

Thai government maintains state of emergency

John Roberts
24 May 2010

In the wake of last Wednesday's military crackdown on anti-government "Red Shirt" protesters, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva has declared that he will work for national reconciliation. At the same time, however, he has ruled out a national election in the immediate future and is maintaining a state of emergency in Bangkok and a third of the country's provinces.

The United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) had been demanding the immediate dissolution of parliament and an early election. Abhisit had previously proposed an election in November but withdrew the offer after his reconciliation plan collapsed. During his weekly television address yesterday, Abhisit said: "At the moment, no one can tell when is the best time." In effect, the election, which Abhisit is likely to lose, has been delayed indefinitely.

Abhisit's vague reconciliation proposals will do little to heal the deep rifts in the Thai ruling elite and the sharp political social tensions that have been exacerbated by last week's military repression. The official death toll for the past two months of UDD protests stands at 85, with 1,800 injured. Last Wednesday, 16 people were killed when troops and armoured vehicles broke up the UDD protest site in Bangkok's Ratchaprasong business district. Most casualties were unarmed or poorly armed demonstrators.

The government is continuing its repressive measures. The Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) has extended a reduced curfew in Bangkok and 23 provinces, and will review it on a day-to-day basis. Deputy Prime Minister Suthep

Thaugsuban said on Saturday that the government had no immediate plans to lift the emergency decree.

A criminal court denied bail on Friday to the 114 UDD arrested leaders and supporters. Most face serious charges under the emergency laws. At least nine face charges of treason, which is punishable by death. On Friday the CRES prohibited prominent UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan from leaving the country. He faces treason charges, but has avoided detention because as a parliamentarian he has immunity while parliament is in session.

Concerns have been raised about the fate of well-known UDD leader Arisman Pongruanrorg who embarrassed the security forces earlier this month by escaping an attempted arrest. Some reports indicate Arisman was arrested last Wednesday, but the government denies he is in custody. UDD leader Somyot Pruksakasemsuk was arrested on Friday after he distributed a UDD statement calling for Abhisit and Suthep to resign to allow for reconciliation talks.

The government has continued to block websites sympathetic to the UDD movement and critical of the military crackdown. One such site, *Prachatai.com* has been blocked again after it changed its online address. A UK-based site, *Thai Political Prisoners*, was blocked on Friday after it posted a CNN report that had already been barred in Thailand.

On Sunday, Abhisit denied any responsibility for last Wednesday's bloodshed. He again blamed "terrorists" and armed protesters for attacking military checkpoints and forcing the troops to retaliate. His account is at odds with photos and video footage showing a well-

prepared operation, with armoured vehicles crashing through makeshift barricades, followed by heavily-armed soldiers firing on protesters.

Likewise, Abhisit's declaration that peace has been restored flies in the face of reality. Deep divisions remain in the Thai political establishment. The UDD is aligned with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who was ousted in a military coup in September 2006 and is currently in exile. The pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won the elections held in December 2007 under a new constitution drawn up by the military. But it was forced out of government a year later by a dubious court ruling that banned the party for election fraud, amid protracted protests by the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD).

Abhisit, whose Democrat Party lost the 2007 election badly, was leveraged into office with the assistance of the military as the head of an unstable coalition with former PPP allies. The Abhisit government has the qualified backing of the country's traditional elites—the monarchy, the army and the state bureaucracy—that initially supported Thaksin's election victory in 2001 but turned on him after his economic policies and methods of rule threatened their economic and political interests.

Thaksin secured a base of support among the rural poor in the country's north and north east after he provided limited handouts, cheap credit and health care as part of his economic stimulus measures. Thaksin and the UDD leadership exploited the resentment over his ousting and discontent over deepening social inequality to launch protests for an early election that the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party calculated it could win.

The protests began in mid-March after a court stripped the billionaire Thaksin of much of his wealth for alleged abuses of office. However, as the protests continued, sections of the rural poor, who formed the bulk of the demonstrators, began to voice their own concerns and their hostility toward the ruling elites. Neither the Abhisit government nor the UDD and Puea Thai is capable of addressing these underlying social issues.

After speaking to "Red Shirts" who had returned to the northern Chiang Mai province, a journalist in yesterday's British-based *Telegraph* concluded that the mood was "far from harmonious... they [the protesters] thought they were close to victory, so now few are willing to accept the old order—even though the violence left the ordinary peasant supporters of the Red Shirts deeply shocked".

An article in Sunday's UK-based *Guardian* proposed that the way to "hit the reset button would be to call new elections". However, it pessimistically concluded: "In any case, it is far from clear that a new vote would change very much—or even if the redshirts believe in that any more. One of their chief complaints is that they keep electing governments which are either thrown out by coups or dubious legal processes."

Speaking in Tokyo last Friday, Thai Foreign Minister Korn Chatikavanij said elections would only be held once "we can have a violence-free period of election campaigning by all parties across all regions of the country." This pretext could be used to indefinitely delay elections. Given the depth of opposition, it is unlikely the Democrats will be able to easily campaign in the north and northeast for years to come.

Korn also declared: "The big lie of the [protest] leaders and of ex-Prime Minister Thaksin was that this fight was about democracy and income inequality. Not once did the Red Shirts offer any solutions". While that is certainly true of Thaksin and the UDD leadership, the bulk of the protesters believed that their grievances would be addressed. These class tensions will only intensify under the impact of the continuing global economic crisis and inevitably erupt in new forms.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact