

Thai demonstrators defy government ultimatum to end protest

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18 May 2010

An estimated 5,000 “Red shirt” supporters of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) yesterday defied the latest government ultimatum to abandon their protest site in Bangkok by 3 p.m. or be removed by armed force. After the deadline passed, the thousands of troops and police surrounding the protesters’ barricades did not launch a direct assault. A nervous standoff continues this morning.

Since last Thursday 37 people have been killed and at least 266 injured in unequal clashes between heavily armed troops and protesters with slingshots, petrol bombs and firecrackers. Most of the casualties have been protesters, some of whom appear to have been shot by military snipers. Among the six people who died yesterday was suspended general Khattiya Sawasdiphol, who was shot in the head last Thursday by a sniper.

At 2 p.m., as the deadline approached, army helicopters dropped leaflets urging the protesters to leave. The government threatened that anyone who remained would face up to two years prison. It offered free transport to the rural areas of the country’s north and northeast, where many protesters come from. Only about a hundred protesters went to the designated exit point.

Army spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkhamnerd claimed last night that the only reason the military did not move in was because the “terrorists are using women and children as their shields”. An estimated 1,000 women and their children remain inside the protest site. A number of the women have told the media that they refuse to leave and will face the troops with the male protesters.

Like the US military in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Thai army is using allegations of “human shields” to justify the killing of poorly armed or unarmed protesters. The demonisation of protesters as “terrorists” is similarly used as a pretext for deploying snipers, soldiers equipped with automatic weapons, and armoured vehicles.

Clashes continued yesterday around the protest site in the capital’s Ratchaprasong commercial district and in the Din Daeng and Bon Kai districts of the city. A petrol truck was parked between troops and protesters in Bon Kai and a fire lit under it. The fashionable Dusit Thani hotel came under grenade attack, forcing staff and guests to seek shelter in the basement.

Yesterday afternoon, UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan told a rally: “We will stay in the area peacefully with nothing in our hands. If the government kills the demonstrators at Ratchaprasong, Din Daeng or Bon Kai, the problem will not go away.” The UDD has organised continuous protests since mid-March to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and the calling of new elections.

The UDD leadership is aligned with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006 and now lives in exile. Many of the protesters are bitter at the traditional Thai ruling elites—the army, monarchy and state bureaucracy—that backed the removal of Thaksin and then, following fresh elections, two pro-Thaksin governments in 2008. Abhisit was installed in late 2008 with the support of the military after the courts banned the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) over alleged election

misconduct.

While in office, Thaksin provided limited assistance to the urban and rural poor as part of his stimulus measures to boost the Thai economy. Thousands of people have flocked to Bangkok from the north and northeast to join the UDD demonstrations, which have increasingly been viewed as a means of protesting against deepening social inequality and rising unemployment. Sections of Bangkok's poor have also joined in the street fighting in recent days.

Fearing that a crackdown will provoke a wider rebellion, the government has declared a state of emergency in 22 provinces since last week. Over the past few days, media reports have pointed to sporadic protests in Chiang Mai, Phayao, Ubon Ratchathani and Ayutthaya. In Chiang Mai, 500 UDD supporters marched to the local railway station before proceeding to the US, Chinese and British consulates to present petitions. The *Nation* reported today that the turmoil spreading in the north is threatening to close Chon Buri's Laem Chabang Port and that road blocks have been established in Khon Kaen.

The prospect of a negotiated end to the current standoff in Bangkok appears to be slim. Offers by the UDD for talks if the troops are withdrawn have been rejected by the government. Tentative discussions yesterday between the government and UDD leaders produced no result. Calls by UN Secretary-General Ban ki-moon and US State Department officials for restraint have been ignored.

Significantly US President Obama and the leaders of other major powers have been silent in the past week. None of them has condemned the Thai government and military for the killing of protesters. The response is in marked contrast to the universal denunciations by Western governments and media of the Iranian regime last year for its crackdown on the so-called Green opposition movement. That was a "colour revolution" that Washington supported.

Yesterday the Prime Minister's Office Minister, Sathit Wongnongtoey, stepped up the government's uncompromising propaganda, declaring: "From

intelligence reports, the goal of these terrorists and their manipulator [Thaksin] is to see the highest possible loss of lives." He claimed that the UDD was bringing foreign lawyers into the country in preparation for filing lawsuits with international bodies against the Thai government. The comments are an obvious attempt to vilify the protesters in advance of the army moving against the Bangkok protest site.

Wongnongtoey's remarks came on the anniversary of the 1992 military crackdown against pro-democracy protests in Bangkok staged in opposition to the ruling military dictatorship. On May 17 of that year, Abhisit's Democrat Party was on the side of the largely middle class demonstrators demanding elections and an end to the junta. Nearly two decades later, the Democrat Party, in league with the military, is responsible for a death toll that has already exceeded the 1992 figure and could go much higher.

Neither the pro- nor anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elite represents the interests of the working class and rural poor. In power, Thaksin was just as autocratic as Abhisit in silencing critics, carrying out a ruthless "anti-drug" campaign that led to hundreds of extra-judicial police killings, and intensifying the war against Muslim separatists in the south of the country. The bitter brawling in the ruling class over the past four years has not been about defending democratic rights, but rather which faction controlled the levers of power and determined economic policy in its interests.

The military violence of the past week is not primarily aimed at Thaksin and UDD leaders but against the urban and rural poor who have begun to voice their own class demands for democratic rights and improved living standards. It is this incipient movement of working people that the government is determined to crush.



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