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Thailand

Violent repression of "red shirts" in Bangkok

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This week in Thailand, Abhisit Vejjajiva's government revealed its true nature. Two sessions of negotiations with representatives of the "red shirts" quickly broke down. Under pressure from his conservative electoral base, Abhisit still refuses to dissolve the Assembly and to submit his party, the Democrat Party, to the verdict of the ballot box.

At first gambling on the redshirt demonstrations fragmenting, the government and the elites who support it have been disappointed. After a month of demonstrations, tens of thousands of protesters continue to call for more justice and democracy. No longer knowing how to force the demonstrators to return home, Abhisit eventually declared a state of emergency on Wednesday April 7th in Bangkok and the surrounding provinces. Then he closed the PTV ("People's Television Channel") which is popular among the red shirts as well as over 30 independent websites which were not relaying Government propaganda. Justifying these measures by his desire to "stop distorted information", Abhisit inflamed the anger of the protesters who took over the headquarters of Thaicom to resume broadcasting. Arrest warrants against the main leaders the red shirts did not prevent the demonstrators from defying bans on rallies and events. There were still tens of thousands in the streets of Bangkok on Friday and Saturday.

It was too much for the government, military, and bureaucratic elites who refuse to give up so much as a crumb of the power they have held for many decades. On Saturday, the military fiercely suppressed unarmed demonstrators, in some cases using live ammunition according to many observers. More than 20 dead and 800 wounded have been identified, mostly among the red shirts. This is the worst death and injury toll since the 1992 coup. In a television delivery on the evening of Saturday April 10th, Abhisit presented his condolences to the families of the victims but justified repression, stating that the red shirts were behind the clashes. He covered up for the military, claiming that while they were armed with live ammunition, they had fired in the air.

Despite the means deployed the army was not able to defeat the demonstrators and the military had to withdraw. The future seems very unclear: the military staff are in shock after this defeat. The army is divided, with many soldiers displaying sympathy for the red shirts. This has led to army officers organizing a witch-hunt against those soldiers that they called "watermelons", green in uniform but red inside.

Attempts at repression could lead to more widespread riots and unpredictable consequences. It is not certain that this option is being considered today by the Government. At the same time, Abhisit's days as premier may well be numbered. His survival depends on the ability of army and bureaucratic elites who put him in power place to find a replacement solution that is acceptable to them. A new military coup is not ruled out.

There remains one major unknown: what is happening so far as the Palace is concerned? The King, in hospital since last September, is no longer able to intervene as he did in the past to try to stifle the protests. Members of the royal family are themselves prey to infighting for the succession. Each of the claimants has forged alliances with factions of the army and police, which partly explains the indecisions of the government over the past month.

The red shirts are demanding the restoration of democracy. This involves the immediate resignation of Abhisit, who has blood on his hands, and the convening of new legislative elections. It is a critical moment in the history of Thailand. The NPA is alongside all the workers, peasants and poor of Thailand and supports their legitimate struggle for social justice and democracy.