

Mass protests in Thai capital as political crisis continues

John Braddock
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Tens of thousands of supporters of Thailand's former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, rallied in Bangkok on Sunday and yesterday in ongoing mass protests. The demonstrators are demanding that the "aristocrat-backed" government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva dissolve parliament and call new elections.

The "Red Shirt" protesters, mainly drawn from Thailand's impoverished rural areas, initially gave the government until noon Sunday to accede to their demands or face mass marches on key locations in Bangkok, threatening disruptions to the city's infrastructure. The deadline was subsequently shifted to noon Monday, but the government has continued to reject the demand.

The protests follow a Supreme Court decision on February 26 to confiscate \$US1.4 billion of Thaksin's \$2.3 billion in personal assets. The Abhisit government brought the case in which Thaksin was accused of abusing his office to benefit his private business dealings. The judiciary has consistently ruled against Thaksin and his supporters over the past four years.

Thaksin denounced the decision as part of a conspiracy to remove him from politics and the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) announced that it would mobilise a million protestors in Bangkok. The four days of demonstrations officially began Sunday but had been building for several days. Local newspapers estimated the numbers at between 80,000 and 100,000, although more were still arriving Sunday from rural areas in the north and northeast.

Despite newspaper headlines warning of a "red tide"

about to swamp the city and lurid forecasts of possible violence, the protests, to date, have taken on an almost festive atmosphere with musical performances interspersed with political speeches. A stage was set up at the Phan Fah Bridge on Rajdamnoen Avenue as the centre of the rally site. About 400 demonstrators marched on the army's 11th Infantry Regiment at Phaholyothin, where the premier had earlier been manning a "war room" before exiting by helicopter.

The government has mobilised a huge force of 50,000 soldiers, police and security personnel in Bangkok. In his weekly radio address on Sunday, Abhisit denied rumours of a military coup and said he would not, for now, impose a state of emergency giving the army broad powers to crack down on the protests. Last April the army and pro-Thaksin demonstrators clashed violently in Bangkok, leaving two people dead and more than 120 injured.

Thaksin, who is currently in exile, addressed the demonstrators by video link, urging them to maintain the pressure to force the government to resign. He denounced the country's "ruling elites" for causing the country's problems and called for the establishment of "democracy, equality and justice". The billionaire Thaksin, however, is himself a leading member of the Thai corporate elite.

Thaksin won office in 2001 by making a populist appeal to the widespread disaffection over the impact of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. While securing a base of support among the rural poor through a series of limited handouts, he alienated sections of the urban elite by continuing to open up Thailand to foreign capital. Despite being ousted in a military coup in 2006,

his supporters won the 2007 election under a constitution drawn up by the army. Abhisit was finally installed in late 2008 after protracted anti-Thaksin protests, including the occupation of Bangkok's main airports, and two court decisions that removed pro-Thaksin prime ministers on dubious grounds.

The accusation that Abhisit's government is "aristocrat-backed" has an element of truth. He and his Democrat Party were inserted in office with the support of the traditional elites—the military, state bureaucracy and the monarchy. The military coup leaders had a hand in pressuring small parties and sections of the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) to switch sides and give the Democrats a parliamentary majority. At the same time, however, Thaksin, for all his populist rhetoric, represents the interests of powerful sections of business elite and while in office resorted to increasingly autocratic methods of rule.

The bitter factional wrangling in the Thai ruling elite has only intensified following Abhisit's installation. The February 26 Supreme Court decision was broadcast live on national television and radio, but timed to minimise potential disruption to Thailand's stock market. The government mobilised more than 20,000 soldiers and police nationwide—with about 6,000 stationed in Bangkok in anticipation of protests.

The nine-judge panel described Thaksin's business dealings as "unscrupulous" and ruled that he falsely claimed to have transferred company shares to family members. They affirmed that Thaksin had misused his office by tailoring government policies and changing laws to advantage his personal businesses, including Shin Corp, which was sold to the Singaporean government's investment arm in 2006, provoking large anti-Thaksin protests. The court declared that Thaksin could retain any money accumulated before he took office in 2001.

Thaksin faces further legal proceedings. The Finance Ministry is asking for an extension of a freeze on another 14 billion baht (\$US430 million) in unpaid taxes from Shin Corp transactions. Thaksin's children Panthongtae and Pinthongta may also be sued over 12 billion baht in back taxes from the 2006 sale of Shin

Corp. Finance Minister Korn Chatikavanij has hinted that if Thaksin's bank accounts in Thailand do not cover the legal claims, the government will pursue his overseas assets.

The factional brawling in the ruling elites between pro- and anti-Thaksin supporters has been intensified by the global economic crisis. Even though the Thai economy began to recover in the fourth quarter of last year, overall it recorded a contraction of 2.3 percent in 2009. Exports surged by 31.4 percent in January and the government predicted last month that the economy would grow by 4.5 percent in 2010. But the recovery, which is dependent on export markets in China, the US and Europe, is shaky. Economist Sauwanee Thairungroj gloomily told *Bloomberg.com*: "If the [political] situation turns violent and badly hurts [business] confidence, it may shave GDP growth this year."

Significantly, the *Wall Street Journal* and *Financial Times* yesterday both warned of the dangers of the ongoing political crisis and called on Abhisit to call fresh elections as a means of ending it. The concern in ruling circles in Thailand and internationally is that the political turmoil could lead to the emergence of social and democratic demands by workers and the rural poor which neither Thaksin nor his factional rivals are able to meet.



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