

Thai prime minister survives no-confidence vote

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Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and five of his ministers defeated censure motions in the country's parliament on Tuesday. The opposition Puea Thai moved the no confidence votes over corruption and the military crackdown on anti-government protesters in Bangkok last month that claimed 88 lives and left hundreds injured.

The rancorous debate only highlighted the divisions in Thai ruling circles that have led to protracted infighting over the past four years. Puea Thai is aligned with the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) protest leaders and former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006.

The UDD protests, which began in mid-March, demanded that Abhisit step down immediately as prime minister and call fresh national elections. Following the violent dispersal of protesters on May 19, the government declared that it would seek national reconciliation. However, the bitter exchanges in parliament demonstrate that Abhisit is not prepared to make any concessions.

Last Saturday, Abhisit lifted the curfew that had been imposed in Bangkok and 23 provinces, but gave no indication when his emergency decree would be revoked. On the same day, Abhisit made it clear to foreign diplomats, trade and business organisations, and journalists that his previous offer of early elections in November was off the agenda.

In parliament this week, Abhisit dismissed opposition charges of brutal and excessive force, despite the military's use of armoured vehicles, snipers and heavily-armed troops. Opposition speakers highlighted the deaths of six people who took refuge in the Wat Pathumwanaram temple toward the end of the military's May 19 assault. They named witnesses who had seen soldiers fire at the

protesters from elevated BTS skytrain tracks and said they had video of snipers on the tracks.

Abhisit claimed that autopsy results showed those killed were shot from ground level. Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban declared that the opposition videos were filmed on May 20, and there were no soldiers on the tracks on May 19.

The parliamentary debate was never meant to get to the truth behind the crackdown, let alone dwell on the underlying social and political conflicts. The government used its numbers to limit the debate and restrict the information submitted. Lower House speaker Chai Chidchob had set up a nine-member committee to vet any video footage to be screened during the censure debate. Puea Thai members walked out in protest.

While the government easily defeated the censure motions, the debate exposed rifts in the shaky ruling coalition. The leadership of Abhisit's Democrat Party decided on Friday on a cabinet reshuffle to replace ministerial posts held by the Puea Pandin party, a small coalition partner that voted against the government on the issue of corruption.

Abhisit's coalition government was installed in December 2008 after more than two years of political turmoil. The military junta that ousted Thaksin drew up a new constitution and held national elections in late 2007, but the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won the most seats and formed the government.

Months of protests followed by the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which was tacitly backed by the traditional Thai ruling elites, including the army and the monarchy. The demonstrations

culminated in the occupation of Bangkok's two airports. The government was ousted by a court decision that banned the PPP over alleged electoral law violations. Abhisit formed a coalition with PPP partners and PPP defectors, who had been pressured to join with the Democrats by the military.

The feuding between the pro- and anti-Thaksin factions of the ruling elites stem from unresolved differences over economic policy and the spoils of office. The traditional elites who backed Thaksin when he came to office in 2001 turned on him when he reneged on his promise to protect Thai businesses, and instead continued to open up segments of the economy to overseas investors.

Thaksin secured a base of support among the rural poor in the north and north east of the country as a result of his limited handouts, including cheap loans and health care. The pro-Thaksin UDD mobilised his rural supporters to demand fresh elections, which it calculated that Puea Thai would win. But as the protests wore on, those involved began to raise their own concerns over the deep social divide between rich and poor.

The determination of the protesters increasingly provoked concerns in ruling circles, including the UDD leadership, which feared that it was losing control. In the week before the final military crackdown, the government and the UDD reached a tentative compromise for elections in November, but the decision was resisted by many involved in the protest. When the army moved in on May 19, the UDD leaders abandoned the protest and surrendered.

Having crushed the protests, the Abhisit government is now seeking to consolidate its grip. Speaking to foreign diplomats last Saturday, Abhisit declared that "given the way things have turned out over the last couple of weeks, the date of November 14 (for the promised early election) would now look very unlikely". He again blamed the UDD leaders for refusing to disperse its Bangkok rally and accept his "roadmap" reconciliation plan.

Abhisit outlined a series of measures designed to limit future protests, including legislation on public gatherings, tougher laws on arms control and steps to whip the police force into shape. Some in the lower ranks of the police and sections of the military exhibited sympathies for the protesters during the political turmoil.

The anti-Thaksin PAD has gone one step further, filing a petition with the Election Commission to have Puea Thai dissolved, and its leaders and executive committee banned from politics. PAD claims that Puea Thai violated electoral laws and the criminal code by supporting the UDD campaign to remove Abhisit from office.

The government and security forces have continued to use the emergency decree to hunt down protest leaders. Fresh arrest warrants are being approved by the courts on a daily basis. On Tuesday, the Metropolitan Police Bureau released a report saying it was investigating 360 violent incidents, including 160 violations of the emergency decree. Among the dozens of UDD leaders and supporters already arrested, nine face terrorist charges, which can carry the death penalty.

Yesterday the Criminal Court granted a request by the military-run Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) for a seven-day extension on the detention of UDD activist Somyot Prueksakasemsuk. The court ignored an international petition calling for Somyot's release, stating that the emergency decree was still in effect and CRES had adequate grounds for prolonging his detention.

None of the underlying social tensions has been resolved. The latest economic data from the National Economic and Social Development Board indicates that while the export sector is still relatively strong, unemployment is likely to soar in the second and third quarters because of the protracted political turmoil and drought in the rural areas. The deep social divide between rich and poor that was exposed in the course of the protests will only further fuel resentment and anger, inevitably leading to further unrest.



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