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ASIA PACIFIC NEWS

Thai 'Red Shirts' stage mass protest in Bangkok

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BANGKOK: Tens of thousands of supporters of Thailand's "Red Shirt" protest movement staged a mass rally in Bangkok on Sunday, police said, amid renewed political tensions in the troubled kingdom.

The Reds, who are broadly loyal to ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra, marked the 80th anniversary of the coup that ended Thailand's absolute monarchy with a call for the judiciary to stay out of politics.

"Today we mark the 80th anniversary and show our concern over threats to democracy. Let's prepare for an unfinished fight," Red Shirt leader Kokaew Pikuithong told the crowd near the capital's Democracy Monument.

Thailand has seen about 20 attempted or actual coups since 1932, he noted.

"In recent years they have changed from military to judicial coups," he said, arguing that Thaksin and his allies had been unfairly targeted.

An estimated 30,000 people had joined the rally by early evening, a special branch police officer told AFP.

The country has been riven by political tensions since Thaksin was ousted by royalist generals in a 2006 coup.

Judicial rulings have played a pivotal role, with courts forcing two pro-Thaksin premiers from office in 2008.

Mass opposition protests by the Red Shirts in April and May 2010 paralysed parts of central Bangkok, triggering a military crackdown that left more than 90 people dead in the country's worst civil unrest in decades.

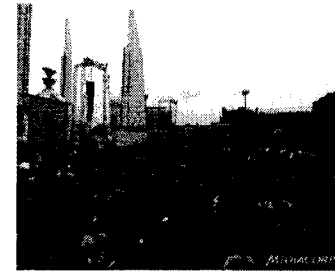
Thaksin, a former telecoms tycoon who lives in Dubai to avoid a jail term for corruption, is loved by many rural and poor Thais for his populist policies while in power, but hated by the elite who see him as a threat to the monarchy.

His sister Yingluck Shinawatra is now prime minister following a landslide election win by her brother's party last year.

This month her party postponed voting in parliament on controversial "reconciliation" proposals strongly opposed by opposition MPs, who fear they will be used to grant an amnesty to Thaksin.

The government's moves have also put it at odds with the judiciary: the Constitutional Court ordered a halt to voting on a charter amendment bill after a complaint by senators that it aimed to overthrow the monarchy.

- AFP/ck



Photos 1 of 1
Protesters at Bangkok's Democracy Monument. Organisers say they number in the tens of thousands. (Photo: Anasuya Sanyal)

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