Thailand: from coup to crisis

Thailand is a constitutional monarchy with a history of political instability, alternating between military rule and unstable civilian governments. The latest in a long series of military coups was in 2014. In 2019, the junta handed over power to a nominally civilian government led by former army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha. Protestors are now demanding his resignation and constitutional reforms to end the military's control of Thai politics.

1932-2014: a long history of instability

Ever since transforming from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional one in 1932, Thailand has been rocked by clashes between conservative monarchists and pro-democracy reformists. To some extent, these two groups (represented in the 2000s by the 'yellow shirts' and 'red shirts') reflect deep social divides between urban elites, and the impoverished, but increasingly politically aware rural population. Historians have described a 'vicious cycle of Thai politics', in which unstable democratically elected civilian governments alternate with military rule, installed on the pretext of restoring order. Since 1932, Thailand has been through 12 successful coups (as well as many more attempted ones) and multiple constitutions.

The roots of the latest crisis go back to the populist government of Thaksin Shinawatra, in power from 2001 to 2006. Despite being one of Thailand's wealthiest men, Thaksin's policies such as a debt relief programme for farmers and universal healthcare were targeted at the rural poor, and very popular with them. At the same time, he was a highly controversial figure, accused of corruption, tax evasion and authoritarian tendencies. Following anti-Thaksin protests and a constitutional crisis triggered by an opposition boycott of the 2006 elections, the military stepped in. After 16 months of military rule, the country adopted a new constitution. A turbulent period followed, with two elections (in 2007 and 2011) won by pro-Thaksin parties, clashes on the streets between 'red-shirt' Thaksin supporters and 'yellow shirt' opponents, political deadlock, and after an abortive election in 2014, another military coup.

2014-2020: five years of military rule, a new constitution and a nominally civilian government

Since 2014, the Thai government has been headed by former army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha, from 2014 to 2019 as head of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta, and since the 2019 elections as leader of the Palang Pracharath (People's State Power) party. The elections, held under a new constitution adopted in 2017, are designed to ensure continuing military control of Thai politics, even under a civilian government. Under this constitution, the prime minister is chosen by a combined vote of the two houses of parliament, the Senate (250 members, hand-picked by the junta before its dissolution) and the House of Representatives (500 elected members), essentially guaranteeing victory for Prayuth. The Senate also approves appointment of judges to the Constitutional Court, a body whose judgments have traditionally been heavily weighted against opponents of military rule; it has banned several pro-Thaksin parties, as well as Thaksin himself (in exile since 2006) from Thai politics.

From 2001 to 2014, Thaksin and his proxies won every single election. To prevent this from happening again in 2019, the junta offered cash handouts for the poor, had some opposition parties disbanded, and imposed restrictive rules on election campaigning. The junta-appointed election commission was accused of rigging the vote. Even so, the pro-Thaksin Pheu Thai came in first place, with 136 out of 500 seats, beating Prayuth's Palang Pracharath (97 seats). Future Forward, a new reformist opposition party founded in 2018, came third with 80 seats. In the end, Prayuth struggled to form a governing coalition, with support from some of the smaller parties, as well as the initially reluctant (conservative) Democrat Party.

2019-2020: Prayuth's government mired in crisis

Even before the coronavirus pandemic reached the country, Prayuth's government was already facing huge challenges. Once seen as a tiger economy, Thailand now lags behind its south-east Asian neighbours, with relatively sluggish growth of just 2.4 % in 2019. Household incomes have stagnated and the number of people living in poverty rose by nearly 2 million between 2015 and 2018. There are no signs of an end to a long-running insurgency in the Muslim south.

Author: Martin Russell, Members' Research Service
PE 659.330 – November 2020

Although Thailand was the first country outside China to be hit by Covid-19, it quickly stopped the spread of the disease, with just 3 700 confirmed cases and 59 deaths by October 2020. On the other hand, the economic impact of closing the country to tourism (which normally generates around 15 % of Thai gross domestic product) has been disastrous. As a result, Thailand is expected to suffer more than almost any other Asian country, with the economy forecast to shrink by 8.3 % in 2020, while the number of economically insecure Thais (i.e. those living on less than US$5.5 per day) will double to nearly 10 million.

July 2020: a wave of protests begins

Although Thaksin and his supporters are still influential, opposition to Prayuth after the 2019 elections was mostly led by the new Future Forward party, led by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, another billionaire. In February 2020, the Thai Constitutional Court dissolved the party on the grounds that it had received an illegal loan from Thanathorn. Coming on top of pre-existing resentment among those who had voted against military rule, and concerns about the dire state of the economy, this ruling triggered a grassroots protest movement. Due to lockdown restrictions, this only really got going in July, and has continued unabated since then, with tens of thousands taking to the streets of Bangkok day after day. Their demands include a new constitution and Prayuth's resignation. Most of the protestors are young people, their defiance expressed by a three-fingered salute borrowed from the Hunger Games films.

In a bid to quell the protests, the government closed down some media outlets and, on 15 October, announced a state of emergency banning gatherings of more than four people. However, the ban was ineffective, with protestors outwitting police by assembling at venues announced via social media at short notice, and it was lifted just a few days later.

The role of the monarchy

Constitutionally, the Thai monarch is an apolitical figure who avoids taking sides. Nevertheless, the monarchy and the military are closely linked. Ahead of the 2019 elections, King Maha Vajiralongkorn echoed his father's words, calling on Thais to avoid chaos by voting for 'good people' – interpreted as a veiled endorsement of Prayuth. Anti-monarchical statements have always been taboo, not least due to a draconian lèse-majesté law that makes insulting the monarchy a criminal offence. That law was suspended in June 2020; nevertheless, publicly criticising the king is still highly risky.

Whereas the former King Bhumibol Adulyadej was widely revered, his son is a far more divisive figure. Spending most of his time outside the country in a luxury German hotel, he is the richest monarch in the world with an estimated fortune of over US$40 billion, and is seen as being out of touch with the Thai people's everyday problems. Protestors are now making unprecedented demands for reforms to the monarchy, such as limiting the king's constitutional powers and reducing financial support for the crown. On 14 October, protestors heckled a motorcade carrying the Queen and her son (it was this incident that prompted the government to declare a state of emergency); two of them face possible life sentences on charges of violence against the royal family. Recalling the sometimes violent clashes between red and yellow shirts of the 2000s, there have also been counter-protests by monarchists wearing the royal yellow.

Outlook

Despite the occasional use of water cannons and the arrest of some 20 protestors, the security forces' handling of protests has been mostly restrained. This, and the lifting of the ban on protests after just one week, suggests that the government wants to avoid an escalation at all costs. The prospect of yet another military coup also seems quite distant, with Thailand's new army chief declaring that the military had no intention of intervening so long as the situation did not degenerate into violence. In August 2020, Prayuth offered to revise the constitution, but he refuses to step down, and there is very little chance of constitutional amendments substantially limiting the powers of the military. The immediate outlook therefore seems to be for stalemate, with the government hanging on despite continuing protests.

The EU and Thailand: after the 2014 military coup, the EU suspended most cooperation with Thailand. In October 2019, it decided to re-engage with the country's newly elected civilian government. The two sides are now preparing to sign a long-delayed partnership and cooperation agreement, and to resume talks on a free trade agreement. In its October 2015 resolution on Thailand, the European Parliament expressed concerns about 'the deteriorating human rights situation … following the illegal coup of May 2014'. There are no more recent statements on Thailand by either Parliament or the EU's High Representative.