

Headline: No easy solutions to major issues

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Picture Caption: Protesters outside parliament are gunning for the military
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Ben Davies reports on the aftermath of the Thai military crackdown

IT TOOK 48 days of protests, brutal scenes, and a death count which some say runs into the hundreds before Prime Minister Suchinda Kraprayoon finally bowed to public discontent and announced his resignation.

But less than 48 hours after his departure, the questions and uncertainties remain.

Issues like who will be the new prime minister, the role of the military, the country's political system, and the fate of military chiefs and political parties that supported them, have still to be sorted out.

"Suchinda may have stepped down," said a senior executive at one of the big local banks, "but the issues remain and there are no easy answers."

The most pressing issue is to find an acceptable prime minister to take upon his shoulders the mammoth task of putting the pieces back together. The first deputy prime minister, Meechai Ruchupan, became acting prime minister after Gen Suchinda quit.

Chart Thai party leader Somboon Rahong is the name most often mentioned, but as a former air chief marshal and protege of Supreme Commander Air Chief Marshal Kaset Rojananil, he is closely associated with the violent military crackdown.

Pro-democracy protesters, and analysts say his appointment could cause people to return to the streets.

Samakkhi Tham party leader Narong Wongwan, has also made it known that he might accept the post. But he was earlier rejected for the premiership because of alleged links to the international drugs trade.

The favoured option is for former premier Anand Panyarachun to head a caretaker government. But the former prime minister, as a non-MP, would be unable to accept the position under the new constitution and has reportedly turned down the post.

Parliament yesterday passed two readings of a constitutional amendment that will prevent non-elected members of parliament from becoming prime minister.

"The best solution would be for the King, as head of state, to designate a new prime minister," said one political analyst. "That is the only way in the short term you will get some kind of stability."

There are widespread fears that the military might stage another coup in the face of calls for massive changes to end its domination of politics and demands to bring army leaders Kaset and Issarapong Noonpakdee, Gen Suchinda's brother-in-law, to justice.

But analysts claim the calls to end military dominance could lead to a power vacuum which might cause instability in the longer term.

"Without the military as a unifying force, this country would fragment," said one local businessman. "Along with the King, they have made this country what it is. Pure democracy would destroy it".

Longer term, however, the consensus is that Parliament must be dissolved and new elections held following the constitutional amendments. This will lay the foundation for a new and responsible government and wipe the slate clean of last week's bloody events.

How long the present calm will last nobody knows. But until an acceptable new prime minister with accountability is appointed, and until the problems at the root of the latest troubles are resolved, Thailand is likely to remain mired in uncertainty and division.