

# Thai government prepares new crackdown on protests

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Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva set the stage on Friday for a showdown between the army and thousands of anti-government protesters who continue to occupy Bangkok's main commercial district around the Ratchaprasong intersection.

After a botched attempt to arrest several protest leaders, Abhisit appeared on national television to announce that army chief General Anapong Paochinda would replace Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban as head of the Centre for Public Administration in Emergency Situations. The body was established to coordinate military, police and administrative heads after Abhisit declared a state of emergency in Bangkok and surrounding areas on April 7.

Abhisit's decision places the military squarely in charge of operations to end a month of protests organised by United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). The UDD supports former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006. Protest leaders are demanding Abhisit, who was installed with the army's backing in 2008, immediately dissolve parliament and call fresh elections.

In announcing that Anapong would be in charge, Abhisit promised to crack down on "terrorism," which he blamed for the violent clashes between the army and protesters last Saturday that left 23 dead and more than 800 injured. For the past week, government spokesmen and the Thai media have made unsubstantiated allegations that shadowy gunmen dressed in black were responsible for firing on troops and provoking the subsequent crackdown. The UDD has denied the claims

and accused the army of planting provocateurs to justify its attack.

The use of the term "terrorism" is an ominous warning that the government and the military intend to stop at nothing to end the protests. Deputy Prime Minister Suthep used the same term in referring to UDD leaders when he announced on television yesterday morning that security forces had surrounded the SC Park Hotel. "We will arrest and suppress the terrorists. We have set up special task forces to hunt down the terrorists," he said, calling on "innocent" demonstrators to leave the Ratchaprasong protest site.

The Park Hotel operation turned into a farce after UDD leaders used a rope to escape from the hotel via a window and were welcomed by protesters. The element of comedy does not alter the deadly seriousness of the threat to "hunt down terrorists". The language recalls the way in which the government's nemesis, Thaksin, set the security forces loose in 2002 in his repressive "war on drugs" that resulted in thousands of extra-judicial killings.

After the operation at the hotel turned sour, Abhisit delayed his televised address until last night. Acknowledging his failure to end the protests, the prime minister declared: "I want to insist the government is going forward to solve the problem that we know brings sorrow to Thai people." In a sign of what is being prepared, he added: "Sometimes we have to be patient and sometimes we have to accept the impact of the security operations."

Army spokesman Sunsern Kaewkumnerd told the media that the military was planning to disperse the

UDD protests. “There will be another effort to retake the area,” he said. “We can’t allow protesters there because it damages the country.” General Anupong called an extraordinary meeting at the army headquarters for Monday of all army commanders from the rank of major general and above.

When the army will make a move is unclear. The government and the military are under strong pressure from the country’s corporate elite to end the political crisis quickly. The stock market fell another 3.25 percent when it opened yesterday after a three-day national holiday. Together with a 3.6 percent fall on Monday, it wiped out most of this year’s gains. Financial analysts are revising growth estimates for the economy downward as the political turmoil hits the country’s substantial tourist industry.

The purpose of Anapong’s meeting on Monday is also uncertain. Bangkok is rife with rumours of splits in the military leadership and possible coup attempts. Citing a royalist source, *Asia Times* journalist Shawn Crispin reported that “top soldiers had in recent days weighed the possibility of launching a ‘half coup’ that would maintain Abhisit’s Democrat Party in political power while relieving certain soldiers from their command posts”. Anapong is believed to have come under sharp criticism from his deputy, General Prayuth Chano-ocha, for failing to take tougher action against the protesters.

The re-emergence of Abhisit after three days of silence and the open preparations for a military crackdown are directly related to unmistakable signs that UDD leaders are trying to wind back its protest activity. For all their demagogy about a fight to the finish, the UDD leadership has abandoned its protest site at the Phan Fa bridge where demonstrators battled troops to a standstill last Saturday night. It also called off a so-called “offensive mobilisation” on Wednesday outside the headquarters of the 11th Infantry Regiment where Abhisit has been sheltering.

From the outset, Thaksin and the UDD leadership proclaimed that the protests would be “peaceful” and limited their aims to the calling of fresh elections. At the same time, however, the bulk of protesters are from

the rural poor in the country’s north and east. The rallies have also drawn in sections of workers and the urban poor. These layers are not only incensed that pro-Thaksin governments have been ousted by the traditional elites, including the military, the monarchy and the courts, but have begun to express their own social grievances over poverty and unemployment.

The protracted infighting in the Thai ruling elites over the past four years between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions is a product of sharp disagreements over economic policy and benefits of government patronage. The UDD has used the grievances of the rural poor to mount its protests, but is fearful that the demonstrations will slip out its control as protesters start to voice their own concerns. Taking fright at last Saturday’s street battles, the UDD leaders have started to rein in the protests.

As the impetus of the protests has begun to wane, the government and the military have taken the initiative. Abhisit has refused any compromise and rejected calls for immediate elections. Government supporters have begun to organise their own rallies in central Bangkok to oppose early elections. The Bangkok media is drumming the government line about the need to deal with “terrorists”. All of this is to prepare for a military crackdown on anti-government protesters that will almost certainly be more violent and more extensive than last Saturday’s battles.

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