

Thai government widens political witch hunt

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Despite its calls for “reconciliation” in the wake of last week’s military’s crackdown on “Red Shirt” protests, the Thai government is widening its witch hunt against alleged leaders, financial backers and supporters of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD).

Last Tuesday, a Thai court issued an arrest warrant for the exiled former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, on charges of “terrorism”. Without providing any evidence, the Department of Special Investigations alleges that Thaksin committed, threatened to commit, or supported terrorist acts. Terrorism charges can bring the death penalty in Thailand.

In targetting the UDD’s figurehead Thaksin, the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and its military backers are effectively branding the entire Red Shirt movement as terrorists. If Thaksin is guilty of “terrorism” for supporting the protests then similar trumped-up charges can be laid against any of the participants. During the final weeks of the two-month-long protests in Bangkok, Abhisit, his ministers and the pro-government media demonised demonstrators to justify the army’s actions, which resulted in at least 88 dead and hundreds injured.

Having bloodily cleared Bangkok’s streets, the Abhisit government is determined to suppress further protests. The security forces have detained at least 22 Red Shirt leaders and as of the middle of this week were looking for another 53. Nine of the detainees face terrorist charges and the others are being held for alleged violations of emergency laws. Those arrested are being held on a military base.

On Friday, Department of Special Investigations

director-general Tharit Pengdit announced that his agency would seek arrest warrants next week for another layer of protest leaders, describing them as “third generation leaders”. They are also to be charged with breaches of emergency laws. He gave no indication of how many warrants would be sought.

The detention of history lecturer Suttachai Yimpraset, who is being held incommunicado and without clear charges, has provoked protests by Chulalongkorn University academics. Suttachai was summoned last Monday, along with a former labour activist and editor of *Red News*, Somyos Prueksakasemsuk, to answer allegations that he had breached emergency laws. Associate professor Nualnoi Treerat questioned why suspects were being interrogated in isolation at a military camp. “It’s creating a climate of fear and people will opt to silence themselves, for fear of being detained or arrested,” she told the *Bangkok Post*.

The *Washington Post* reported yesterday that multimillionaire businessman Prayudh Mahagitsiri was the latest person to be added to “an expanding financial blacklist” prepared by the military-run Centre for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES). His bank accounts have been frozen and he has been ordered to provide details of all financial transactions since September. An emergency decree signed by military chief General Anupong Paochinda declared that the purpose of the financial measures was to root out “national security” threats and to “get rid of this problem effectively and immediately”.

Together with Prayudh, 151 businessmen, lawyers, politicians and other alleged UDD financiers are on the blacklist. Their only “crime” appears to be their association with Thaksin. Twenty companies with connections to the Thaksin family are under

investigation and require government permission to conduct virtually any financial transaction.

Thai-based author Chris Baker told the *Washington Post*: “This [crisis] is an ideological conflict mixed up with a business conflict. Business competition has always been muddled with political conflict. But this is much more vindictive.”

Thaksin was ousted as prime minister in September 2006 in an army coup after falling out with Thailand’s traditional elites, including the monarchy, over economic policy and the spoils of political office. After the military junta relinquished office, the pro-Thaksin People Power Party (PPP) won the 2007 elections but was forced out of office in what amounted to a judicial coup. Amid protracted anti-Thaksin protests, the PPP was declared illegal and Abhisit installed as prime minister in December 2008 with the political assistance of the military.

The bitter divisions in the ruling elites have now unleashed a broader movement among the rural and urban poor, who regarded Thaksin as their champion as a result of his limited handouts while in office. The UDD launched protests in mid-March to demand Abhisit’s resignation and fresh elections, calculating that the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai would win. However, as the protests wore on and clashes erupted with the security forces, the protesters began to voice their own concerns about social inequality and poverty.

While the current political crackdown is being directed at UDD leaders, the government’s chief aim is to suppress the eruption of wider social unrest. Despite claims yesterday by acting national police chief General Patcep Tanprasert that the situation was under control, the state of emergency is being maintained in Bangkok and 23 provinces in the country’s impoverished north and northeast. Patcep announced that the current curfew might soon be lifted, but added that it could be imposed at any time. Some pro-UDD radio and TV stations remain closed and opposition websites blocked.

Patcep moved on Wednesday to tighten control over the northeast by transferring four provincial police

heads to inactive posts in Bangkok. The police officials are blamed for failing to stop city halls and government buildings from being torched amid local outrage over the military’s killing of UDD protesters in Bangkok. Assistant army spokeswoman Lieutenant Siriya Khuengsirakul told the media that intelligence officials claim to have information that UDD supporters are moving underground and could be planning violent retaliation. The police and military are intensifying their surveillance, she said.

The security forces are acutely aware of the seething discontent among the rural poor over the bloodshed in Bangkok and the anti-democratic practices of the country’s ruling elites. An article in the current issue of *Time* magazine reported on the widespread character of the anger among people in the impoverished northeast region, also known as Isaan. “In the city of Khon Kaen, a billboard on a main road is emblazoned with a doctored photo of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, his aristocratic features bruised and battered,” the article stated. “Even more chilling, everyone from matronly teachers to small business owners is openly calling for armed insurrection.”

By widening the witch hunt against UDD leaders, the Abhisit government will only harden hostility among the urban and rural poor toward the ruling elites and ensure that further political upheavals are inevitable.



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