

Thai government besieged by pro-Thaksin protestors

Alex Lantier
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Thailand's military-backed government is teetering on the brink of collapse after protests by supporters of exiled ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra culminated in Saturday's siege and evacuation of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Pattaya. As red-shirted protestors surround government buildings in the capital, Bangkok, the political survival of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is in question.

A billionaire former telecom mogul, Thaksin is a conservative populist whose limited spending initiatives, especially in the rural northern provinces, won him support from sections of the rural poor and sections of the Thai bourgeoisie who profited from his programs.

It now appears that, amid a worsening economic situation and rising popular opposition to Abhisit, Thaksin's followers can also command significant support within Bangkok. The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), headed largely by former members of the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party led by Thaksin during his 2001-2006 tenure as prime minister, has organized protests calling for Abhisit's ouster and a return to the previous, pro-Thaksin government. On April 3, Thaksin rejected a government offer to negotiate with the UDD.

On April 8, an estimated 100,000 people participated in UDD demonstrations in Bangkok, and taxi drivers created a massive traffic jam. The pro-government *Bangkok Post* wrote, "[T]he heavily pro-Thaksin taxi drivers of Bangkok parked at the Victory Monument and on Sukhumvit road. Within minutes there was a huge traffic jam.... At one point, officers angrily threatened taxi drivers that they would bring in cranes to lift their vehicles off the street. The taxi drivers laughed, looked around at the chaos, and asked: 'How'"

With sections of the Thai bourgeoisie calling for military repression of the protests, there are growing signs of sympathy for the protestors inside the security forces themselves.

Friday, red-shirts blocked the roads to the Royal Cliff Hotel compound in the beach resort town of Pattaya, where the 14th ASEAN summit was to take place. Led by ex-TRT politician Arisman Pongruangrong, the protestors tried to present a petition to ASEAN delegates.

Saturday, the red-shirts forced entry into the hotel. Security forces reportedly offered little resistance. *Post* correspondent Parista Yuthamanop, covering the Pattaya summit, wrote, "There were no bursts of water hoses, no sounds of tear gas being fired or

sounds of men clashing. The security forces had been evidently directed to use no force, no weapons, only their bodies."

Abhisit fled to U-Tapao naval airfield by Blackhawk helicopter. Helicopters also evacuated leaders from the Philippines, Burma and Vietnam. The ASEAN meeting was hastily cancelled.

Thaksin spoke to his supporters in Pattaya via video link Saturday night, telling them, "Our people in Bangkok and the provinces can unite to change the country."

On Sunday, the situation moved towards armed confrontation in the streets of Bangkok. The government arrested Arisman for his role in the Pattaya siege. Prime Minister Abhisit declared a state of emergency in a televised interview from the Interior Ministry, calling the red shirts "enemies of the nation." The state of emergency covered five provinces surrounding Bangkok and Pattaya.

Shortly thereafter, UDD supporters invaded the Interior Ministry, and as Abhisit fled the building, his car was briefly surrounded by protestors wielding stakes. Red-shirts also surrounded the prime minister's residence, Government House. *Al-Jazeera* correspondent Tony Cheng wrote, "Tensions are now running very high. There are now tanks on the streets of Bangkok." Bangkok Metropolitan Police spokesman Major General Suporn Phansua reported that protestors had taken control of tanks and armored cars on the streets of Bangkok.

Bangkok Post writer Voranai Vanijaka penned a column all but calling for military repression of pro-Thaksin protestors. He wrote, "[I]f a protest turns into terrorism, the government has the right to use force to restore order and preserve the rule of law. Otherwise anarchy reigns.... PM Abhisit, there's no need to be afraid of international condemnation. The international community knows well what the word 'hypocrisy' means. There's a fine line between democracy and anarchy, and it is the duty of the government to preserve law and order in the interests of citizens."

With his reference to international hypocrisy, Voranai was hinting that, in the event the military repressed the demonstrators, the US would again overlook stated policies of opposition to regimes installed by military coups and continue its tacit support for the current government.

The fight between Thaksin and sections of the Thai military brass and Bangkok bourgeoisie is the continuation of a protracted conflict over Thaksin's populist policies that first led to his ouster in a 2006 military coup. This conflict has also acquired an international dimension amid growing great-power rivalry,

especially between the US and China, for influence in Southeast Asia.

Especially as US business ties in the region fall behind those of China—US-ASEAN trade was roughly \$170 billion in 2007, compared to China-ASEAN trade of over \$200 billion—the US has favored its longstanding ties with Abhisit's military backers over its relations with Thaksin. This has been bolstered by US suspicions that Thaksin, who, like many of Thailand's private businessmen, is ethnic Chinese, favors closer relations with Beijing.

Thaksin's TRT was formed in 1998 during the Southeast Asian financial crisis, in opposition to the devastating consequences of the fiscal austerity imposed by the US-organized International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout of the Thai economy. The TRT called for debt relief and social spending in rural areas. After a TRT-led coalition of parties won the 2001 elections against the Democratic Party of Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, who had supervised the IMF policies, Thaksin became prime minister.

Relying on a boom in Thai export revenues as the US housing bubble allowed the US to import large quantities of Thai goods, Thaksin instituted limited health insurance and investment schemes, especially in Thailand's rural northern regions. Thaksin also lined his pockets, notably with a tax-free, \$1.9 billion sale of his stake in the Shin Corp telecom company to Singaporean holding company Temasek Holdings.

Sections of the Thai bourgeoisie unhappy with Thaksin, supported the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), founded in 2005 as a disparate collection of Democrats, media executives and right-wing royalists intent on overthrowing Thaksin.

Thaksin was ousted in a September 2006 military coup while he was visiting the US Council on Foreign Relations in New York. He then fled to London.

The Bush administration decided to limit its opposition to the military-backed government. The Thai military, with which the US had ties dating back to Thailand's participation in the US wars in Korea and Vietnam, was a valuable ally in the "war on terror." It attacked Muslim insurgents in southern Thailand, gave US access to U Tapao airbase and other logistical facilities crucial to the US military, and reportedly allowed the CIA to use Thai bases as "black sites," i.e., secret prisons where suspected terrorists were interrogated and tortured.

A December 2008 US Congressional Research Service report notes: "The military coup and subsequent suspension of military aid by the United States threatened to derail the strong bilateral defense relationship. Following the reinstatement of aid, Thai and US military officials emphasized their commitment to a smooth resumption of close military ties.... In May 2007, the annual [US-led] 'Cobra Gold' multinational military exercises went forward despite the suspension of several other military cooperation programs. The 2008 Cobra Gold exercises were labeled a success as well."

December 2007 elections organized by the military-backed government returned the TRT, which had since renamed itself the People's Power Party (PPP), to power. However, the opposition tried to have the PPP declared illegal and constantly challenged the legality of the PPP government. Thaksin returned to Thailand in

February 2008, but he and his wife were both arrested on corruption charges and released on bail. Thaksin flew to Beijing during the August 2008 Olympics in violation of his bail terms, and from there fled to London.

Thaksin was subsequently expelled by the British government, and his location is not widely known. He is rumored to have traveled to China, Indonesia and Dubai. According to some reports, he is having a multimillion-dollar mansion built for him in China.

In November 2008, the PAD organized demonstrations against the PPP government and occupied Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi International Airport. Thailand's Constitutional Court ultimately dissolved the PPP, effectively sacking the government. Abhisit, a Democrat, was installed as prime minister in December 2008.

The global economic crisis has dealt a serious blow to Thai bourgeois politics, undermining the export-driven growth that made Thaksin's policies possible and fueling popular opposition to the current government. The latest International Monetary Fund (IMF) projections show that under the best of conditions the Thai economy will contract 2 to 4 percent in 2009. The crisis will only sharpen the political tensions between the Thai masses and both the Thaksin and Abhisit factions of the Thai bourgeoisie.

The crisis will also exacerbate the US-China rivalry in Southeast Asia. Yesterday, China set up a \$10 billion investment fund for ASEAN, which will serve as an alternative to the IMF and the Asian Development Bank for ASEAN states seeking financial bailouts. Huang Jing, a visiting professor at National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, told Bloomberg, "China is going to take the opportunity of this crisis to further establish itself in Asia. All this will have a huge political and diplomatic impact in the region, in addition to the economic impact."



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