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Political Stalemate in Thailand: Continued uncertainty and tension

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Synopsis

Although the general election will be held on 2 February 2014 and the Peau Thai Party is expected to win a majority, it may not be able to secure 95 percent of the Parliamentary seats for Parliament to convene. By-elections will have to be held. The differences between Peau Thai Party and PDRC protestors are great. The political stalemate, uncertainty and tension will continue.

Commentary

THE PROTESTS AGAINST Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's government, coordinated by the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) led by Suthep Thaugsuban, a former Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary General of the Democrat Party, could lead to potential confrontation and stalemate, uncertainty and political instability.

The PDRC has demanded that the government abandon the electoral system and the Prime Minister resign, to give way to a People's Council which has no electoral legitimacy. Western media described this move as the protesters demanding a suspension of democracy and to replace the Parliament with an un-elected People's Council. The PDRC's aim has been to remove the Peau Thai government led by Yingluck Shinawatra and eliminate the dominant influence of the Shinawatra family in Thai politics. The reason is that the PDRC and the Democrat Party, which have only the support of a large number of voters in Bangkok and some Southern Thai provinces, have lost all the elections held since 1992 whereas the Peau Thai Party (and Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai Party) had won all the elections since 2001.

The Peau Thai Party has the strong support of the rural voters of the North and Northeastern provinces because its policies on affordable medicare, and providing loans for education and to start businesses, met the expectations of the rural farmers and other voters. The Democrat Party has decided not to contest the 2 February election and supported the PDRC. Thus the PDRC has resorted to protests to try to change the electoral system under the 2006 Constitution to try and gain power. Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has confirmed that the general election scheduled for 2 February will proceed. Suthep Thaugsuban has responded by threatening that the PDRC will "close every route" to the polling stations. This has raised fears of further violence.

The issue that sparked the PDRC protests

The PDRC protests were sparked by the passage of a blanket amnesty bill by the House of Representatives in October 2012, which would have erased Thaksin's 2008 abuse of power conviction, as well as absolved former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his deputy Suthep Thaugsuban for ordering the 2010 military crackdown on the pro-Thaksin Red Shirt supporters in Bangkok that killed more than 90 people and the army officers who implemented the order. In retrospect, this bill was considered politically ill-timed and has allowed an opportunity for Thaksin's opponents including the Bangkok elites and middle class, to protest against the Yingluck government. Some Red Shirt supporters also opposed the bill as their comrades had died.

Although the Yingluck government tried to withdraw the bill, it was too late as even before the Senate rejected the bill on 11 November 2013, the PDRC has organised protests to focus on ousting the Yingluck government. When the Democrat Party MPs resigned enmasse to join the PDRC protests, Prime Minister Yingluck dissolved Parliament on 9 December 2013 to hold the general election on 2 February 2014 which was endorsed by Royal Decree.

PDRC campaign against the Yingluck government

The PDRC comprises a mix of royalists, students, some civil servants, the urban elites and middle class, supporters of the Democratic Party in Bangkok and in the Southern provinces. A Buddhist monk Luang Phu Buddha Issara has in recent days emerged as a key figure in the anti-government movement. The PDRC is actually a minority group but it has been defiant in demanding and pressuring the elected Prime Minister Yingluck and her government to abandon the electoral system and to resign, so as to give way to an un-elected People's Council which has no electoral legitimacy. The PDRC also tried to derail the general election scheduled for 2 February 2014, even though it was endorsed by Royal Decree. The election has to be held not earlier than 45 days but not more than 60 days from the date of dissolution of the House of Representatives.

The PDRC has continued to hold protests and blocked key Bangkok intersections and certain government buildings and agencies despite the announcement of a State of Emergency which came into effect on 22 January 2014, effective for 60 days. The State of Emergency does not allow any public assembly larger than five persons but the PDRC has been defying this order. Prime Minister Yingluck instructed the Police not to use force as the PDRC may be trying to create a situation of chaos and bloodshed in which the Thai Military may be forced to intervene. But so far, the Military has showed no interest to intervene though it has not excluded the possibility of intervening or conducting a coup if the situation becomes so chaotic and seriously threatens stability.

Although the Constitutional Court and the Election Commission have attempted to postpone the general election, Prime Minister Yingluck has decided to proceed with the general election after a meeting with the Election Commission on 28 January 2014. The election is expected to return the Peau Thai Party with a strong majority with the support of the rural provinces of North and North Eastern Thailand. However, the Peau Thai Party may not have the required 95 percent of elected MPs in the 500 member House of Representatives to enable the convening of the Parliament as required by the 2007 Constitution. This situation has arisen as the PDRC supporters had blocked the registration of candidates for the general election especially in the Southern Thai provinces. The PDRC supporters have blocked voters who turned up on the 25-26 January weekend for advanced voting especially in Bangkok.

The way forward and prospects

The political situation is presently uncertain and the potential for confrontation between the Peau Thai Party supporters and the PDRC could lead to violence. A stalemate prevails as both sides are sticking to their positions. Potential for violence exists if the PDRC continues to disrupt the election. Although the Peau Thais is expected to win a majority in the elections, Parliament may not be able to convene as the Peau Thai may not have 95 percent of the elected members due to its candidates' inability to contest in certain areas especially in the Southern Thai provinces. By-elections will be need to be held. The Peau Thai Party has to gain some of the remaining seats to make up 95 percent of the seats in Parliament before it can convene.

Although the electoral process is a democratic way to resolve the crisis the PDRC including the Democrat Party, will not accept the electoral process under the existing Constitution (2007). The Constitutional Court and the Election Commission appeared to be not neutral and have tended to favour the PDRC and has even tried to postpone the 2 February general elections. On 7 January 2014, the National Anti-Corruption Commission has pressed misconduct charges against 308 mainly Peau Thai MPs who supported an amendment to create an all elected Senate which is now partially appointed. Many of these Peau Thai Party candidates for the forthcoming election may be disqualified if they are impeached by the Senate. This will be another potential problem for the Peau Thai Party.

In the prevailing situation, the uncertainty and political stalemate will continue. Such a situation could adversely

affect the Thai economy and the tourism industry as more than 45 countries have issued travel advisories to their citizens and some airlines have cancelled some flights to Bangkok.

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