

Anti-government protestors clash with soldiers in Thai capital

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At least two people are dead and more than 100 injured after a day of fierce street battles yesterday between heavily-armed troops and anti-government protestors in Bangkok. Thailand's protracted political standoff within the ruling elite between supporters and opponents of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra took on a new dimension as sections of the urban poor reinforced protests against the current regime.

Protests calling for the ousting of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva escalated after demonstrators entrenched themselves at the Government House on March 26. After they stormed the venue of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Pattaya on Saturday, forcing its cancellation, Abhisit imposed a state of emergency on five provinces. The army mobilised thousands of soldiers in the capital. In a video hook-up on Sunday, the exiled Thaksin, called on his supporters to oust the government in a "people's revolution," saying he would return to Thailand to lead it.

Supporters of the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) ignored the state of emergency. On Sunday, they took over key traffic intersections in central Bangkok and shut down Bangkok's railway station. Troops armed with automatic rifles, tear gas and water cannon moved against the protestors from early yesterday morning, provoking sharp clashes as demonstrators fought back with sticks, stones, and Molotov cocktails. Areas of the city were barricaded with buses, taxis and LPG tankers. In the course of one confrontation, UDD supporters set an empty bus in motion to plough into lines of soldiers.

The pitched street battles lasted for hours before demonstrators were finally forced to withdraw to the Government House compound. Journalists described sections of the city as a war zone, with troops guarding traffic intersections, infrastructure and government installations. Humvees with heavy calibre machine guns were patrolling the streets. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that at nightfall a convoy of combat tanks were on the way to Bangkok. In a televised address last night, Abhisit called on protestors to leave the Government House compound or "we will remove them step by step."

The number of casualties is unclear. The army claims that it fired

live rounds into the air and only blanks at the crowd. Several of those admitted to hospital had gunshot wounds. Government spokesmen denied responsibility, saying that clashes between UDD protestors and local residents, including one in a Muslim neighbourhood, had led to the gunshot injuries and two fatalities. In an interview with CNN, however, Thaksin accused the army of lying, saying: "They shot people. Many died. Many people were injured."

In contrast to the predominantly middle class protests last year of yellow-shirted anti-Thaksin supporters, many of the red-shirted UDD partisans were from the urban and rural poor. They are particularly bitter at the way in which the Thai establishment—the judiciary, state bureaucracy, military and the monarchy—conspired last December to oust the People Power Party (PPP) government they had voted for.

Thitinan Pongsudhirak, an academic at Chulalongkorn University, told *Bloomberg.com*: "Many people feel the outcome of Thai politics is determined by an old elite, and this is something that they are protesting against. This time, the protestors are going against the establishment, not just Abhisit."

The resentment towards the conservative Thai elites is being compounded by the rapid deterioration of the country's export-dependent economy, which is predicted to contract this year for the first time since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. Exports fell by 25.3 percent in January compared to a year before. The Bank of Thailand has forecast that 1.07 million people would lose their jobs this year if there were a zero growth rate. Most analysts are now predicting a contraction of between 2 to 3 percent.

Thaksin, a billionaire telecom mogul and right-wing populist, is undoubtedly seeking to exploit the anti-government hostility in his own interests. He came to power in 2001, riding a wave of hostility to the pro-IMF austerity measures implemented by Abhisit's Democrat Party that devastated living standards and substantial sections of Thai business. Thaksin won another sweeping election victory in 2005, only to be ousted in a military coup in 2006.

Like Abhisit, Thaksin did not hesitate to employ police state methods. He whipped up anti-Muslim sentiment and launched a

military crackdown on Muslim separatists in southern Thailand. At the same time, however, his limited anti-poverty measures, including village loans and cheap healthcare, secured him a following among the country's urban and rural poor. When the army called fresh elections in late 2007 under a new, restrictive constitution, the pro-Thaksin PPP won the largest share of seats and formed the government.

The fear in ruling circles in Thailand and internationally is that by using his "pro-poor" image and calling for a "people's revolution" Thaksin is setting in motion social forces that he will be unable to control. Yesterday's elemental eruption of social conflict indicates that the UDD is already losing its grip.

UDD leader Jakropob Penkair told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation today that everyone involved in the protests knew the risks involved in the confrontation with the army. "But people have been so determined and so focussed on what he or she is doing. It is beyond a coordinator like myself to be guiding them or controlling them," he said. "We are not in control of the men and women on the streets."

The Thai press has reacted with undisguised class hostility to the protestors. An editorial in today's *Nation* entitled to "Red shirts act like terrorists" bluntly declared: "By adopting these extreme strategies, the red-shirted protestors have turned themselves into urban terrorists. If they carry out any of their threats using these methods, the government's security forces should take the maximum measures to deal with them."

It is clear what "maximum measures" signify. The Thai military has gunned down unarmed protestors in the past and the generals are quite prepared to give the order again. In 1992, a military junta ordered troops to fire on large, pro-democracy protestors in Bangkok—scores were killed, many others "disappeared", at least 3,500 people were arrested and many were tortured. The crisis was only defused when King Bhumibol Adulyadaj intervened to insist on a transition to parliamentary democracy.

However, King Bhumibol's ability to play the role of neutral arbiter in the present situation has been compromised by the monarchy's partisan support for last year's anti-Thaksin People Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protests. PAD was a loose grouping of businessmen and urban middle class, backed by the military and state bureaucracy. The colour of their campaign paraphernalia—yellow—was to symbolise their support for the monarchy.

The growing hostility to the monarchy is summed up in one of the recent UDD banners: "Stop Privy Council Rule, Bring Back True Democracy". The Privy Council, which is answerable to the king, is widely viewed as having a hand in the campaign against Thaksin and his party. On April 8, a huge protest besieged the house of Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda, the king's top advisor, demanding that he and two other royal aides step down for allegedly plotting the coup that ousted Thaksin in 2006.

The ruling elite is also aware that military repression could divide the army and unleash a social explosion. As the *Economist* noted: "Policemen and soldiers are drawn from the same ranks of the great unwashed, country folk and the urban poor, who make up so many of the red shirts' numbers." The magazine cited the comments of an army officer in charge of taking control of a traffic intersection yesterday. "This situation hurts me here. I won't order the troops to shoot. We don't want Thais to fight Thais," he said.

Both the US and European Union (EU) have cautiously backed the Abhisit government. The US State Department condemned what it described as "the unacceptable violence of the protestors" and called for a reduction of tensions. The EU's Czech presidency called for "protesters to refrain from further violent action in the street."

The comments certainly reflect concern that the crisis in Thailand could spiral out of control, destabilising other Asian countries hit hard by rising poverty and unemployment. At the same time, Washington has exhibited a clear bias against Thaksin, taking virtually no action against his ousting in 2006 and tacitly supporting the removal of the PPP from power last year. Despite Thaksin's wholehearted support for the US "war on terrorism", the US remained concerned that he was opening the door to the influence of rival China.

The Thai government has no obvious solution to the political standoff. Abhisit has ruled out fresh elections as that would almost certainly result in the return of a pro-Thaksin party. Three years of bitter infighting place major obstacles in the way of a deal between the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elite. Abhisit declared on Sunday that he was engaged in a "do-or-die" campaign for the rule of law and ruled out any negotiation with Thaksin.

The real fear in ruling circles is that the lack of a political compromise and the resort to military repression will produce an uncontrollable social upheaval. Speaking to the *Financial Times*, Thai academic Thitinan Pongsudhirak warned: "This is about sharing not just the power but the money and prestige as well. The elites are facing a choice: lose some now and keep the lot or keep it all now and risk losing the lot."



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