The Battle to Define Thai Democracy
Putting the ‘People’s Council’ Proposal into Context
By Pasuk Phongpaichit & Chris Baker

From October last year, Bangkok has been roiled by sometimes violent street protests calling for the ouster of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra’s government. In recent weeks the protests have died down, but what hasn’t disappeared, is a long-running dispute over how the country should be governed, and by whom.

Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker examine the background behind the surprising proposal that emerged from the anti-government camp during the recent cycle of protests.

ON DEC. 17, 2013, leaders of the anti-government protests on the streets of Bangkok proposed that the government step down and hand over power to a “People’s Council,” constituted by the People Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), the self-appointed body overseeing the protests. This council would run the government and oversee a reform of the political system before new elections at an unspecified date.

The proposal was quite startling. The organizers claimed 3.5 million had joined the protest rallies, although independent estimates based on drone-carried photography reckoned several hundred thousand, still a massive turnout. The leaders dubbed their movement the muang maha prachachon, the “great mass of the people,” claiming to speak for “the people.” The proposal for a People’s council followed from this claim.

The proposal prompted a lukewarm reaction. The Bangkok press, which had generally been strongly supportive of the protests, was gently dismissive. In retrospect, this proposal was one of several strategic mistakes that resulted in support for the protests dwindling from a high point in November-December 2013 until the movement was effectively abandoned in early March 2014, without achieving the overthrow of the government, the creation of the People’s Council, or any other goals.

The protests had exploded in October 2013 after the government clumsily attempted to pass an amnesty bill that would have enabled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, ousted by coup in 2006 and self-exiled since 2008, to escape a conviction for abuse of power, return to Thailand, and possibly reclaim assets impounded by the courts. The protests mushroomed rather spontaneously, with minimal co-ordination through social media, attracting mainly white-collar workers and businesspeople. This was essentially a protest against the return of Thaksin.

After the amnesty bill was killed, opponents of the government tried to redirect the protest towards overthrowing the government headed by Thaksin’s sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. These opponents included the opposition Democrat Party as well as remnants of the so-called Yellow Shirts who had mounted earlier street protests against pro-Thaksin governments. Since 2006, three governments have been overthrown and the results of three elections have been set aside through interventions by the military and the courts, cheered on by the Democrats and the Yellow Shirts.

Suthep Thaugsuban, a former secretary-general of the Democrat Party and deputy prime minister, resigned from the party and parliament to lead the protests. The PDRC leaders claimed the Yingluck government had lost its legitimacy through the amnesty bill debacle. They appealed for use of a constitutional provision enabling the monarchy to replace the government, and directly petitioned the military high command to carry out a coup. The palace kept silent. The army chief said no. These responses left the protesters with no mechanism to remove the government. The proposal for a People’s Council appeared in that context.

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December and set new elections for Feb. 2, the PDRC demanded “reform before election.” In this context, “reform” meant measures to constrain the power of an elected government. The protesters want some mechanism for “independent” people, rather than “politicians,” to design such measures.

The PDRC leaders argued that government backed by an election majority could practice “parliamentary dictatorship,” ignoring criticism and overriding checks and balances. The amnesty bill was a perfect example, and the Yingluck government had provided several others. Methods were needed to check the abuse of power and protect minority interests. In essence, this is a debate over the practice of electoral democracy that has appeared all over the world in recent years.

But in Thailand, it came with an extra dimension. Since 2001, pro-Thaksin parties have won four election victories by large margins by responding to a demand for political inclusion coming from the provincial and largely rural areas in Thailand’s northeast and upper north. Thaksin’s opponents argue that these election victories were secured by money, either through vote buying or populist policies such as farm-price subsidies, and hence the governments have no proper legitimacy.

Through this sequence of Thaksinite election victories, the Bangkok middle class has grown steadily more nervous about its weight in the politics of electoral democracy. Roughly half the total population lives in the Thaksinite strongholds of the northeast and upper north, and only a fifth in the capital. The Democrats, the favored party of Bangkok voters, have not won an election outright in over 20 years, and trailed the Thaksinite Pheu Thai Party by 159 to 265 at the latest poll in 2011. The Bangkok middle class complains about “their taxes” being used on “populist” schemes such as farm subsidies, and worries about a broader shift in resource allocation away from the capital to the provinces.

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The judiciary will probably bring down the Yingluck government. The protesters hope that the judges and military will then install an “independent” interim government to run the country and carry out “reform,” but this would provoke opposition from the Thaksinite heartland. More likely is a short-term interim administration that carries out some quick reforms before a new election. These reforms might include strengthening the upper house, improving mechanisms for budget oversight, and re-engineering the election system to return to the multi-party pattern prior to 2001.

The People’s Council proposal is part of a debate over tuning Thailand’s political system to match the changed distribution of social and economic power following a generation of rapid growth. Although this debate is being conducted through street rallies, with plenty of space for extremist views, underneath there is a process of dialogue and compromise.