Thai government continues crackdown on opposition

John Roberts
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In another empty gesture to ease political tensions, Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva announced yesterday that he would soon appoint a chairman to the national reform committee. The committee is one of five set up following last month's military crackdown on anti-government protesters, as part of Abhisit's so-called national reconciliation plan.

Another committee is to investigate the May 19 assault on the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) protest site in Bangkok and the deaths of 89 people over the two months of demonstrations. Other committees will examine constitutional and media reforms.

Jatuporn Promphan, one of the few UDD leaders not in custody, denounced the committees as an effort to buy time for Abhisit's Democratic Party-led coalition government and avoid an election. Jatuporn was granted bail because he is a member of parliament. The UDD had been demanding the immediate resignation of Abhisit, and early elections.

Abhisit's talk of "reconciliation" belies the reality: the government and military are continuing their crackdown on UDD leaders and other protesters, branding them as "terrorists". On Tuesday the military-run Committee for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES), in a joint meeting with the Department of Special Investigations, the Council of State and the National Security Council, deferred any decision to lift the state of emergency or grant amnesty to UDD demonstrators, known as "red shirts".

On the same day, the CRES announced that it had compiled a list of 86 persons engaged in suspicious financial transactions, after placing 152 people under investigation for financing the UDD protests. Summonses are being issued for the 86 to appear before eight working groups set up by the CRES. They face possible charges of conspiring to commit terrorist acts, which can carry the death penalty.

CRES spokesman Colonel Sansern Kaewkamnerd said the list includes government officials and people close to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his relatives. An arrest warrant on terrorism charges has been issued previously for Thaksin, who lives in exile after being ousted by a military coup in September 2006.

On Tuesday also, the Criminal Court refused bail for 11 UDD leaders being held on terrorist charges. They will remain in custody at the Bangkok Remand Centre and Khlong Prem Prison until at least June 26 when the CRES will apply for a further extension of their detention under the state of emergency.

On Wednesday, Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban, who is the CRES director, said an amnesty for some red shirt protestors was one option being considered. Suthep said that between 300 and 400 people had been detained during the UDD protests under the emergency law and legal action could still be taken against them even if the emergency were lifted.

Vague promises of reconciliation and amnesty are little more than window dressing. Abhisit has effectively ruled out early elections—the main UDD demand. In his weekly address last Sunday, Abhisit declared the government was not "hunting down the people who joined the recent anti-government protests

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in peace" but went on to add that the government would never reconcile with "terrorists".

Abhisit has dispatched Kiat Sittheeamorn to Washington as a special envoy to convince the Obama administration that the Thai government has the situation under control. Kiat told members of the US Congress and Obama officials that the UDD rally in Bangkok had included armed and "Marxist" elements. He reminded his hosts of the support Thailand had given the US after September 11, 2001—obviously implying that the US should support Thailand's suppression of "terrorists".

Jim Webb, head of the US Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on Southeast Asia, who had just visited Thailand, agreed that elements of the red shirt protest movement were "classic Marxists". As "proof," he declared: "You had the incitement of people based on poor versus rich in a country that has made enormous advances over the last 30 years."

Webb's reference to social inequality indicates the nervousness in ruling circles in Bangkok and Washington over the class issues that emerged during the UDD protests. Thailand's integration as a cheap labour platform into the global economy has led to a deepening divide between rich and poor.

While the UDD leadership, which is closely associated with the Thaksin wing of the Thai ruling elite, exploited the grievances of the rural poor to stage its anti-government protests, it is certainly not Marxist. Thaksin, a telecom billionaire, was ousted by the military in 2006 after falling out with the traditional Thai establishment over economic policy and the exercise of political power and patronage.

After 14 months of rule, the military called elections under a constitution designed to keep the Thaksin faction out of office. However, the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won the most seats and formed a coalition government in 2008. When first elected in 2001, Thaksin made limited concessions to the rural poor and gained a base of support in the long-neglected north and north east of the country.

Two PPP governments were brought down in 2008 through a combination of anti-government protests organised by the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) and politically-biased court decisions. In December 2008, the Abhisit regime was installed after the PPP was banned for alleged electoral abuses. Senior military figures played a major role in pressuring former Thaksin allies to join the Democratic Party in coalition.

The UDD leaders called protests in March to demand an early election, calculating that it would result in victory for the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party. However, as the protests continued, the rural and urban poor began to raise their own demands for better living standards that went beyond the limited aims of the UDD.

Both the Abhisit government and the UDD leadership were worried about wider social unrest if the protest movement continued. In fact the UDD leaders reached a deal a week before the May 19 assault to break up the protest movement in return for a November election but were unable to deliver on their undertaking because of the opposition of many ordinary protesters. On the day of the crackdown, UDD leaders surrendered to security forces, leaving their followers to their fate.

For all the talk in Bangkok and Washington about the need for reconciliation, the US and other major powers all tacitly backed the use of heavily armed troops to crush the anti-government protesters, who resisted with little more than slingshots and petrol bombs. Undoubtedly these governments will do so again as social and political unrest reemerges, as it inevitably will.

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