

# Thai government shaky as mass protests continue

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Following Saturday's deadly street battles on the streets of Bangkok, the political crisis in Thailand has only deepened. The red-shirted protesters of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) continue to occupy two sites in the capital. The troops have withdrawn to their barracks—for the time being—and desperate efforts are being made in ruling circles to find a way of ending the tense standoff.

UDD leaders have rejected talks and an offer yesterday by Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban to call elections within six months. The opposition is demanding that parliament be dissolved immediately and national elections held within 15 days. Calls have been made for Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to be tried over Saturday's violent clashes that left 21 dead, including 4 soldiers, and more than 850 injured.

A further confrontation is possible today as anti-government protesters hold a rally outside the headquarters of the 11th Infantry Regiment where Abhisit is holed up and conducts his cabinet meetings. UDD leader Nattawawut Saikua described today's march on the army camp as "an offensive mobilisation". Opposition protesters are ignoring the state of emergency declared by Abhisit last Wednesday after protesters surrounded the national parliament and a group broke through a security cordon to enter the building.

Abhisit's position was further eroded on Monday when army commander General Anupong Paochinda suggested that the government would have to agree to early elections. "The best solution to this is to dissolve the House. We must return to politics to solve the problem. It must be ended by political means," he said, adding: "I just want to see peace restored."

General Anupong's comment underscores the depth of the political turmoil, which has begun to take on the character of a class rebellion against the country's traditional elites.

Sections of the rural poor loyal to former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra have been joined by layers of Bangkok's urban poor and working class. The loyalty of the army's lower ranks, who are drawn from the same social strata, is being questioned openly in the national and international press.

Media speculation is also rife about divisions within the military hierarchy over whether to launch an all-out crackdown to clear the streets of protesters. A nervous editorial in yesterday's London-based *Financial Times* urged calm and compromise, urging the army "to resist any temptation to do what it has done too many times before: [to] resolve democratic strife through military intervention".

Also on Monday, the Election Commission recommended that Abhisit's Democrat Party, the country's oldest, be dissolved by the country's Constitutional Court over allegations of electoral malpractice involving a large donation from cement manufacturer TPI Polene. In a country where wide-scale electoral infringements are routine, the case is a convenient device for putting pressure on Abhisit and potentially for bringing down his government.

In December 2008, after months of anti-Thaksin protests, including the occupation of Bangkok's two major airports, a similar Constitutional Court ruling dissolving the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) was used to bring down the government of Prime Minister Somchai Wongasawat. General Anupong was reportedly involved in pressuring former PPP allies and factions to back the installation of Abhisit and join a Democrat-led government.

Monday's announcements by Anupong and the Election Commission are clear signs that the country's traditional elites are withdrawing their support for Abhisit. At the same time, it is far from clear who would replace Abhisit and what form a new government would take. If new elections were held, the most likely winner would be the pro-Thaksin Puea

Thai party—the successor to the dissolved PPP—leading to a new round of political unrest.

Chulalongkorn University lecturer Prudhisan Jumbala told *Bloomberg.com*: “Abhisit may resign or dissolve parliament, but that doesn’t necessarily get us anywhere. Nobody can implement the rule of law without the cooperation of society, and neither side trusts the authority of the state.”

After four years of bitter factional infighting in the country’s ruling elites, the key institutions of the state have been deeply compromised. The military, the courts, the state bureaucracy and the monarchy are all regarded as partisan among broad layers of the rural poor who support Thaksin and the UDD. The traditional elites backed the 2006 military coup that ousted Thaksin, and then supported the removal of two pro-Thaksin governments following the 2007 election, before finally installing Abhisit.

It is significant that there have been few calls to date in Thailand or internationally for King Bhumibol Adulyadej to intervene in the crisis. The long reigning monarch has been a lynchpin holding the state apparatus together for decades. Following the army’s crushing of pro-democracy protests in 1992, the king was able to impose a compromise on the military and its largely middle class opposition. Anti-royalist sentiment has been growing, however, because of what was seen as the monarchy’s support for the 2006 coup and anti-Thaksin protests in 2008.

Despite signs of shifting support, Abhisit has given no hint that he is prepared to stand down. On Monday, he struck a strident new note, blaming Saturday’s violence on “terrorists” who had to be separated from the genuine protestors. Speaking in Washington, Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya echoed the uncompromising line, comparing Thaksin to Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin and denouncing him as “a bloody terrorist”. Kasit repeated the offer of talks, but said the government would not be forced by protests to dissolve parliament.

These accusations of “terrorism” serve an obvious political purpose: to justify a further, more brutal assault by the security forces on anti-government protesters. The New Politics Party—the political arm of the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) that led the anti-Thaksin protests in 2006 and again in 2008—has called for the imposition of martial law, accusing Thaksin of trying to foment civil war. Given that a state of emergency is already in force in Bangkok and surrounding areas, PAD’s call can only be interpreted as a demand for a military crackdown.

Compounding the political crisis, Thai share prices plunged by 3.64 percent on Monday in response to Saturday’s violent clashes, sharply reversing their gains for the year. Sales by foreign investors exceeded purchases by 2.1 billion baht (\$US65 million). The stock market is closed for three days as part of the country’s New Year celebrations, but the potential for further falls only adds to the urgency in ruling circles for some resolution to the crisis.

The protracted wrangling between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elite is the product of sharp differences over economic policy and competing networks of political patronage. The ongoing global economic crisis that erupted in 2007-08 has not only exacerbated factional brawling but compounded the social crisis facing broad layers of working people. The anxious reaction to Saturday’s clashes reflects deep concerns in ruling circles in Thailand and internationally that the protests could spiral out of control of the UDD opposition.

The issue facing workers and the rural poor is the construction of a political movement independent of all factions of the ruling class. For all of his posturing for “democracy”, the populist billionaire Thaksin was just as autocratic in office as his opponents. The country’s deepening social divide underscored the limited character of his handouts to the rural poor. Any fight for democratic rights and social justice must necessarily be based on a socialist and internationalist program that unifies workers in a struggle to abolish the profit system that is the source of unemployment and poverty.



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