

# Thai government rules out early election

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Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva seized on a grenade attack last week to effectively rule out any early national elections. “What happened” he said, “will be taken into account when I make decisions relating to the election. I have said before that people’s confidence will have to be restored before an election is held.”

The statement was another step back from Abhisit’s proposals at the height of anti-government protests in May to bring national elections forward to November to appease supporters of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) had been demanding Abhisit’s resignation and immediate elections prior to the army’s bloody crackdown on May 19.

The explosion at the National Broadcasting Service’s Channel 11 television station was a threadbare pretext. The grenade exploded in the car park, caused no casualties and damaged five vehicles. After a similar incident a few days earlier outside the King Power complex, Abhisit declared that Bangkok would be the last place where emergency rule would be lifted in Thailand.

Whether or not the army was actually involved in the incidents, the government rests heavily on the military. Abhisit imposed a state of emergency on April 7 in 23 of Thailand’s 76 provinces, including in Bangkok, where UDD protests were building up. The decree gives extraordinary powers to the security forces, including arrest and detention without trial. Emergency rule still applies in six north-eastern provinces, as well as the capital.

Abhisit’s claim that national elections cannot be held or the state of emergency lifted is belied by the recent elections in Bangkok. On August 29, elections were held for seats on the Bangkok Metropolitan Council and for councils in 36 of the city’s 50 districts. On July 25 there was a by-election in Bangkok’s Constituency Six.

Abhisit’s Democratic Party won all three elections but the electorate remains polarised. Puea Thai, the party closely associated with the UDD, continues to register significant

support in what has always been a major Democrat stronghold.

In the Metropolitan election, the Democrats won 45 of the 60 seats to Puea Thai’s 14. In the district councils, the Democrats won 210 of the 256 seats to Puea Thai’s 39. Most of the Puea Thai wins were in the outlying districts, where many of the urban poor rallied with UDD rural protestors from the north-eastern and northern provinces from March until May.

In the July 25 by-election, the Democrat Panich Vikitsreth won 96,000 votes to the Puea Thai’s candidate Korkaew Pikulthong’s 81,000 votes. The electorate is an outlying area of the city, with a mixture of high, middle and low-income suburbs. The close result occurred despite the fact that emergency rule was in force and the Puea Thai candidate was in prison.

In addition, the military-run Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) placed the principal Puea Thai official in the by-election area on a list of those prohibited from making any financial transactions. Thus the party’s campaign spending was restricted. The local press also reported that the security forces closely watched all Puea Thai campaigners.

As the *Bangkok Post* commented at the time, the only possible conclusion was that even in Bangkok support for Puea Thai had not lessened, despite the break-up of the UDD protests and the tight control exercised by the government and the military. That is the real reason that Abhisit wants to put off national elections for as long as possible.

The antagonisms between the Democrats and Puea Thai reflect deep divisions within the Thai ruling elite. Puea Thai—and previously the People Power Party (PPP) and Thai Rak Thai (TRT)—is closely aligned to Thaksin, who came to power in 2001 on the basis of widespread hostility to the International Monetary Fund austerity measures being implemented by the Democrats in the wake of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

Initially backed by the traditional Thai elites, Thaksin fell out of favour after he continued to open up the economy to foreign investment and cut across the previous systems of patronage

that favoured the military and state bureaucracy. Anti-Thaksin protests organised by the Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which drew its support primarily from the Bangkok middle classes, culminated in the ousting of Thaksin in September 2006 in a military coup.

Thaksin, however, had built up a base of support in the rural north and north-east by providing cheap village loans and health care as part of his economic stimulus measures. Long neglected by the Bangkok elites, farmers, small business operators and rural labourers came to view the telecom billionaire Thaksin as their champion.

When, after 14 months of military rule, elections were held in December 2007 under a constitution drawn up by the generals, the pro-Thaksin PPP won the largest share of seats and formed the government. The PAD again organised demonstrations in Bangkok, which eventually involved the occupation of the capital's two main airports.

The anti-Thaksin bias of the traditional establishment, including the monarchy, was evident in the failure of the security forces to move against PAD protesters and two court decisions removing successive PPP prime ministers on trumped-up corruption charges. At the height of the airport occupations, the courts outlawed the PPP while the military operated behind the scenes to secure sufficient defections to put Abhisit and the Democrats into office in December 2008.

The UDD initiated protests against the Abhisit government in March, demanding immediate elections. However, the demonstrators, drawn from the rural poor in the north and northeast, and sections of the urban poor, began to voice their own grievances. Bitter street fighting erupted in April when the military attempted to clear the protesters, compelling the security forces to retreat. The final assault on May 19, involving heavily armed troops, snipers and armoured vehicles, left at least 88 dead and hundreds more injured.

Despite Abhisit's promises of reconciliation, his government and the military continued the harsh repression. On August 16, prosecutors began preliminary proceedings against 17 UDD leaders, known as "Red Shirts," on treason charges. They were bundled into the court shackled and are due to appear again on September 27. The charges can carry the death penalty.

The prosecutions are part of a wider campaign. Government spokesman Panitan Wattanayagorn recently stated that 241 Red Shirts have been arrested and that 372 other "suspects" are still at large. Panitan said the Department of Special Investigations, effectively the regime's political police, is working on 145 "terrorism" cases, 21 cases of "threatening the government" and 80 cases of "causing injury to the general public and

officials". Civil rights groups, such as the Peoples Information Centre, put the number of political prisoners at nearly 470.

The Asian Legal Resource Centre has written to the UN Human Rights Council over the arbitrary use of the emergency laws to harass and intimidate the political opposition. It cited the case of Sombat Boonngammanong, a critic of both Thaksin and the 2006 military coup, who was arrested on June 27 and detained for several seven-day periods. He was finally charged on July 9 for violating a section of the emergency decree that prohibits gatherings of more than five people. The letter also highlighted the case of five students in Chiang Rai province who were subjected to intense police scrutiny and harassment in July and August for carrying signs criticising the emergency decree.

The *New York Times* reported on August 31 that the security forces have shut down 46 local radio stations in Udon Thani province, where resentment against the government is widespread. This is part of a national censorship campaign that has resulted in over 40,000 web pages being blocked this year.

On September 6, Abhisit's deputy prime minister, Suthep Thaugsuban, scuttled offers by Puea Thai to join the regime in "reconciliation" discussions. He accused the opposition of supporting Red Shirt violence and planning to topple the monarchy. Puea Thai leaders responded by suspending their proposal for talks.

The continuing political tensions reflect the fragility of Thailand's economic situation. While the latest forecast for Thailand's GDP growth is more than 7 percent for 2010, much of this expansion has been based on exports to East Asian manufacturers. Growth across the region, however, is beginning to show signs of slowing as demand falters in the major markets of North America and Europe.

Rising unemployment and falling living standards would inevitably accentuate the already volatile political conditions in Thailand.



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