

Anti-government rally on third anniversary of Thai coup

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Around 25,000 supporters of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), Thailand's opposition coalition aligned with exiled former prime minister and billionaire businessman Thaksin Shinawatra, rallied in the centre of Bangkok on Saturday. September 19 marked three years since the toppling of the Thaksin government by the country's armed forces.

The UDD rally demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and his Democratic Party-led government, new national elections and a royal pardon for Thaksin from the head of state, King Bhumibol Adulyadej. That would mean rescinding Thaksin's corruption conviction and allowing him to return to Thailand.

The UDD had planned to march on the home of the king's close adviser, former premier and general Prem Tinsulanonda, whom Thaksin's supporters accuse of being the behind-the-scenes organiser of the 2006 military coup. Organisers called the march off, however, after the Abhisit government invoked the Internal Security Act and ordered the deployment of 10,000 troops and police onto the streets of Bangkok.

During anti-government demonstrations in April, UDD members clashed with security forces. At least two people were killed and over 100 injured. At that time, the UDD leadership called off further protests due to their fear that a confrontation could spiral out of their control. Protesters were beginning to express demands for democratic and economic changes that went far beyond the UDD's limited perspective of returning Thaksin to power.

Saturday's rally was dispersed without incident after participants listened to a live-video link address by Thaksin, delivered from Britain. Thaksin made an open

appeal to the military and his political rivals to back his return as the best means of ending the continuing political turmoil. "This country is still [experiencing] an economic crisis while other countries don't any longer. Trade, tourism and investment are contracting. There is less good news and justice. This makes Thai people less happy than when I was in charge," he said.

"Our country has deteriorated and risks becoming a failed state," Thaksin said. "The longer this government stays, the bigger the disaster is for the country. Give me just six months as prime minister and I will bring this country back to normal. I plead for national reconciliation. I have already forgiven everybody. Let's start anew and decide in new elections."

The 2006 coup has been followed by constant infighting within the Thai establishment that has only deepened as the economy has been hit by the global financial crisis. Thaksin was removed in 2006 after a prolonged campaign of protests organised by the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which was essentially a front for the country's traditional ruling elites, including the monarchy, the state apparatus and the military.

Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party (TRT) were first elected in 2001 on the basis of promises to reverse the International Monetary Fund-backed austerity measures and deregulation imposed by the previous Democratic Party government after the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis. Support in the traditional ruling elites began to wane, however, as Thaksin, under pressure from international investors, began to implement the very agenda he had pledged to oppose.

The PAD protests were organised by a former ally, businessman Sondhi Limthongkul, representing weaker

layers of business that needed protection from foreign competition. They mobilised significant support in urban areas from middle class layers and even from workers who were threatened by Thaksin's program of privatising state-owned enterprises.

Others joined the PAD protests out of concern over Thaksin's autocratic methods. His 2003 law-and-order campaign resulted in hundreds of alleged drug dealers being murdered by state forces, and his brutal treatment of Muslims in the south of the country revived the moribund separatist movement.

Following the 2006 coup, Thaksin and scores of his supporters were banned from political office and his party dissolved. These moves, however, failed to destroy Thaksin's political machine. By providing cheap health care and development loans for impoverished farmers and villagers in the long neglected north and north east of the country, he built up a significant base of electoral support.

When the military relinquished direct rule in 2007, the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won a clear majority. In 2008, PAD, supported by the military and monarchy, revived its protests. The courts carried out what amounted to judicial coups, forcing the dismissal of two PPP prime ministers, Samak Samaravej and Somchai Wongsawat, and the dissolution of the PPP in December 2008.

The formation of the Abhisit-led coalition, made up of 167 Democratic Party members in the 480-seat parliament and PPP defectors, was the product of behind-the-scenes pressure by the military. Another election was considered out of the question as Thaksin loyalists, already regrouped as the Puea Thai party, would likely dominate the new parliament.

The Abhisit government is torn by divisions over how to respond to the economic situation. In contrast to the protectionist policies demanded by PAD and favoured by the military, international agencies are continuing to demand a further opening up of the economy to foreign investment.

Stimulus packages in Thailand and internationally have led to a revival of exports and a GDP growth of 2.3 percent in the second quarter, officially bringing the economy out of recession. Even so, the government

predicts negative growth this year of between 3.0 and 3.5 percent. Manufacturing production dropped 7.3 percent in July and 8.3 percent in June. Exports, which make up 60 percent of GDP, dropped 25.7 percent in July, year-on-year.

The unresolved political crisis threatens even these modest economic gains. Fitch Ratings downgraded Thailand's sovereign credit rating to BBB and its currency to A-minus in April following the street fighting between the UDD and the military. At a conference in Bangkok on August 31, Fitch Ratings Asia-Pacific sovereign ratings head James McCormack warned: "In terms of structural issues it goes back to politics. We just don't see it's fully or completely resolved in Thailand."

The Abhisit government's disarray is encouraging the pro-Thaksin supporters. An op-ed piece in the *Bangkok Post* last month noted that "there are signs that the [ruling] coalition is falling apart" and "Thaksin, ever so sensitive, has smelled something in the air and has given a warning to his troops." The former prime minister has been using the internet and satellite communications to play a more public role, abandoning his earlier promises to quit politics.

In one of his rare public speeches, the 81-year-old King Bhumibol on August 21 called for political unity and warned of a political collapse. "Recently I feel that our country could fail, because nobody is working in harmony," he said. "They are competing with each other and no one understands what the other is doing."

His comments came a week after 20,000 people gathered in front of the Grand Palace in Bangkok to present 3.5 million signatures calling for a royal pardon for Thaksin. The monarchy, however, was closely involved in the moves to oust Thaksin and the subsequent governments made up of his supporters. The king's speech reflects fears in ruling circles that the continuing economic political turmoil could open the door for a social explosion of workers and the poor on a far wider scale than in April.



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