**Bangkok bombing wrongfoots Thailand's junta**

The lack of any claim of responsibility for the deadly attack has added to the political uncertainty as tensions grow over delays to elections

[The Bangkok bombing](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/aug/17/bangkok-bomb-thai-capital-reels-deadliest-attack-in-years), the most deadly in Thailand’s recent history, poses a major challenge to the military junta that seized power in May last year promising to bring security and stability after months of violent political turmoil.

The prime minister, General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who heads the self-appointed National Council for Peace and Order, admitted the regime had suffered an unprecedented security failure.

Ministers said on Tuesday they had no inkling that an attack on this scale was being planned, no warning, and had next to no idea who was responsible.

“This is the worst incident that has ever happened in [Thailand](http://www.theguardian.com/world/thailand),” Prayuth said. “There have been minor bombs or just noise, but this time they aimed for innocent lives. They want to destroy our economy, our tourism.”

Prayuth did not say who “they” – the perpetrators – were, and it seemed clear, one day after the attack, that the junta was clutching at straws as the hunt for the individual or individuals responsible got under way.

The prime minister suggested security camera footage from the scene, a famous Buddhist shrine, pointed to a culprit or culprits. But he conceded the footage was far from conclusive. “Today we have seen the closed-circuit footage, we saw some suspects, but it wasn’t clear,” Prayuth said. “We have to find them first.”

In an attempt to show he was on top of the situation, Prayuth said he had ordered the police and security forces to “hurry and find the bombers”. But he also admitted the attack could have been the work of a lone terrorist.

Asked by reporters if he had any firm evidence or leads, he replied testily: “We are still investigating. The bomb has just exploded why are you asking now? Do you understand the word investigation? It’s not like they claim responsibility.”

Unless it can achieve an early breakthrough in the investigation, the regime may face pressure to call in outside expertise. Tony Abbott, the Australian prime minister, has [offered his country’s assistance](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/video/2015/aug/18/tony-abbott-australians-visiting-thailand-bombing-video) and other allies, principally the US, may get involved, especially if a link emerges to international terrorist groups such as Islamic State.

The continuing lack of any claim or statement by those behind the attack has fed a storm of speculation in a country unaccustomed to large-scale terrorist incidents of this type.

Prayuth was quoted by news agencies as saying that a man seen on CCTV may have belonged to an anti-government group based in Thailand’s north-east – a reference to the rural power base of the country’s redshirt movement, which is loyal to the ousted prime minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, and her exiled brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, who was also overthrown in a coup in 2006.

Such a statement would risk provoking a strong reaction from his political opponents. However, Thai media later said the quote was not referring to the suspect.

A crackdown on political protests, opposition dissent and independent journalism since last year’s military takeover has brought relative quiet to the streets of Bangkok in recent months. Hundreds of regime opponents have been arrested.

But tensions have been rising again as the date for new elections has repeatedly slipped. On seizing power, Prayuth said national polls to restore democracy would be [held by or after October this year](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-28069578), but the junta recently suggested the vote might be put off until at least 2017.

Thaksin posted a message on YouTube last week urging his followers to reject the junta’s proposed constitution because he said it was undemocratic. The draft charter is due to be voted on next month by the junta’s national reform council, with a public referendum possibly to follow next January.

Both the regime and independent observers have discounted involvement in the attack by ethnic Malay Muslim separatists who have waged a long and unsuccessful campaign against rule from Bangkok in Thailand’s southern provinces bordering Malaysia.

Security chiefs said the separatists had hitherto eschewed direct attacks on the capital and that the type of bomb used – a 3kg (6lbs) pipe bomb – was not part of their armoury.

Suspicion has also fallen on expatriate Uighurs or their sympathisers after Thailand [accused more than 100 of them of being terrorists](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/09/thailand-forcibly-sends-nearly-100-uighur-muslims-back-to-china) and deported them to China. China’s Muslim Uighur minority, concentrated in the western province of Xinjiang, has long complained of persecution by the “colonialist” authorities in Beijing. Many have fled the country. About five Chinese nationals were reported to be among those killed in Monday’s blast, and many more were injured.

More worryingly, perhaps, for western countries at least, is the suggestion, again unsubstantiated at this stage, that there may be a link between the Bangkok attack and international jihadi terrorism as practised by Isis, al-Qaida and like-minded groups.

Connections have been drawn in the past between Islamist hardliners in Malaysia and Indonesia and the Philippines-based terror group, Abu Sayyaf, an al-Qaida affiliate. In 2002 hundreds were killed and injured in an attack by [Jemaah Islamiyah](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16850706) on western tourists and others in Bali. But by and large, the south-east Asian region has escaped the kind of carnage often seen in parts of the Middle East.

Claims by junta officials that the Bangkok attackers were intent on damaging Thailand’s lucrative tourism industry will carry a chilling echo in Tunisia, whose [tourist trade was badly hit after June’s lethal beach attack](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/tunisia/11703817/Terror-on-the-beach-The-full-story-of-the-Tunisia-beach-terror-attack.html) by a jihadist in Sousse. Similar attempts have been made to target tourism in Egypt.

Reacting to the bombing and the political uncertainty that has ensued, Thailand’s baht currency slumped to a more than six-year low on Tuesday and shares fell in Bangkok amid concerns the attack could damage the tourism sector.