

Thai government extends emergency rule

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The government of Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva this week extended emergency rule in Bangkok and 18 other provinces for a further three months. The emergency decree had been due to expire yesterday.

The move indicates that seven weeks after the May 19 military crackdown on the Bangkok protests organised by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), the political situation remains tense. Government and security forces operations are continuing against the protesters and any sign of anti-government unrest.

The UDD leaders, closely associated with exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the Puea Thai party, had demanded the government's resignation and new elections.

The emergency measures provide draconian powers to the military and police, including detention for up to 30 days without legal redress. The decree was first imposed in Bangkok and 23 of Thailand's 76 provinces on April 7, after a month of UDD demonstrations. It will remain in force in the capital and five other provinces in the Central Region, three provinces in the North and 10 provinces in the Northeast. Five provinces have had the decree lifted.

The cabinet deemed that there remained "situations that require close monitoring and surveillance", according to the prime minister's office spokesman Ongart Klampaiboon. The degree of "monitoring" can be gauged from the fact that 200 companies of soldiers are still deployed in Bangkok the government's own Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) reports.

CRES, run by the military and chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban, from Abhisit's Democratic Party, had recommended that the emergency be maintained in Bangkok and all 23 provinces. To support its call, it prepared a list of dozens of grenade attacks and other acts of sabotage that have occurred in Thailand since the May 19 crackdown.

A week before Tuesday's cabinet decision there was a bomb attack on the Bangkok offices of the Bumjaithai Party, a partner in the ruling coalition that is made up of defectors from the People Power Party (PPP), the predecessor of the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai.

The bombing occurred on the same day as thousands of Red Shirts, as the UDD supporters are known, gathered for the cremation of former army general and UDD member Khattiya Sawatdipol. He died after being shot by a sniper while inside the UDD protest site in Bangkok's Ratchaprasong district. He was among 90 killed and 1,800 injured during the three months of UDD protests, most of whom were unarmed demonstrators.

It is not clear who carried out the Bumjaithai attack. The military itself has a long record of such provocations. The subsequent arrest of suspects associated with the UDD has been used to promote the claim that the government and military are hunting down "terrorists". Puea Thai officials immediately claimed that this incident and others were the government's way of justifying the continuation of emergency rule.

Abhisit backed the lifting of the emergency in five provinces, reflecting pressures on the government to end the measures altogether. On July 4 Federation of Thai Industries chairman Payungsak Chatsutipol called for an end to emergency rule. He said it was detrimental to private sector confidence and was making investors think twice about further commitments. Thai Chamber of Commerce Vice Chairman Phongsak Assakul said the tourism industry would be hard hit if the measures were maintained.

Reflecting the concerns of international business, the Brussels-based International Crisis Group has called for the lifting of emergency rule as a means to restore stability and achieve the government's stated aim of "national reconciliation". South East Asia project director Jim Della-Giacoma warned: "There is little prospect that genuine reconciliation will succeed when the offer comes from the same government directly responsible for the recent deadly crackdown on the red shirts and their ongoing repression."

On June 28, the London-based *Financial Times* warned of simmering discontent in rural central Thailand because of the government's repression and worsening social inequality. "A veneer of calm may have returned to Thailand after the recent violent protests, but out among the dusty villages of the opposition heartland, a deep well of resentment seethes and bubbles, threatening a new

eruption,” Tim Johnston reported from the village of Baan Laan.

The government, however, is continuing its crackdown. Far from agreeing to new elections, government spokesmen have expressed public order concerns over a July 25 Bangkok by-election in which Puea Thai is standing one of the UDD leaders currently held on terrorism charges.

The Abhisit coalition government was installed—backed by the military, the royal court and the traditional establishment—in December 2008 following years of tumultuous faction fights within the Thai ruling elite. These conflicts have remained unresolved despite the ousting of Thaksin by a military coup in 2006.

The feuding between the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps of the ruling class stem from long-standing differences over economic policy, bound up with the impact of globalised production. In the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, a previous Democrat Party government was defeated in an electoral landslide after it attempted to impose the “open market” and austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund.

The traditional elites initially backed Thaksin, a billionaire business tycoon, when he came to office in 2001, but 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. The military junta that ousted Thaksin drew up a new constitution and held national elections in late 2007, but despite 14 months of military rule the pro-Thaksin PPP won the most seats and formed the government.

Months of “yellow shirt” protests followed by the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), tacitly backed by the army and the monarchy. After the demonstrations culminated in the occupation of Bangkok’s two airports, the pro-Thaksin government was ousted by a court decision that banned the PPP over alleged electoral law violations. In an anti-democratic takeover, Abhisit formed a coalition with PPP partners and PPP defectors, who had been pressured to join with the Democrats by the military.

The turmoil also expressed, in confused forms, a growing social divide. The Thaksin camp had won electoral support among the rural population of the north and northeast of the country. Before the 2006 coup, the Thaksin government had introduced stimulus packages that included handouts to the rural masses in the form of cheap health care and village development fund loans. Long neglected by the Bangkok-based elite and left out of Thailand’s export industry based boom, sections of the farming and rural poor came to view the corrupt billionaire as their political champion.

The UDD was able to mobilise this support to challenge the Abhisit coalition. However during the three months of

the recent UDD protests the rural masses began to voice their own demands for social equality. Poor urban dwellers and sections of workers also began to join the protests, threatening to trigger a social movement that went far beyond the limited aim of the UDD leaders for a new election and the return of a Puea Thai government.

As the June 28 *Financial Times* report warns, the resentment felt against the political establishment has proved to be very deep. The newspaper also pointed to the worsening social inequality in Bangkok. It cited a recent paper by Supavud Saichua of Phatra Securities in Bangkok showing the growth of a large low-wage workforce. The paper found that although employment in poorly-paid sectors, including retail, hotels, restaurants and construction, has grown over the last decade from 24 to 29 percent of the total workforce, corresponding wages have declined from 11.8 to 10.6 percent of total wages.

Abhisit has made unsuccessful attempts to appease the rural and urban poor by extending free bus and train rides and gas subsidies. A mocking article in the *Bangkok Post* on July 1 entitled “Populist steps hardly help” derides the government’s attempts and accuses it of “embracing populist policies it once held in contempt”.

It is this social discontent that is the underlying target of emergency rule. The issuing of an arrest warrant for Thaksin on terrorist charges and the laying of similar charges against 11 UDD leaders has created the conditions for a vicious witch hunt.

There are reports of wider numbers of detentions. Sunai Phasuk, a researcher for the US based Human Rights Watch, told the Associated Press: “A large number of protestors have been detained but no one knows the exact figures, or even their whereabouts.”

Another researcher warned of parallels to the 1992 military coup. Kritaya Archavanitkul, who authored a study “Missing, Dead and Injured in the 1992 Political Crackdown,” said conditions were more difficult than 18 years ago because the emergency decree obstructed fact-finding. She told the *Nation*: “We just have a blurred picture of how people died, got injured and disappeared.” She added that 2,030 people were still missing from May 1992.



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