

Former Thai prime minister charged with murder

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Thai opposition leader Abhisit Vejjajiva has been charged with murder over deaths that occurred during the 2010 military crackdown on Red Shirt protesters, when he was prime minister. His former deputy, Suthep Thaugsuban, has also been charged. Both men have been released pending further investigations, in preparation for trials.

The decision to prosecute Abhisit is another indication that the bitter political feuding within the Thai ruling elites that helped fuel the protests has not abated. Abhisit and his Democrat Party were defeated at last year's national elections, which brought Yingluck Shinawatra and the Puea Thai party to power. Yingluck's brother, Thaksin Shinawatra, was ousted as prime minister by the military in 2006, initiating six years of political turmoil.

The Department of Special Investigations (DSI) initially charged Abhisit and Suthep on December 13 over the death of taxi driver Pham Kamkong. He was among 90 killed and 1,500 injured when Abhisit ordered the military to crack down on anti-government protests called by the pro-Thaksin United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), or Red Shirts.

On Wednesday, DSI chief Tarit Pengdith met with prosecutors to add hundreds of additional charges. These include some of the cases, involving 35 deaths, already passed on to prosecutors via the Metropolitan Bureau of Police. According to the DSI chief, there are another 700 cases of attempted murder and 800 of assault. Most of the deaths and injuries occurred on May 19, 2010, when the army launched a full-scale assault on the Red Shirt camp in Bangkok's main business district.

Abhisit and Suthep have denied the charges. Suthep said the government in 2010 was acting under an executive decree that protected officials who gave

orders during the state of emergency from prosecution. He noted that DSI chief Tarit, now advising the current government, was a member of the previous government's Committee for the Resolution of Emergency Situation (CRES) in 2010 and present at its meetings.

Abhisit accused the Puea Thai government of using the charges as a means of pushing through a stalled general amnesty bill to apply to all those involved in the political conflict since 2005. The main purpose, he said, was to obtain an amnesty for Thaksin, who went into exile after being convicted of corruption. Abhisit declared that he would rather be convicted and face a possible death penalty than allow Thaksin to return to Thailand.

A general amnesty would also affect the trial of 24 Red Shirt leaders, including five current parliamentarians, who have been charged over their role in the 2010 protests. These charges were filed during Abhisit's last year in office.

The prosecution of Abhisit and Suthep threatens to undermine the shaky agreement, struck before last year's elections, between Thaksin and representatives of the military and monarchy who backed Abhisit's Democrat government. The traditional elites, who are bitterly hostile to Thaksin, agreed to allow the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai party to assume office if it won, as long as the new government left the military untouched and enforced the country's reactionary lese majeste laws, which outlaw criticism of the royal establishment.

To date, the deal appears to have held up. The closely-watched annual list of senior officer promotions and reassignments, released in October, was interpreted by many observers as a compromise. Current army commander General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, a staunch royalist, held sway over the army appointments, while

Defence Minister Sukamphol Suwannathat, a known Thaksin ally, was able to determine and expand positions at the Defence Ministry.

However, the prosecution of Abhisit over the 2010 crackdown carries the threat that soldiers and senior officers could face charges or discipline over the murders. In particular, army commander Prayuth was in charge of the attack on the UDD compound on May 19, 2010. To date, the army has not commented on the charges against Abhisit and Suthep.

None of the charges against Abhisit and Suthep, on the one hand, or against Red Shirt leaders, on the other, has anything to do with concern for democratic rights or legal processes. When in power, Thaksin was just as ruthless as Abhisit in suppressing political opponents, and equally contemptuous of democratic rights. His notorious “war on drugs” involved the extrajudicial killing by police of hundreds of alleged drug peddlers.

The protracted infighting in the Thai ruling class has been driven by sharp differences over economic policy and political patronage. The traditional elites, centred on the monarchy, initially supported the billionaire Thaksin when he won office in 2001. He reversed some of the pro-market restructuring measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund in the wake of the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis that had devastated sections of Thai business.

The situation changed, however, as Thaksin used his position to the advantage of his own business empire and his cronies, undermining the traditional systems of patronage on which the state bureaucracy and military depend. He also began to open up sections of the Thai economy to foreign investment. The traditional elites were particularly opposed to Thaksin’s populist measures, including village loans and cheap health care, by which he built an electoral base among the urban and rural poor.

The military and monarchy tacitly backed the emergence of the largely middle class Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD), which organised large protests in Bangkok from late 2005, helping to create the political conditions for the military to seize power in September 2006. The coup, however, resolved nothing. Two pro-Thaksin governments, formed after the army called fresh elections in 2007, were destabilised and removed through what amounted to judicial coups. This paved the way for Abhisit and the Democrats to be

installed, with the assistance of the army, in late 2008.

Determined Red Shirt protests emerged in 2010 and lasted for months. While the UDD leaders sought to limit the demands to Abhisit’s resignation and fresh elections, the urban and rural poor who joined the protests began to raise their own concerns about the social disadvantages they faced, the deep gulf between rich and poor, and the contemptuous attitude of the ruling elites.

The entire Thai ruling class, including the Thaksin wing, became alarmed over the increasingly militant and radical character of the protests. In fact, the UDD leaders reached a deal a week before the May 19 assault to break up the protest movement, in return for a November election. But they were unable to deliver on their undertaking because of the opposition of many ordinary protesters. On the day of the crackdown, UDD leaders surrendered to security forces, leaving their followers to their fate.

Both factions of the ruling elite then drew back from the brink and reached a compromise to permit last year’s election to proceed. However, amid the acute uncertainty produced by the global economic crisis, the competing camps are seeking to consolidate their positions at the expense of their rivals. The murder charges against Abhisit are the latest step by the Thaksin faction. At the same time, both sides are acutely aware of the danger that this infighting could open the door for the emergence of a movement of workers and rural poor that again begins to voice basic social demands.



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