Doug Bandow: Thailand's reverse revolution

By Doug Bandow

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Thailand continues its slow-motion political implosion. The prime minister has been ousted, and a new election scheduled July 20, but the latter will settle nothing unless traditional ruling elites are willing to accept a government run by their opponents. If not, the country risks a violent explosion.

Bangkok's politics long leaned authoritarian. However, in 2001 telecommunications executive Thaksin Shinawatra campaigned as a populist, winning the votes of Thailand's neglected rural poor to become prime minister. He was reelected in 2005.

Instead of figuring out how to better appeal to the popular majority, his opponents organized the so-called People's Alliance for Democracy which launched protests to topple his government. The military ousted the traveling Thaksin in 2006 and tried him in absentia for alleged corruption. The generals then rewrote the constitution and called new elections.

However, Thaksin's successor party won a plurality and dominated the resulting coalition. Thaksin's opponents then launched a wave of demonstrations, besieging parliament and closing the airport. The security agencies refused to defend the government and the courts ousted the prime minister on dubious grounds.

When so-called Red Shirt Thaksin supporters flooded into Bangkok to protest the de facto coup, Democrat Party Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's government, backed by the military, killed scores and injured thousands of demonstrators, and imprisoned numerous opposition leaders.

Then Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, and her Pheu Thai party won an absolute majority in the 2011 election. So PAD morphed into the People's Democratic Reform Committee, led by former DP deputy prime minister Suthep Thaugsuban, one of those responsible for the 2010 killings. Channeling Benito Mussolini and his infamous Black Shirts, Suthep organized mobs to drive her from office and called on the military to stage a coup.

In response Prime Minister Yingluck called new elections, angering the opposition, which knew it would lose. Suthep turned his mobs loose, blocking many Thais from voting in February. His attacks left enough constituencies unfilled to prevent the new parliament from taking office.

Then in March the opposition-controlled Constitutional Court invalidated the entire election because its opponents had prevented Thais from voting. Yingluck remained caretaker prime minister with only limited power to govern. Now the Constitutional Court has ousted her over the attempted reassignment of a government official. Suthep and his allies hope to use this ruling to install a compliant unelected prime minister.

But leaders of the United Front for Democracy, or so-called Red Shirts, promised to respond violently to any judicial coup. In the past, the widely respected king was able to transcend party factions, but he is aged and largely disengaged while other members of the court back Suthep.

Thaksin has been justifiably criticized, but his opponents generate more heat than light. For instance, his corruption conviction, in absentia by a compliant court under a military regime, proves little.

One can criticize Thaksin's populist approach, but political parties around the world commonly follow a similar election strategy. Perhaps his worst offense was attempting to bloodily suppress the drug trade. Similarly, Yingluck's expensive rice support program may be unwise – it has well-nigh bankrupted the government – but also is not corrupt in any classic sense.

Suthep denounced Yingluck as a tool of her brother, but many Thais supported her because they believe she represents his views. Ultimately, Suthep and his supporters are most interested in gaining power for themselves.

Putative authoritarians like Suthep most risk plunging Thai society into violence. Establishment elites must pull their country back from the brink.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author and editor of several books, including "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire."