

Thailand: Bangkok rally highlights continuing political tensions

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Anti-government protesters held a large rally in Bangkok last Sunday to mark the fourth anniversary of the 2006 military coup that ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The demonstration was the first held in the Thai capital since the army's suppression of protracted protests on May 19 that left more than 90 dead and hundreds injured.

The opposition United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) held last Sunday's protest despite a continuing state of emergency in the capital and six north eastern provinces that prohibits gatherings of more than five people. According to press reports, the rally attracted 10,000 protesters at its height in the Ratchaprasong commercial district, the site of the UDD's fortified protest camp in May and the scene of the military crackdown. Smaller demonstrations were held in other parts of the country, including one in the northern city of Chiang Mai.

The government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva had announced that a peaceful rally would be tolerated. However, the military-run Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES) were on alert for what Defence Minister Prawit Wongsuwan called suspicious movements—that is, from UDD strongholds in the country's north and north east. As a result, the protesters were mainly from Bangkok.

Protest banners included calls for an end to the Abhisit government and new elections. Others were worded "People died here" referring to the victims of military repression in April and May. Shrines were erected to commemorate those killed. Sangwan Suktisen, whose husband was killed on April 10 in the first major clash,

told the *Nation* that she and her son had come to demand justice.

Retiree Pakawan Maleyvech commented in the *Financial Times*: "I want to show people that we don't want this government. We want them to dissolve parliament and hold new elections." Pukkie Mathika held up a banner declaring that the Thai government "kills people". Interviewed by Inter Press Service (IPS), the insurance broker said: "I do not fear this government. We will not give up."

IPS noted that the mood at the rally was in sharp contrast to government billboards that read, "Reconcile, as we are one country, one family and one people". The anger was also at variance with Thaksin, the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party and most of the UDD leaders, who are looking for a compromise with the Abhisit government.

UDD leader Sombat Boonngamanong, one of the few UDD leaders not under arrest or in hiding, spent most of his time at the rally appealing for calm. He apologised for the burning of buildings in Bangkok following the May 19 crackdown. Following the gunning down of protesters, some vented their anger by attacking buildings associated with Bangkok's wealthy elites.

Sombat clearly had trouble controlling the protest. At one point, police supplied him with loud speakers to urge the crowd not to block the major Ratchaprasong intersection. "If you shut the road we won't win," Sombat told angry protesters. "Please think it through... our fight must go on. We must end today's activity. We fight politically and we must win it politically."

The tensions at the rally did not go unnoticed. On Monday, national police chief General Wichean Potephosree warned of the dangers of large gatherings that had no leadership to control them and said that the police would have to beef up their intelligence work. The fear in ruling circles is that a movement is emerging of the urban and rural poor whose demands go well beyond Thaksin and the UDD leadership.

Thaksin, who is living in exile, did not address Sunday's rally directly but used his Twitter account to appeal for reconciliation. "I want to see Thai people look ahead together," he declared. "I don't want to see any more unrest, the bringing down of the high institution (the monarchy of King Bhumibol Adulyadej) into politics."

Thaksin's push for reconciliation took a rather strange twist earlier this month with a move to replace Puea Thai leader Yongyuth Wichaidit with Kowit Wattana, a former national police chief. Kowit was part of the junta that replaced Thaksin after the 2006 coup, but fell out of favour and became interior minister in the pro-Thaksin government of Samak Sundaravey in 2008.

Kowit was obviously put forward as a compromise figure to appease the Abhisit government, the military chiefs and the monarchy. However, news of his impending appointment provoked opposition in the Puea Thai and Thaksin was compelled to back away. Yongyuth Wichaidit stood down as leader but then was rapidly reappointed.

According to an *Asia Times* report on September 21, Thaksin has been involved in internationally-sponsored mediation talks with the Abhisit government over the past few months in Cyprus and Russia. On September 1, Thaksin's spokesman Pongtep Thepkanchana met with Abhisit aides in Bangkok's Conrad Hotel. Progress in the talks has reportedly been limited as Abhisit has rejected Thaksin's key demands, including direct access to the royalist elite and the return of \$US1.4 billion in assets seized via a court ruling on February 20.

Thaksin was first elected to office in 2001 by capitalising on widespread opposition—including in ruling circles—to the pro-market restructuring agenda being implemented by the Democrat Party on behalf of the IMF.

However, he came into conflict with the traditional ruling elites around the monarchy, the state bureaucracy and the military when he began to upset longstanding patronage networks and continued to open up Thailand to foreign investors.

Thaksin further threatened the Bangkok establishment by building up an electoral support base among the rural population in the north and north east. As part of his economic stimulus measures, he provided cheap health care and village development loans to layers of people long neglected by Bangkok. The rural poor from the rural north and north east formed the backbone of the protests in April and May this year in Bangkok.

Following the 2006 coup, the military junta called fresh elections based on a new constitution in late 2007, but the pro-Thaksin party won a plurality due to its support among the rural poor and formed a coalition government in 2008. Months of political turmoil followed as anti-Thaksin protesters took to the streets with the tacit support of the military and the monarchy. Court decisions removed two pro-Thaksin prime ministers for alleged corruption. Abhisit was finally installed in December 2008, with the assistance of top generals who persuaded elements of the pro-Thaksin government to switch sides.

The government has tried to paint last Sunday's UDD rally as a sign that democracy and normalcy have returned to Thailand. In New York for the UN General Assembly, Abhisit has foreshadowed the lifting of the state of emergency in six provinces, but not the capital. However, the government's anti-democratic measures continue, including the detention of top UDD leaders who face trial for treason, media censorship and a heavy presence of security forces in Bangkok and many provinces.



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