



BULLETIN

No. 77 (153) • May 20, 2010 • © PISM

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The internal crisis in Thailand – Implications for the region

by Justyna Szczudlik-Tatar

The internal crisis in Thailand could have an unfavorable impact on the situation in South-East Asia. The pacification of the demonstrators on 19 May of this year will make it harder to achieve an understanding between the parties to the dispute. Its resolution presently depends on the attitude of the government and would be served by talks with the demonstrators whereas isolating the opposition will only lead to more protests. In addition, a possible collapse of the Thai economy would worsen the economic situation in the entire region. The Thai crisis brought to light the weakness of the ASEAN and the lack of influence of this organization and of neighboring countries on the situation in the region.

Origins of the conflict. The beginnings of the conflict reach back to 2005, when Thailand's Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra from the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, in power since 2001, won the elections. His fight against poverty, reform of the health services and restrictive anti-drug policy gained the support of the poorer strata of Thai society (mostly rural). At the same time, accusations of populism, corruption, abuse of power and authoritarianism leveled by the opposition against the prime minister led to growing discontent among the better to do segment of the population (mostly urban). The prime minister was also accused of being disrespectful toward the royal head of state. Royalists (also called "yellow shirts") began to organize anti-government demonstrations which paralyzed the functioning of the state.

During early elections held in April 2006, TRT once again won, to the discontent of the "yellow shirts". In September 2006 the armed forces conducted a *coup d'état* to prevent the destabilization of the state. The military *junta* changed the constitution, which had been in force since 1997, and announced parliamentary elections for December 2007. The winner of the elections was the People's Power Party (PPP), the successor of the TRT, which had been delegalized in May 2007 by the Supreme Court for electoral fraud during the previous elections. Samak Sundaravej became Prime Minister.

In 2008, royalists acting as part of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) called on Samak Sundaravej to resign, accusing him of acting on behalf of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, of violating the constitution and corruption. The Supreme Court shared the opposition's arguments and, in September 2008, deprived Samak Sundaravej of the post of prime minister. Somchai Wongsawat of the PPP (and a Thaksin Shinawatra family member) became the new prime minister, leading to renewed protests from the opposition. Following more unrest, the Supreme Court delegalized the PPP while the prime minister lost his position. In December 2008, Abhisit Vejjajiva from the Democratic Party (DP), supported by the "yellow shirts" became the new prime minister and remains in office till this day.

After the DP took power, protests began by supporters of the former PPP who established the National United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD). The crisis came to a head in April 2009. The authorities were forced to cancel a planned ASEAN summit because of the protests by UDD supporters (called the "red shirts"). The demonstrators were calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, accusing him of having assumed power in a non-democratic fashion thanks to the biased decisions of the Constitutional Tribunal. Protestors ended their demonstrations toward the end of April out of fear that the army would be brought out against them.

The conflict in 2010. A new wave of protests by the "red shirts" began in March 2010. It was set off by a court decision in February to confiscate part of the estate of former Prime Minister Thaksin, who was accused of having come into possession of it illegally. The demonstrators, as in 2009, demanded the resignation of the Prime Minister and the calling of new elections. Serious clashes, in

which 25 people were killed, took place on 10 April 2010. At the beginning of May, the government attempted to end the dispute. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva agreed to dissolve parliament in September and to hold new elections in November (nearly a year before the expiry of the assembly's term), on the condition that the "red shirts" cease their protests. The protesters, in turn, made the cessation of demonstrations conditional upon obtaining binding decisions about the elections, the abolishment of the state of emergency, the withdrawal of troops and the punishment of those guilty of the death of protesters on 10 April. Agreement was made difficult by the attitude of the "yellow shirts", who accused the government of passivity in the face of the demonstrators' demands. The conflict further escalated on 13-18 May, when 37 persons lost their lives during fighting.

In this stalemate, the leaders of the "red shirts" called on the king to intervene (the function of the monarch is highly symbolic, however, and the king is traditionally apolitical). They also proposed that the UN mediate. The government firmly rejected this idea, and called on countries and international organizations not to interfere in Thailand's internal affairs. The government also rejected the mediation initiative announced on 18 May by Thailand's senators. The following day, the army stormed the demonstrators, who surrendered fearing even greater casualties. In all, about 80 persons lost their lives during the protests. The authorities imposed a curfew in Bangkok and in 23 provinces.

Reactions of the USA, China and the ASEAN. The United States, Thailand's most important ally, condemned the unrest. At the beginning of May, US Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell traveled to Bangkok and met with protest leaders. The Thai government refused to meet with Campbell and accused the USA of interfering in Thailand's internal affairs. On 19 May, the USA expressed concern with the situation in Bangkok and called on both parties to end the conflict.

China took a neutral stance. Until now, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has only issued a laconic declaration expressing concern with the situation in Thailand and hope for a quick resolution of the dispute. The lack of an unequivocal stance concerning the conflict can be explained by a very important principle in Chinese foreign policy – that of non-interference in another country's internal affairs. In addition, China doesn't want to antagonize any of the parties in order to make its actions easier at the end of the conflict.

ASEAN found itself in a difficult situation. In April, Cambodia called on Vietnam, which is presently chairing the Association, to hold an extraordinary summit devoted to the situation in Thailand and to ways of reacting to those events. The principle of non-interference in a country's internal affairs, which is in force within ASEAN, makes it impossible for the organization to take other than verbal action, however.

Implications for the region. The crisis will most probably lead to changes in the way the Thai political system functions. Two scenarios are possible. The first – which seems less probable in the present situation – is democratization involving abandoning the traditional forms of governance based on business and military *coteries*. Notwithstanding the government's accusations of terrorism and of acting in the interests of the former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra leveled against the demonstrators, the "red shirts" have distanced themselves from Shinawatra and are stressing the need to respect democratic principles. If this scenario will take place presently depends on the attitude of the government. Taking up talks with the opposition, including the realization of the decisions announced during the protests (such as the holding of early elections), could moderate the dispute. Attempts to isolate the opposition will most probably lead to more protests.

The second scenario entails a deepening of the chaos and a possible *coup d'état*. This is favored by the division of society into the "red" and "yellow" camps that emerged as a result of the protests and the manner in which they were ended. Moreover, there is a danger that the Malay Muslim minority inhabiting the southern part of the country (Thailand is mostly a Buddhist country) will take advantage of the existing instability to increase its separatist activities. Thailand also has a border dispute with Cambodia: both countries claim sovereignty over the Preah Vihear temple. In addition, the unstable situation could affect the economy of Thailand and the entire region, where tourism is one of the greatest sources of revenue. Possible sanctions by the European Union and the USA could lead to Thailand's isolation and the petrification of its regime. China could prove the beneficiary of such a situation. Presently, China has the possibility of painting itself non-democratic Thailand's principal ally by respecting the principle of non-interference, by recalling its role during the Asian crisis of 1997 when it granted Thailand assistance, and by making reference to the Asian community of values.