

Thai military crackdown on anti-government protest leaves 21 dead

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At least 21 people are dead and 874 injured after fierce street battles erupted on Saturday in central Bangkok as soldiers in riot gear attempted to disperse thousands of anti-government protesters. The bloody clashes have intensified the political crisis surrounding Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. The opposition United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) is calling for the government to resign and hold fresh national elections.

Abhisit imposed a state of emergency after UDD demonstrators, also known as the “Red Shirts”, surrounded and entered the national parliament building on Wednesday. Opposition leaders called on their supporters to ignore the emergency decree, continue their month-long rallies and promised protests “at the maximum level” on Friday. More than 1,000 demonstrators forced their way into the compound of the Thaicom satellite station, 60 kilometres north of Bangkok, to put the pro-UDD People Channel station—turned off by the government last week—back on the air.

In a nationally televised address on Friday evening, Abhisit set the stage for a military crackdown. He sharply criticised the armed forces for failing to maintain the “rule of law”, and warned that his government would mobilise “all forces and legal measures” necessary to put an end to the protests. He ordered the army to deploy an extra 30 companies, about 4,500 soldiers, to retake the Thaicom station and cut off the PTV signal.

Saturday’s confrontation took place near the Phan Fah bridge and the Democracy Monument in central Bangkok, where UDD supporters have camped since mid-March. Troops used live rounds, tear gas and rubber bullets to try to break up the protesters, who retaliated with petrol bombs, rocks, water bottles and, according to the security forces, gunfire.

Reuters reported that the street battles spread into the Khao San Road area, which resembled a “war zone”. Shop windows were shattered, cars smashed and many people lay wounded on the street. Television reports said protesters lit a gas cylinder and rolled it toward the soldiers at the Khok Wua intersection.

The subsequent explosion wounded at least 50 soldiers.

After hours of bitter fighting, the security forces pulled back, having failed to clear the protest site. After dark, however, troops opened fire again with rubber bullets at an intersection leading to Khao San Road. Some fired live rounds, while helicopters dropped tear gas. The “Red Shirts” used taxis and pick-up trucks to barricade the area. An uneasy standoff continued yesterday both in central Bangkok and also at Rajdumnoen Road, the capital’s upmarket commercial district, where UDD protesters set up a second camp a week ago.

To date, the death toll is 21—17 civilians, including Japanese cameraman Hiro Muramoto, and 4 soldiers. Of the 874 injured, around 200 were soldiers, including some who are in a critical condition. UDD leaders reiterated their determination to continue the protests and rejected an offer by Prime Minister Abhisit for talks, saying the time for negotiations was over. Protesters yesterday displayed weapons seized from soldiers including riot gear, rifles and ammunition. At least half a dozen military vehicles, including armoured personnel carriers, Humvees and a truck were crippled in the street battles.

Abhisit appeared on television late on Saturday night promising an investigation into the clashes, but defending the troops, saying they had only fired “into the air and in self-defence”. The deaths will only further undermine his Democrat Party and the fragile coalition government. The army crackdown was the worst since 1992 when it was the Democrats who led largely middle class protests in Bangkok to demand an end to military dictatorship and new elections. Dozens were killed in that confrontation.

According to the Thai media, the government is engaged in tense discussions. The *Nation* reported today that Abhisit’s junior coalition partners are threatening to bring down his administration unless constitutional changes are made and elections called far sooner than the nine months currently proposed. Reflecting deep fears of worsening political unrest, the newspaper’s editorial appealed for “a period of reflection and calm” as the situation was “out of control”.

The concern in ruling circles is that the standoff in Bangkok will also trigger protests in the rural north and east of the country—the main social base of the UDD, which backs former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Reuters reported that hundreds of “Red Shirt” protesters on Saturday broke into local government buildings in the northern city of Chiang Mai and the northeastern city of Udon Thani in support of the UDD protests in Bangkok.

The political crisis is the outcome of more than four years of intense factional infighting in the Thai ruling class. Thaksin, a right-wing populist billionaire, won the 2001 election by exploiting widespread hostility, including among layers of business, to the Democrats who had imposed the IMF’s austerity agenda following the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis. However, opposition in the political establishment grew, as Thaksin continued to open up Thailand to foreign investors and sidelined the country’s traditional elites—the military, the monarchy and state bureaucracy.

Anti-Thaksin protests escalated in 2006 after he was accused of using his position as prime minister to benefit from the sale of his Shin Corp telecommunications conglomerate. After months of political turmoil, Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in September 2006. However, the junta’s attempts to regulate the economy were a disaster. The military relinquished power in 2007 after rewriting the constitution but Thaksin’s supporters won the 2007 election, ushering in another year of political turmoil.

Abhisit was installed in December 2008 with the backing of the military and the monarchy after a court ruling effectively brought down the pro-Thaksin government. The military coup leaders had a direct 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. Abhisit has resisted calls for a fresh election, in large part because his Democrat Party would almost certainly be defeated. While in office, Thaksin built significant support among the rural poor through limited handouts and a low cost health scheme.

The bitter differences in the ruling elite over economic policy, political power and patronage have deepened as the Thai economy has been hit by the global economic crisis that erupted in 2007–08. While exports have begun to recover and positive economic growth was expected this year, the uncertain outlook has only been compounded by the political turmoil. The Thai Hotels Association warned that its members would be at “great peril” if the crisis continued. The Japan Credit Rating has downgraded Thailand’s local currency long-term senior debt rating to A from A+.

Neither the government nor the opposition represents the interests of ordinary working people. Thaksin and the UDD leadership are exploiting the hostility of the rural poor to the Bangkok elite to leverage a new election and a return to power that will only benefit their business and political backers. For all of his talk about “democracy”, Thaksin was notorious for his autocratic methods as prime minister. As for Abhisit and the Democrats, they are now dependent on the military hierarchy that they claimed in the past to oppose. The military is facing internal tensions itself as many in the lower ranks are from rural areas and sympathise with the “Red Shirt” protesters. The media is discussing the problem of “watermelon soldiers”—khaki green uniforms on the outside, but “red” on the inside.

The fear in ruling circles—government and opposition alike—is that the protesters will begin to make their own class demands. The *Nation* has noted that the protests have begun to attract support from the urban working class and poor: “street vendors, clerks, waitresses, hotel cooks, security guards, taxi drivers, motorcycle-taxi riders, and local residents [are] coming from the more congested and poorer parts of Bangkok”. The demonstrations highlighted “the growing disquiet over class inequality among the poor as well as indicating class solidarity”, the newspaper stated. Last Friday UDD leader Natthawut Saikua warned the government that his supporters might “take matters into their own hands” if the opposition’s demands were not met.

The essential problem confronting Thai workers is that they lack a party that articulates a socialist and internationalist perspective representing their own independent class interests, and are thus unable to provide an alternative leadership to the rural masses. While the contending ruling class factions are currently engaged in a vicious political battle to secure their economic interests, they would quickly bury their differences to back an all-out military crackdown on any threat by workers and the rural masses to the basis for bourgeois rule.



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