

Thai government prepares for early election

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Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is pushing ahead with plans for an early national election despite misgivings within the traditional ruling elites that it could open the door for a return of a government supportive of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Abhisit indicated last month that he intended to dissolve the lower house of parliament in the first week of May, paving the way for an election in late June or early July—about six months early.

The planned election would take place amid continuing sharp tensions between the rival camps of the ruling class—Abhisit’s Democrat Party-led coalition and the Thaksin-aligned Puea Thai party—that have produced one political crisis after another over the past five years. Less than a year ago, Abhisit ordered the military to violently suppress protests organised by the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) to demand his resignation and fresh elections.

After months of demonstrations, on May 19 the heavily-armed soldiers, backed by snipers and armoured vehicles, moved on UDD or “Red Shirt” protesters, who had occupied the Ratchaprasong intersection in Bangkok’s commercial district. At least 92 people were killed and around 1,800 injured on the day and in previous clashes.

The open conflict raised fears, both within the government and among its opponents, of an escalating social and political crisis that threatened to spin out of control. Many UDD supporters, who were from the impoverished rural areas of the North and Northeast, had begun to raise their own demands for improved living standards, denounce the gulf between rich and poor, and criticise the country’s traditional elites, included the monarchy.

Both the pro- and anti-Thaksin camps, concerned at the potential threat to bourgeois rule, have since attempted to ease tensions, despite their ongoing rivalry. According to a recent *Asia Times* article, a behind-the-scenes accommodation between the government and the royal Privy Council, on one side, and the UDD, on the other, began to be worked out last October, possibly with the

assistance of US officials.

An article in the *Bangkok Post* gave details of a meeting between Abhisit and prominent UDD leaders at the Miracle Grand Hotel last December at which a deal was reportedly struck. In return for the government easing its draconian measures against the opposition, the UDD and Puea Thai would confine their activity to the electoral process, end criticism of the king and crack down on radical elements engaged in or threatening armed resistance.

The government subsequently lifted the state of emergency that had been imposed prior to the May 19 clashes and in February released seven UDD leaders on bail. The UDD rallies that have been allowed to proceed have been quite large but notably moderate in tone. UDD chairperson Thida Thavornseth, who was present at the December meeting, has used her appearances to try to rally the Red Shirts behind Puea Thai’s election campaign. All the released UDD leaders are seeking to stand as Puea Thai candidates.

Thaksin, who remains in exile in Dubai, has also declared that he intends to play a prominent role in Thailand. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* on April 7, he put forward his own pro-business plan, calling for a cut in the corporate tax rate from 30 to 25 percent to match Malaysia and move more in line with Singapore’s rate of just 17 percent.

As reported by the *Asia Times*, former Thaksin justice minister Pongthep Thepkanchana recently told the media that Puea Thai’s internal polling showed the party would win 30 more seats than the Democrats. Independent polls found that Puea Thai retained solid support in the Northeast, would split the seats in the North and Central regions, and would make new inroads in Bangkok.

Abhisit has made a series of promises in a bid to boost the Democrats’ vote. He has pledged to raise the minimum wage by 25 percent in less than two years; provide free electricity for low-income earners, make low-interest loans available for taxi drivers and street vendors; increase civil service pay by 5 percent, extend the welfare

system to the informal sector, and raise subsidies for rice farmers.

Despite criticisms in the local and international press of his “pre-election splurge,” Abhisit has persisted with his vote-buying measures, knowing that he must find a way to undermine support for Puea Thai among the rural poor. Support in the rural areas for the billionaire Thaksin is based more on myth than reality. Coming to power in 2001 after the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Thaksin’s main objective in his limited rural welfare measures was to boost the tottering Thai economy.

One of Abhisit’s calculations in calling an early election is that the economy is likely to deteriorate as the year wears on. Economic growth, which hit 8 percent last year, is predicted to decline to 3-5 percent this year. Moreover, rising inflation could heighten social tensions. Consumer prices increased by 3.14 percent in March compared to a year earlier, the fastest rate since last August. The government is spending about \$US10 million daily to keep politically sensitive fuel prices down.

The government has also pushed through several constitutional changes designed to assist the Democrat Party and its allies. The number of party-list seats has been increased from 80 to 125 in the new 375-seat national assembly and these seats are to be counted nationally, rather than regionally. Multi-member constituencies have been abolished in favour of single-member seats. Both of these measures are likely to assist the small parties allied to the government.

Despite all of Abhisit’s efforts to guarantee an electoral victory, sections of the military hierarchy are concerned that Puea Thai could win. The military ousted Thaksin in September 2006 in a coup that was backed by the country’s traditional elites, including the monarchy, the state bureaucracy and the courts. These layers of the political establishment had initially backed Thaksin in 2001, but turned on him after he promoted pro-market reforms and encouraged foreign investment at their expense. Oriented to more affluent layers of the Bangkok middle classes, they were also hostile to Thaksin’s populist appeals to the rural poor.

The military relinquished power after rewriting the constitution to handicap the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP). Despite these efforts, the PPP won the 2007 election and formed a coalition government in early 2008. Months of political crisis followed, in which protests by the anti-Thaksin Alliance for Democracy (PAD), in league with the courts, the monarchy and the military, brought down two PPP governments. Abhisit was finally

installed with the assistance of the military in December 2008 after a court ruling outlawed the PPP over charges of electoral fraud.

PAD and sections of the military top brass have never reconciled themselves to the return of a pro-Thaksin government. PAD and the army have inflamed border tensions and clashes with Cambodia over the disputed Preah Vihear Temple as a means of whipping up nationalist sentiment and creating an atmosphere of national crisis—possibly to head off early elections.

PAD, which previously supported the government, has denounced Abhisit for failing to take a tougher stance on the temple issue. In a statement in February, the organisation called for a new leader who was more “capable”, “decisive” and “honest”. PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul declared that the Abhisit administration was “worse than any other previous government”. He has since called for an election boycott and threatened to sever relations with PAD’s electoral arm, the New Politics Party, if it fails to toe his line.

While support for PAD is small and dwindling, it undoubtedly has sympathisers among the generals. Persistent rumours of a military coup compelled the armed forces commander General Songkitti Jaggabata and army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha to announce at a press conference on April 5 that there would “definitely not be a coup” and the military would not interfere in the election.

However, such promises offer no guarantee against a military intervention, either before or after the election, if a pro-Thaksin government appears likely. The generals are clearly following events very closely. According to the *Asia Times*, the military’s Internal Security Operations Command recently conducted secret polling showing that Puea Thai had a 10-seat lead over the government.

Whatever the outcome of the election—assuming it takes place—none of the underlying issues that have divided the Thai ruling elites has been resolved, and this will inevitably lead to further political crises.



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