

Thai protest leaders agree to government deal

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After more than two months of anti-government protests, leaders of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) met on Tuesday and accepted “in principle” a proposal by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva to call national elections on November 14. The decision marks a significant backdown from previous UDD demands for an immediate dissolution of parliament.

The UDD continues to maintain its protest site behind barricades in the Ratchaprasong commercial district of Bangkok pending the clarification of details of the government’s proposals and a definite date for the dissolution of the parliamentary lower house. According to UDD chairman Veera Musikhapong, UDD leaders were unanimous in accepting Abhisit’s offer.

In addition to the November election, Abhisit proposed a five-point reconciliation package, including respect for the monarchy, social reforms, an independent media body and unspecified constitutional amendments. The fifth point was an independent investigation into the April 10 clash between the military and UDD protestors at the Phan Fah bridge in Bangkok that left 25 dead and over 850 injured.

The UDD’s decision follows a steady retreat over the past three weeks, including the winding back of protest activities and offers to compromise on the election date. The UDD leadership, which supports former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was fearful in particular that the protestors, drawn from sections of the urban and rural poor, were beginning to go beyond its own narrow electoral aims and to voice their own demands for improved living standards.

Like the government and military, the UDD was

concerned that another bloody confrontation on the streets of Bangkok could trigger a rebellion in the rural north and northeast of the country which it would be unable to control. Following the street battles on April 10, UDD supporters blocked highways and rail lines in the northeast to prevent extra troops and police being transported to Bangkok.

It is by no means certain that the latest deal will end the political crisis, even in the short-term. The pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the Thai ruling elite have been locked in political struggle for the past four years. Thaksin was ousted in a military coup in September 2006, but when the army junta relinquished power and held fresh elections in 2007, the pro-Thaksin party won a majority and formed the government. Throughout most of 2008, the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) held anti-government protests that culminated in the occupation of Bangkok’s two airports. Court decisions led to the ousting of two pro-Thaksin governments and the installation of Abhisit in December 2008 with the backing of the military.

Neither Thaksin nor Abhisit represent the interests of working people or their aspirations for genuine democratic rights. The bitter and protracted factional struggle has centred on sharp differences over economic policy and the control of the levers of state power. The country’s established elites—the military, monarchy and state bureaucracy—initially backed Thaksin but turned on him when his policies began to cut across traditional systems of political patronage and to undermine sections of Thai business.

The UDD’s acceptance of Abhisit’s proposal reflects the fact that it was only ever concerned to exploit the protests to obtain an early election, which the Thaksin-aligned Puea Thai party is likely to win. Thaksin, who

is in exile, rang a Puea Thai meeting on Tuesday to urge acceptance of the deal with Abhisit. “Reconciliation is good for everybody,” he said. “Today, don’t think about the past but look to the future. That is how national reconciliation will happen. I think there should be a start to talks, to create a good climate.”

Puea Thai chairman Chavalit Yongchayudh praised the government proposals, saying: “What happened is good and makes us feel relieved. May 5, Coronation Day [for King Bhumibol Adulyadej], is an auspicious day for all. I believe the [UDD] red shirts will gradually go home and all sides will turn to seeing one another and join hands as one. We have taken a long step back.”

UDD leaders, however, have been cautious in their public statements. Weng Tojirakarn set out UDD’s own five-point plan to help gain acceptance of the government’s proposals. It called for the government to end the state of emergency, return the troops to their barracks, halt government propaganda against the protestors, allow pro-UDD media back on line and drop criminal charges against protestors.

BBC television interviews with UDD rank-and-file protestors revealed hostility to the government’s plan. One protestor declared that it was no different from an earlier offer from Abhisit that the UDD had rejected. Abhisit’s vague promise of social justice will not satisfy the concerns of protestors for improved living standards, including better welfare, education and health services. On Tuesday 1,100 people from the northeastern provinces of Udon Thani, Nong Khai and Nong Bua Lam Phu set out by road to reinforce the Ratchaprasong protest.

The government is also facing opposition from its own hard-line supporters to what they regard as a sell-out. According to the *Nation*, all 37 Bangkok members of parliament of Abhisit’s Democrat Party have received hostile phone calls from their constituents over the government’s capitulation to the UDD demand for early elections. PAD coordinator Suriyasai Katasila declared the deal was “a way out for the mob leaders and the Abhisit government, but not Thai society as a

whole”.

An article in yesterday’s *Bangkok Post* suggested that army commander General Anupong Paochinda played a major role in forcing Abhisit to make a gesture of reconciliation. Anupong’s overriding fear was that the use of troops and tanks to break up the Bangkok protest would lead to protests throughout the north and northeast. One commander told the newspaper: “The order to kill is easily executed because the soldiers have guns. But what happens next?”

Even if a deal is finally reached between the government and the UDD leadership, and the Bangkok protest is dispersed, none of the underlying issues have been resolved. An election in November will lead to further factional brawling, whichever party wins a parliamentary majority. More fundamentally, the underlying social tensions produced by the worsening global economic crisis will continue to fester and will inevitably erupt in new forms.



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