

Opposition rally in Thailand cuts across government's election manoeuvres

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Thai police estimate that at least 30,000 “Redshirt” supporters of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra took part in a rally in central Bangkok on January 9. According to police special branch officers, the numbers reached 40,000 at one point.

The demonstration was the first major mobilisation of Thaksin supporters since the government ended the state of emergency in the capital and three surrounding provinces on December 22. The emergency decree had been imposed last April in 33 provinces, mainly in the rural north and north-east of the country, where the former premier has a significant social base.

The demonstrators, organised by the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), gathered at the Democracy Monument. They then marched to join a larger gathering at the Ratchaprasong intersection, the site of Redshirt rallies and clashes with security forces last May that left 90 dead and over 1,000 injured. The main demand of the rally was that those responsible for the killings in the government and military be brought to justice.

The marchers also called for the release of 19 UDD leaders who are facing treason charges over last year's protests, which had demanded the resignation of the government and new national elections. The 2010 UDD rallies attracted crowds of up to 100,000.

Thaksin, in self-imposed exile, addressed the rally by a 10-minute video phone link while flying over Europe. The billionaire former prime minister made populist pledges to return “justice” and “democracy” to the country and dismissed the government's “reconciliation” talk. “The government's meaning of reconciliation is to chase up people who they can arrest,” he declared, “so that the ‘Reds’ will be no more.”

The turnout could only have unsettled the

government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, which has been seeking to undermine support for the UDD with a series of measures aimed at wooing pro-Thaksin voters. It is widely anticipated that Abhisit intends to call a national election, due this year, as early as April or May. The government had been hoping that relatively high economic growth of 10 percent in 2010 would ensure its return to power. The indication that pro-Thaksin forces retain a mass social base, however, raises the possibility that the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai Party could gain the largest share of the vote.

Suthep Thaugsuban, the deputy prime minister in charge of national security, expressed concern that the return of mass rallies to the capital could increase social and political tension. He denounced the UDD plan to hold two demonstrations in the capital every month in the lead-up to an election. He also condemned plans by the anti-Thaksin Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) to hold a rally on January 25 to protest the government's handling of a border dispute with Cambodia.

While the prosecution of the UDD leaders remains central to government policy, and media censorship and arrests continue in the areas of opposition support, the Abhisit regime had been adopting a carrot-and-stick approach to win over supporters of the UDD and Puea Thai.

In a television broadcast on the same day as the Redshirt rally, Abhisit announced various measures, supposedly to reduce “discrepancies and injustice in our society”. The “informal” sectors of the economy, including motor cycle taxi drivers, street vendors and taxicab operators—social layers that have been prominent in Bangkok's anti-government rallies—will now be able to obtain loans from state-owned banks.

The government will cap the diesel price at 30 baht

per litre and extend free electricity to those using 90 units a month or less. Help will be extended to low-income earners for child care and education. These measures come on top of earlier promises to guarantee crop prices, refinance rural loans, raise the minimum wage and set up a national savings fund and old age pension scheme.

During Thaksin's term in office from 2001 to 2006, his Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party built up a base of electoral support among the urban poor and the peasantry in the north and north east with a series of limited economic concessions, including cheap health care and loans for village development. The policies had a significant political impact, in large part because the recipients had long been neglected.

However, Thaksin's agenda alienated the traditional elites centred on the monarchy of King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the military and the state bureaucracy. Business figures affected by Thaksin's turn to International Monetary Fund-inspired economic policies formed the PAD and organised mass anti-government protests in the urban areas. PAD was able to exploit resentment, particularly in the urban middle class, over Thaksin's autocratic methods of rule and alleged corruption.

The PAD protests helped create conditions for the September 2006 military coup that ousted Thaksin and outlawed the TRT. During the 14 months of military rule, a new constitution was imposed that was designed to exclude Thaksin's supporters from power. However, the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won the largest number of seats in the December 2007 election and formed a coalition government.

The traditional elites never accepted the election result. Sustained PAD protests, tacitly backed by the military and monarchy, quickly emerged, culminating in the occupation of Bangkok's two main airports. The constitutional court removed Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej in September 2008 and his successor Somchai Wongsawat in December on dubious charges of corruption and electoral fraud, and dissolved the PPP. The Abhisit government was formed on December 17, 2008 after the military pressured the PPP's coalition partners and a PPP faction to join with the opposition Democratic Party.

The large "Red Shirt" protests that erupted in April and May last year reflected the deep resentment of

layers of the urban poor and peasantry toward the traditional ruling elites. Despite the efforts of the UDD leadership to narrowly focus the demonstrations on the demand for new elections, protesters began to voice their broader concerns about social injustice and the lack of democratic rights.

Following the brutal military crackdown that left at least 89 people dead, the UDD sought to rein in its supporters. The billionaire Thaksin, Puea Thai and the UDD, which represent a dissident faction of the Thai ruling elite, feared that the protests were slipping beyond their control.

At the January 9 rally, UDD leader Jatuporn Prompan told the media: "We have learned a lesson that big gatherings will not lead to the result we want." On January 15, the UDD announced that it had made an agreement with the police that all future protests will be limited to just two hours and will be organised to have the "minimum impact" on Bangkok business.

Despite the efforts of UDD leaders, the underlying political and social tensions that led to last year's protests have not gone away. Moreover, it is far from clear that the Democrat Party, for all its handouts, will win this year's election—the party has lost every national election held over the past decade. Whatever the outcome, the election will only set the stage for a new political crisis, fuelled by the rift in the ruling elite and more fundamental class divisions in society as a whole.



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