

Thai military crushes Bangkok protest

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At least six people were killed and more than 60 injured yesterday when the Thai army cracked down on anti-government protesters who had been camped out in Bangkok's Ratchaprasong commercial district for weeks. The military had besieged the protest site over the past week, cutting off food, water, power and mobile phone services.

In a display of overwhelming force, armoured vehicles smashed through makeshift barricades followed by heavily-armed troops who fired live rounds at anyone showing signs of resistance. Military helicopters circled overhead to track the movements of demonstrators. An estimated 3,000 to 5,000 protesters were present as the soldiers moved in.

At least six protest leaders surrendered to the security forces, saying they were seeking to avoid further bloodshed. In reality, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) leadership appeared to have lost control of the protesters, many of whom were determined to resist the army.

The *New York Times* reported that UDD leader Jatuporn Proman was booed off the stage as he declared, just prior to handing himself in: "We cannot resist against these savages anymore". He pleaded: "Please listen to me! Brothers and sisters, I will use the word 'beg'. I beg you. We have to end this for now." As the article reported, his call was not heeded. Some protesters reported to an army-designated assembly point, but others began setting fire to nearby buildings. One told the newspaper: "Everyone feels that our leaders betrayed us. We want democracy. True democracy, free democracy. Why is it so hard, why?"

The *Nation* reported that a protest meeting in the Klong Toey area of Bangkok erupted when it was announced that the UDD leaders at the Ratchaprasong site had decided to turn themselves in. "If you don't want to fight then get out," one demonstrator yelled. The newspaper reported those on the stage had lost control. A section of the crowd ransacked the nearby CP Fresh Mart and KBank, which protesters "regarded as supporters of their political enemy".

Dense plumes of smoke rose above the city as angry protesters set fire to at least 27 buildings in the capital, including the luxury Central World and Siam Paragon shopping malls and the library at the Thai stock exchange. The Channel 3 television station was torched and the staff of the *Bangkok Post* and *Nation*—English-language newspapers known for their hostility to the UDD—were evacuated after demonstrators appeared near their offices.

The government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, which had already imposed a state of emergency in the capital and 23 of the country's 76 provinces, imposed an overnight curfew throughout these areas. It announced that troops had been ordered to shoot looters and arsonists on sight. Army spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkamnerd declared that "the general situation is under control" and that the security forces had ended "their offensive".

While the government has managed to break up the Ratchaprasong protest, none of the political and social issues which fuelled two months of anti-government protests has been resolved. The UDD, which is aligned with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, began the demonstrations in March to demand immediate elections. But as the protests in Bangkok's glitzy commercial and tourist hub were joined by the rural and urban poor, issues of social inequality emerged more insistently.

The death toll yesterday and over the past month will only heighten social tensions. At least 25 people died and more than 850 were injured in street fighting on April 10 when soldiers attempted to clear another protest site near the Phan Fah bridge in central Bangkok. In the week since last Thursday, another 51 people died after a compromise collapsed and Prime Minister Abhisit shelved his offer to call an election in November. Medical authorities yesterday reported another six bodies at a Buddhist temple near the Ratchaprasong site, calling official figures into question.

In the rural north and northeast, where many of the UDD

demonstrators came from, there have been protests and skirmishes with security forces. Protesters set fire to government offices in Udon Thani and damaged the City Hall in Khon Kaen. The government buildings in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai were reportedly torched.

An email to the WSWS described the situation in Chiang Mai: “Today’s ‘D day’ in Bangkok has sparked unrest here. I was in town at midday when loud explosions were heard near the governor’s residence. I saw several armoured personnel carriers with troops disgorging and entering the governor’s compound. The [UDD] red shirts had responded to events down in Bangkok, setting fire to tyres at the entrance gates. When they threw petrol bombs, the troops opened fire with live rounds over the heads of the protesters.”

Business commentators yesterday voiced fears that the unrest was far from ended. Kongkiat Opaswongkarn, CEO of Asia Plus Securities, told Reuters: “This isn’t over. The government is really going to have to look at the grassroots problem and what these people are calling for... The social division, as we see it, is way too deep.”

Kavee Chukitsakem, research head at Kasikorn Securities, expressed concerns that the UDD leaders were no longer in charge. “This situation is worse than expected now and it’s very difficult to stop. After the red shirt leaders surrender, things are out of control. It’s like insects flying around from one place to another, causing irritation. We don’t know who they are and why they are doing this. If the situation does not improve quickly, it will severely affect the overall economy,” he told Reuters.

The Abhisit government shows no sign of compromising with Thaksin or the UDD leadership. UDD leaders have been branded as “terrorists” in the pro-government media and could face harsh penalties if put on trial. Abhisit has declared that he will proceed with the five-point reconciliation plan, but that is unlikely to be accepted by opposition leaders without any commitment on early elections.

The bitter infighting between the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the Thai ruling establishment has continued for the past four years. Thaksin, a telecom billionaire, was ousted in a military coup in September 2006 following sharp differences over economic policy. The traditional Thai elites that had backed Thaksin in 2001 turned on him when he continued to open up the economy to foreign investors and undermined the patronage networks that favour the military

and state bureaucracy.

Despite 14 months of military rule and a new constitution designed to keep Thaksin’s supporters out of office, the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won the election in December 2007. The PPP drew its support from the rural north and north east provinces where farmers and small proprietors had benefitted from the Thaksin government’s limited handouts and provision of cheap health care.

Political infighting continued throughout 2008. Protracted demonstrations were mounted by the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—backed by the monarchy, the army, the state bureaucracy and the courts. The security forces, which mobilised in force yesterday against UDD demonstrations, allowed PAD supporters to occupy the government house compound in central Bangkok for months and took no action when PAD occupied the capital’s two main airports.

At the height of the 2008 airport occupation, a court ruling banned the PPP over alleged electoral misconduct, leading to the collapse of the government. The country’s top generals played a significant role behind the scenes in pressuring former PPP allies and a PPP faction to join a coalition with Abhisit’s Democrat Party. The determination of UDD protesters over the past two months has been fuelled in part by resentment and bitterness over the partisan role of the state apparatus in installing Abhisit.

Even if the rival factions of the ruling elite reach a compromise, neither the government nor the opposition parties is capable of resolving the social crisis facing workers and rural poor. The ruthless army crackdown on protesters yesterday is a warning to the working class in Thailand and internationally of the measures that will be used increasingly to suppress any opposition to the impact of the worsening global economic crisis.



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