulated the rise of Tamil separatism and terrorism. However, in early June the CDC rejected the idea of instituting a Buddhist state.

## Out of the morass?

Thailand's revered and highly influential King Bhumibol Adulyadej warned Constitutional Tribunal judges, a week before they were due to announce their verdict on 30 May, that they should issue a firm decision on the charges faced by the TRT and other political parties, explain their rationale clearly and recognise that this verdict was unlikely to satisfy all constituencies. Against a background of warnings by the CNS that it would re-impose a state of emergency if the judgement resulted in social unrest, the Tribunal ordered the TRT's dissolution and banned Thaksin together with 110 senior TRT officials from political participation for five years. But the judgement also absolved the opposition Democrat Party of all charges and was widely interpreted as a highly politicised ruling aimed at breaking the TRT's power and re-establishing a system of government based on coalitions of relatively weak parties and in which the military and monarchy would have important arbitrating roles.

While the TRT had undoubtedly been guilty of improper practices in the 2006 elections and there were clearly drawbacks to its overwhelming preponderance in parliament, with its extensive social programmes it has nevertheless remained Thailand's most popular political party. Its supporters run into the millions and are concentrated particularly in the north and northeast and among Bangkok's poor. There is every indication that in a modified form it will endure as a major political force despite its forced dissolution and the temporary disqualification of its leaders. Even after the 30 May ruling, around 250 former TRT members of parliament remained eligible for re-election. However, the banning of the TRT's leading lights from politics will leave a huge gap in the ranks of any successor party and it seems likely that some disqualified TRT parliamentarians might be represented by their wives or other family members. Indeed, despite the shadow of possible corruption and tax-evasion charges, Khunyong Pojaman Shinawatra, Thaksin's wife, is the leading contender to take the helm of a party to succeed the TRT. In early June, 60 TRT MPs from the north and northeast announced the formation of a

'Love Thaksin, No Dictatorship' group, which may form the basis for a 'new TRT' once the NLA has endorsed a bill allowing a resumption of political activity and the registration of new political parties. According to Prime Minister Surayud, this should happen in September, in theory giving political parties roughly three months in which to campaign before a general election in December. Though the Democrat Party aspires to lead the next government, it seems extremely unlikely that it could make significant inroads into the TRT's heartland constituencies.

A major reshuffle of the military leadership is due in October, with implications for the future of the CNS given that Sonthi and other senior CNS figures are due to retire then. One outcome, which could smooth the way for an elected government while maintaining military influence over the interim administration, would involve the dissolution of the CNS, with key members being co-opted into a new Cabinet. Surayud could remain prime minister, with Sonthi becoming deputy prime minister with responsibility for security and CNS Secretary-General General Winai Phattiyakul becoming defence minister. Such a government might be more sustainable and internationally acceptable in the event of a 'no' vote in the constitutional referendum and a consequent delay in the elections.

## Key challenges

However, renewed political stability and a legitimate, democratic government are vital if Bangkok is to deal effectively with major challenges facing the country. Thailand's protracted political crisis has undermined the confidence of investors and consumers, prompting Finance Minister Chalongphob Sussangkarn to admit in early May that the prevailing political uncertainty had become the biggest threat to the economy, which has also suffered from increased oil prices. The 30 May judgement banning the TRT improved market sentiment, but acceptance of a new constitution in the referendum and the formation of a stable democratic government will be necessary to restore full confidence.

A more critical immediate problem is the southern insurgency. Early hopes that the military-led administration would oversee a significantly new approach in the south were soon dashed: bombings, arson and shootings continued unabated through late 2006 and early 2007. Indeed, the conflict has escalated, with more

determined attacks on government security forces and on infrastructure. Though the junta indicated initially that it might end emergency rule, which allows draconian civil-rights restrictions in the three violence-wracked provinces, it was extended in January and again in April 2007. The 5,000 or so insurgents continue to demonstrate tactical ingenuity and the Thai police have claimed that foreign personnel, suspected to be Indonesian, may have been involved in training them. With 20–30,000 troops already in the three southernmost provinces, in late April it was reported that the government planned to deploy a further 15,000 personnel, particularly to protect lines of communication. At the same time, however, Bangkok was relying increasingly on poorly trained, locally recruited militia troops who have earned a reputation in the south for killing innocent civilians and other abuses. There seems to be a danger of more open communal conflict as tit-for-tat murders of Buddhists and Muslims become more frequent, and as communities in the worst-affected districts lose faith in the ability of Bangkok to protect them and begin arming themselves, despite the substantial security forces the government has deployed. Notwithstanding the military regime's claim to be interested in pursuing a negotiated solution, its record has not been encouraging and it may be that the conflict can only be resolved by a more broadly based government willing to explore the rebels' grievances, enter into dialogue with them and perhaps grant some form of autonomy in the south.

In late June 2007, Thailand's political future remained unclear. Though the interim government insisted that national elections would be held in December, it seemed possible that the September referendum could reject the proposed new constitution. While the junta claimed that this was unlikely, it revealed that its response to such a contingency would be to reinstate one of Thailand's many former constitutions – which one, however, remained unclear. Even if the referendum resulted in the draft constitution being accepted and the elections being held on time, how effectively the TRT could reconstitute itself in a new guise, what level of support it would receive and whether a cohesive government would result all remain imponderable. The most optimistic scenario is for a return to government by the type of unstable coalition that characterised Thai politics before the rise of Thaksin and the TRT in the late 1990s. □ IISS