

Political stalemate continues in Thailand

John Roberts
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The political crisis in Bangkok is intensifying as thousands of anti-government protesters entrenched in the upmarket Ratchaprasong commercial area confront heavily armed soldiers and police. The demonstrations have been organised by United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), which supports ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The prospect of a deal to end the demonstrations collapsed on Saturday after Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva rejected a UDD proposal made the previous day for the dissolution of parliament within 30 days and elections within three months. Previously the UDD had demanded an immediate dissolution and elections within 15 days.

The UDD protests began in mid-March and have continued unabated. Street battles erupted on April 10 when soldiers attempted to clear demonstrators at a protest camp at Phan Fah bridge. At least 25 people were killed and more than 850 injured. Grenade attacks on pro-government protesters last Thursday killed three and wounded scores. The UDD denied any involvement but made its conciliatory offer the following day.

The state apparatus is clearly preparing for a crackdown. On Saturday, Chief Civil Court Judge Chartchai Akarawiboon publicly clarified a ruling on Thursday, which had been interpreted as an injunction against the use of force against protesters. The judge declared that the military could disperse the demonstration as long as it was “carried out in line with international standards.”

The spokesman for Centre for the Resolution of Emergency Situation (CRES), Colonel Sansern Kaewkamner, said on Saturday that the army had not ruled out the use of force and dismissed press reports

that army commander General Anupong Paochinda had told 200 unit commanders on Friday not to do so. He repeated the government’s claims that “terrorists” had infiltrated the protests.

Abhisit has declared the government’s intention of clearing the Ratchaprasong protest site but has not said when. He appeared on national television on Sunday seated beside General Anupong to emphasise that the government would not call elections until the situation in the capital had returned to normal.

Abhisit is under pressure from the anti-Thaksin People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which has been calling for the imposition of martial law in Bangkok. The prime minister has already imposed a state of emergency on the capital. A deadline set by PAD for the government to act has expired, raising the prospect of clashes between its supporters and UDD demonstrators.

The government and military have been tightening the noose around the Ratchaprasong protest, but have not so far moved in—in large measure out of fear of triggering a popular revolt, particularly in the rural north and northeast where UDD support is strong. As Colonel Sansern bluntly explained: “Any operation in the Ratchaprasong area could fuel the fire in some provinces and that will stir up conflicts in the future.”

Already UDD supporters have taken action to prevent police and soldiers being moved to Bangkok. On April 22, UDD supporters released a train carrying troops and army vehicles they had held up at Khon Kaen. The train was only allowed to move after the UDD was convinced it was rotating troops in the southern province of Pattani where the army is fighting Muslim separatists. On the day of the train’s release, CRES

announced that four companies of soldiers and police would be sent to clear the tracks if the train was not allowed to continue.

In the country's northeast, protesters on Sunday blocked a major highway at Udon Thani. Roadblocks have also been reported in Nong Kai province and to the north of Bangkok. At one point, 50 police vehicles and 500 police had been stopped. At Ubon Retchathani, 3,000 UDD supporters took seven people hostage, claiming they were PAD security guards, in protest against PAD calls for the military to disperse the UDD protest in Bangkok.

On Monday UDD secretary-general Natthawut Saikua told the media: "The UDD network throughout the country will ask police not to join the planned crackdown at Ratchaprasong." He added that he believed the government would soon dissolve parliament as it could not get the security forces to act.

The present political crisis is the latest episode in four years of infighting in the Thai ruling class between pro- and anti-Thaksin factions over economic policy and the spoils of office. The traditional elites—the military, the monarchy and the state bureaucracy—which backed his election in 2001, turned on Thaksin as he encouraged foreign investment and concentrated power in his hands, cutting across their vested interests.

Thaksin and the UDD have sought to exploit the frustration and outrage of the rural poor over the way the prime minister was ousted by the military in 2006, then pro-Thaksin governments were removed by court rulings over alleged corruption in 2008. At the same time, they have attempted to keep the protests on a tight leash, fearing that the protesters would begin to voice their own demands. While the UDD claims to be fighting for democracy, Thaksin was just as autocratic as his factional opponents while in office.

In a feeble attempt to end the political deadlock, the ailing King Bhumibol Adulyadej spoke publicly for the first time yesterday. He did not directly address the crisis, but lamented that "in this country there may be some people who forget their duty." Speaking in hospital to newly appointed judges, he called on them

to work "honestly and properly" to show there are officials "who perform their duties with strong, clear will and are determined to maintain stability in the country."

The king's intervention underscores the degree to which the monarchy itself has been undermined by the factional brawling. In 1992, after the military killed scores of people in a crackdown on anti-government protests, the king forced the head of the military junta and opposition leader to appear before him to reach a compromise. Over the past four years, however, King Bhumibol's standing as a neutral arbiter has been compromised by the monarchy's obvious support for the anti-Thaksin faction.

The intractable character of the present political turmoil points to the depth of the country's economic and social tensions. The pro- and anti-Thaksin factions are unable to compromise as each has vested interests at stake. At the same, both groups are deeply fearful that the working class and sections of the urban and rural poor are beginning to give voice to their own demands for basic democratic rights and decent living standards.



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