

Thai government imposes state of emergency, but protests continue

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9 April 2010

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva seized on an anti-government protest at the national parliament building on Wednesday to declare a state of emergency in the capital of Bangkok and surrounding provinces. Emergency rule provides the armed forces with a range of draconian powers.

The opposition United Front Against Dictatorship for Democracy (UDD) declared that it would continue its protests and called for mass demonstrations today at ten undisclosed locations throughout the capital. UDD leader Nattawut Saikua yesterday told a rally of more than 10,000 supporters: “Tomorrow the prime minister will face an unforgettable experience.” He warned that if the government clamped down, “we’re going to raise our protest to the maximum level”.

Yesterday the military set up checkpoints around the capital in a bid to prevent UDD supporters from rural areas from joining today’s protests. The government also shut down pro-opposition media, including the satellite television Peoples Channel, which has provided continuous coverage of the anti-government protests that began on March 12. At least 36 opposition websites have been blocked. Arrest warrants were issued for seven people allegedly involved in storming the parliament building.

Prime Minister Abhisit declared: “Once leaders who prefer violence are arrested, we believe we can persuade other protesters to leave the protest site.” However, military spokesman Sunsern Kaekumnerd hinted at tougher action. After noting that protest numbers appeared to be dwindling, he said: “It will be more acceptable for the public in the case of the government enforcing harsher measures.” The *Bangkok Post* yesterday reported that the military was shifting personnel thought

to be sympathetic to the opposition out of important positions. Abhisit yesterday cancelled his scheduled trip to the Association of South East Asian Nations summit currently taking place in Hanoi.

The tense situation in Bangkok is the latest stage in four years of bitter factional infighting in the Thai ruling elites. Abhisit was installed in December 2008 with the backing of the military and the monarchy after a court ruling effectively brought down a government sympathetic to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Abhisit rests on an unstable coalition led by his Democrat Party that includes former allies of the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party.

The current round of UDD protests began after a Supreme Court decision on February 26 stripped Thaksin of \$US1.4 billion of his \$2.3 billion in personal assets over corrupt practices while in office. The UDD is demanding immediate national elections. The focus of the demonstrations shifted last week to the upmarket Ratchaprasong shopping and business area of the capital, provoking an angry reaction from mall owners, tourist operators and other businesses that have been affected.

On Wednesday, UDD demonstrators, or Redshirts, surrounded the national parliament building and a group of about 80 broke into the compound at about noon. A smaller group of about 20 entered the building itself to look for Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban to complain about police measures against the protesters. Minor scuffles took place. Suthep and other cabinet members fled the compound by military helicopter and other parliamentarians scrambled over the back fence. The parliamentary session was abandoned.

The government, backed by the media, appears to have inflated the incident to justify the imposition of a state of

emergency. Abhisit had already invoked the Internal Security Act (ISA) and activated the Centre for the Administration of Peace and Order (CAPO), which banned protests in parts of the capital and sought court orders to break up the protests. The UDD organised the march on parliament to make clear that it would ignore the ISA.

The emergency decree grants sweeping powers to the military, including the right to ban public gatherings, impose curfews, block any news that could instigate fear or misunderstanding and arrest and detain people without a warrant for 30 days. The decree indemnifies members of the security forces for any action taken under emergency rule. The emergency legislation, along with the current constitution, was drawn up during the 14-month period of military rule that followed the ousting of Thaksin as prime minister in September 2006.

Abhisit has revealed that a special cabinet meeting decided to set up a new centre to handle the crisis under the emergency decree. To be known as the Centre for Public Administration in Emergency Situations, it will be headed, as in the case of CAPO, by Deputy Prime Minister Suthep. The new body will include the chiefs of all the armed forces, as well as the national police chief and the permanent heads of selected ministries.

At the core of the bitter factional struggle in Bangkok are sharp differences over economic policy. Thaksin won the 2001 election on the basis of a right-wing populist program that made limited promises, particularly to the rural poor. He was able to capitalise on widespread hostility, including among layers of business, to the Democrats who had implemented the austerity measures demanded by the IMF in the wake of the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis.

Once in power, however, Thaksin was compelled to implement measures to attract foreign investors, thus alienating less competitive layers of local business and sections of the middle class. Sections of the traditional elites, who had initially backed him, turned against Thaksin as he began to sideline sections of the state bureaucracy and military. His anti-democratic methods of rule also provoked opposition. At the same time, Thaksin retained a solid base of support among the rural poor who had benefited, if only in a limited way, from his handouts and cheap health care.

Anti-Thaksin protests escalated in 2006 after Thaksin, a billionaire, sold off his Shin Corp and allegedly used his position to evade taxes. After months of political crisis, he was finally ousted by the military, whose own period of rule was fraught by economic problems. The junta's attempts to rein in foreign investment and protect Thai businesses provoked plummeting share values, which forced the military to backtrack.

The junta relinquished power in 2007 after drawing up a constitution that was designed to keep Thaksin out of office and to provide the mechanisms for the military to intervene in an emergency situation. Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party was dissolved for alleged election fraud and many of its senior members barred from politics. Despite the military's calculation, the pro-Thaksin party won the 2007 national election and formed a coalition government, leading to a year of acute political turmoil. Amid ongoing anti-Thaksin protests, mainly by sections of the Bangkok middle class, the courts removed two pro-Thaksin prime ministers on dubious grounds and paved the way for the installation of Abhisit.

The ruling faction is fraught with contradictions. Abhisit's Democrat Party, which opposed previous military juntas, now depends on the backing of the armed forces chiefs. In 1998, the Democrats championed pro-market reforms but are now allied with sections of the ruling elite that insist that Thai business must be protected. If it calls on the military to forcibly crush the protests, the government risks precipitating a political and social upheaval. If the demonstrations drag on, however, Abhisit's own political future is in doubt.

Abhisit's decision to impose a state of emergency brings the military directly into political life and raises the possibility of another coup. While the newly formed Centre for Public Administration in Emergency Situations is headed by the deputy prime minister, it has the appearance of a junta in waiting. If Abhisit cannot quell the protests, the generals might again decide to seize power themselves.



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