

Anti-government protests continue in Thailand

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The three-week standoff between the Thai government and red-shirted protesters demanding new elections is continuing in Bangkok. The focus of the demonstrations shifted over the weekend to the Ratchaprasong shopping and business area of the capital where many five-star hotels, banks and shopping malls are located. At least 10,000 people took part in Saturday's rally and thousands have maintained the protest.

The protesters, organised by United Front Against Dictatorship for Democracy (UDD), have defied government efforts to force them to leave. On Monday, they stormed the offices of the country's Election Commission, demanding it decide on whether to prosecute the ruling Democrat Party for electoral irregularities. The demonstrators left the commission after it agreed to release its decision on April 20—a week earlier than scheduled.

The situation is tense. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva invoked the Internal Security Act in Bangkok and mobilised 50,000 police and troops in response to the protests. On Sunday, the Centre for the Administration of Peace and Order (CAPO), a joint security force set up under the state of emergency, declared the vicinity surrounding the protest as a controlled area under the Internal Security Act and banned demonstrators from moving to other areas of the city. Yesterday CAPO approved arrest warrants for 10 UDD leaders.

UDD leaders insist that the protests will not end until Abhisit steps down and fresh elections are called. The protesters are supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted by a military coup in 2006. Many are from poorer rural areas in the north and north east where the right-wing populist billionaire Thaksin built up a base of support on the basis of limited

social reforms.

The government is backed by Thailand's traditional ruling elites—the military, the monarchy, the state bureaucracy and the judiciary. The army formally relinquished power in 2007 after drawing up a new constitution. However, Thaksin's supporters won the election and formed the government, resulting in a protracted standoff with the mainly middle class, anti-Thaksin protests. In 2008, the courts removed two prime ministers over alleged corruption and electoral fraud, paving the way for the installation of Abhisit at the head of a shaky coalition.

The latest round of anti-government protests began last month after a Supreme Court decision on February 26 stripped Thaksin of \$US1.4 billion of his \$2.3 billion in personal assets. The government initiated the case, in which Thaksin was accused of abusing his office to benefit his private business dealings.

As many as 150,000 protesters have taken part in continuous rallies. On March 28, UDD supporters forced unarmed soldiers to leave temples and a government building near their protest site, which up until last weekend was centred at the Phan Fah Bridge. The following day, thousands of demonstrators tried to enter a military base in northern Bangkok where the prime minister had been holed up for two weeks.

In an unprecedented bid to end the standoff, Abhisit met with three UDD leaders in nationally televised negotiations on March 28 and 29. The two lengthy sessions, which were widely watched, produced no resolution. Both sides played to the cameras. The prime minister offered to call elections, not due until December 2011, before the end of year. The UDD negotiators

insisted that an election be held within 15 days.

On the face of it, the Abhisit government is in a strong position. The economy is expanding, with industrial production increasing by just over 30 percent in both January and February compared with a year earlier. As a result, it has the support of the media and business groups that have praised its economic management during the global economic crisis. However, the fact that the televised talks took place indicates that the government is aware of its weakness and lack of legitimacy.

The Democrat Party lost the 2001 election to Thaksin amid widespread hostility to its imposition of the IMF's pro-market agenda that devastated significant sections of the Thai economy. The party subsequently lost elections in 2005 and 2006—a snap poll called by Thaksin to try to resolve the standoff with opposition protests. The Democrats also lost the 2007 election and have only 167 seats in the 480-seat national assembly. Abhisit only came to power in December 2008 after a court ruling dissolved the ruling pro-Thaksin party, and the military pressured its allies to join the Democrats.

The bias of courts, military and police toward the Democrats has only fuelled the anger of anti-government protesters. The police and military, who stood by while anti-Thaksin protesters occupied Bangkok's two main airports for more than a week, are now preparing to crack down on the current pro-Thaksin rally. The election commission and courts, which helped oust two pro-Thaksin governments in 2008, have been dragging their feet on allegations of Democrat election misconduct that could potentially result in the deregistration of that party.

Behind these political grievances are sharpening social tensions. While the economy is expanding, the social divide between rich and poor is also deepening. Farmers in the rural north east have been hit by falling prices and growing debts. The average family in the region is in debt to 100,000 baht (\$3,000).

Abhisit has tried to woo farmers through a program under the Farmers Reconstruction and Development Fund, designed to help 510,000 farmers with a collective debt of 80 billion baht. Under the scheme, if farmers agree to pay back half their debt, they will be entitled to a moratorium on the remainder. But like Abhisit's other pro-poor measures, the fund provides only limited assistance

and has had little political impact.

Thaksin and the UDD leadership are seeking to exploit the widespread social discontent to bolster their own political position in what has been five years of bitter infighting in the ruling elites. Less competitive layers of Thai business, particularly small and medium companies, turned on Thaksin after he continued to open up the country to foreign capital. Neither of the rival factions is capable of addressing the pressing social needs of ordinary working people.

Both the government and its opponents are deeply anti-democratic. As prime minister, Thaksin was notorious for threatening opposition media and for his anti-drug campaign, during which hundreds of alleged dealers were killed by police.

While the UDD leaders are keeping the protests confined to the demand for an election, anti-government protesters are motivated by broader issues. The *New York Times* noted last week: “The main target of the protestors’ ire seems to be the system: the perception that the bureaucrats and the military serve the elite at the expense of the poor.” *Time* magazine cited one small businessman in Bangkok as saying: “I don’t even like Thaksin. It’s not about one person. It’s about how the government doesn’t care about people who aren’t rich.”

The UDD leadership is just as concerned as the government that protesters do not begin to voice their own social demands and take more militant action. Last April, large anti-government protests in Bangkok boiled over into violent clashes with the police and military in which several people were killed. The *Bangkok Post* noted last week that “quite a few” pro-Thaksin politicians were concerned at the economic impact of the ongoing rallies and “how it will all end”, leading to a desire “to wrap up the protest as soon as possible”.



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