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# THE CONVERSATION

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## Two-step coup leader may have dangerously misjudged Thais

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Protesters are defying the military's ban on gatherings to demonstrate in Bangkok against the coup. EPA/Narong Sangnak

Thailand's army commander, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, took his unilateral declaration of martial law one step further on May 22, grabbing power for a military junta. The two-step coup caught some observers by surprise. They felt that the military would not intervene again because it had learned, following the 2006 coup, that governing a large, modern and open country was simply too difficult.

There's something in this, for the notoriously short-fused Prayuth says he had thought long and hard about a coup for three years before Thursday's two-step. Yet Prayuth learnt other lessons as well.

Initially, the 2006 putsch was widely accepted as a "good coup". There was little organised

opposition and international pressure was tepid, merely urging a clear timetable for re-establishing civilian government and a return to electoral politics. But things went awry.

The junta's appointed civilian government, with palace insider and former army commander Surayud Chulanont as prime minister, was ineffective. Aged former technocrats and persons selected for loyalty rather than capacity made for a somnolent interim government.

The Surayud government's major efforts were the writing of new political rules and a new constitution, all designed to keep Thaksin Shinawatra's parties out of power. It also established politicised bodies to investigate Thaksin, allowing the judiciary to dissolve his Thai Rak Thai Party and ban its leading politicians.

In 2006, the military detained some Thaksin ministers, but released them reasonably quickly. When it adopted heavier-handed repression and ultra-royalist propaganda, this seemed to increase opposition, and the military soon wound it back.

Radical Thaksin opponents were aghast that the junta wasn't tougher. When pro-Thaksin parties triumphed in the 2007 election, these opponents blamed the junta's "timidity" and criticised its failure to dismantle the "Thaksin regime". This refrain was again heard during this year's anti-government demonstrations.

## Army approach has hardened

Prayuth appears to have observed these failures and decided that the military boot had to be larger and heavier. A first indication of this came in 2010 when Prayuth displayed considerable ruthlessness in operations against red shirt demonstrators. Almost 100 died and thousands were injured in those brutal days. Prayuth's troops used snipers, live fire zones and shot medics and journalists.

When promoted to army commander in 2010, Prayuth demonstrated more military toughness, confronting red shirts, directing lese majeste charges at them and demanding that electors reject pro-Thaksin parties in the 2011 election. He sulked when Yingluck Shinawatra won that election and continued to spar with red shirts and those he considered anti-monarchy. He allowed the Yingluck government little political space, with destabilising coup rumours circulating on a weekly basis.

When royalist demonstrators took to the streets to bring down Yingluck and eliminate the "Thaksin regime", Prayuth protected them, sending troops to guard protest camps and defended their "democratic right" to occupy government offices. He tolerated serving members of the military working under cover with the protesters. The demonstrators repeatedly pleaded with Prayuth to launch a coup and when he finally did, they cheered this as a victory.

Prayuth's toughness is also on display as he steers the junta. His initial feint – declaring martial law – lasted barely 48 hours. That was proclaimed as finding a way out of the political stalemate through negotiations. But Prayuth's patience ran out when the interim government, still pushing for an election, refused to resign. Prayuth detained all the negotiators he'd brought together, soon releasing many of those supportive of the coup.

With a swiftness not seen in 2006, Prayuth has rounded up politicians and activists and detained about two-thirds of them, mostly from the pro-Thaksin side. He called in several of the Shinawatra clan and has them in custody. For a few days Yingluck, deposed as prime minister by the Constitutional Court just a couple of weeks ago, was also detained. Those who refused to report to the junta have gone into hiding.

Ominously, the junta blacked out all television and thousands of radio stations and warned social media users to "be careful". It blocked international news channels as well. It closed schools and universities, transferred officials considered "suspect", sacked the police chief

and suspended the constitution. It sent out troops to search the houses of red shirt leaders, politicians and academics. The round-ups continued on the weekend and today.

Staunchly monarchist, Prayuth has been a supporter of the lese majeste law and criticism of the monarchy has infuriated him. The junta has launched a series of actions against persons it considers anti-monarchy, chasing down several academics and activists, detaining them, searching their houses and trawling their computers.

More threateningly, anyone accused of anti-monarchism will now be subject to military courts.



Army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha's hardline approach is meeting resistance in Bangkok. EPA/Narong Sangnak

In other words, Prayuth is pushing harder and faster than in 2006. He is using military power to establish order through repression, threats and arrests. He has been targeting red shirts, pro-Thaksin politicians and the Shinawatra clan because he thinks organised opposition is likely to come from these groups.

### **This show willingness to resist**

Establishing order will allow the military to re-arrange political rules that will seek to eradicate the "Thaksin regime". To do this, the junta is likely to want to retain power for a considerable time, even if it puts a civilian administration in place.

All of this may seem like Coup 101, and this is what the military has always done; its main role has always been to quash internal dissent.

Still, there is a major glitch. Prayuth could not have imagined that Bangkok, the core of the royalist opposition to Thaksin, would oppose the coup. When anti-coup protests broke out, the troops tried to block the protesters and arrested some "ringleaders". But anti-coup protesters have come together in hundreds and now in thousands, and have been fighting back against soldiers with their bare hands. There hasn't been major bloodshed, but this is dangerous terrain as protesters confront armed and sometimes frightened and seemingly confused troops.

Provincial protests have so far been smaller. Even so, the junta has threatened provincial officials with sacking or transfer if they fail to stop the anti-coup demonstrations. The detentions in provincial areas have been less public, designed to prevent red shirts organising.

Prayuth may respond with even stronger repression. One lesson Prayuth and his brass have not learned is that many Thais will no longer accept the military boot.