

Thailand: 'We just want democracy'

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Hundreds of Thais and an Australian remain in jail, as the government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva continues to repress the grassroots pro-democracy Red Shirt movement. Some Red Shirt protesters are still in hiding.

This follows the full-scale military assault on May 19 that ended a six-week protest by thousands of Red Shirts in the commercial centre of Bangkok. Australian Colin Purcell, of Perth, has been caught up in the repression and is still detained by police.

Kaewta, who was at the protest and the military crack-down, told Green Left Weekly: "We just want democracy. We are peaceful. We went out with empty hands — we never, ever had weapons."

She described grenade attacks and shootings by the military besieging the protesters. "Snipers were hiding in high buildings everywhere."

Many Red Shirts killed during the protests had head wounds, suggesting sniper fire.

The Red Shirts were demanding new elections, as democratically elected governments had been overthrown twice in the last five years.

In 2006, then-PM Thaksin Shinawatra was overthrown in a military coup and forced into exile. His Thai Rak Thai party was dissolved but, in 2007, the Peoples Power Party — based on TRT support — won elections.

This government was overthrown in 2008 by the royalist Yellow Shirts. The military and courts sided with the Yellow Shirts after they overran the national parliament and shut down Bangkok's airport. Abhisit, who was leader of the parliamentary opposition, was installed as PM in December 2008.

The conflicts are about more than rival politicians. During his 2001-06 government, Thaksin, a telecommunications tycoon, implemented policies that benefited the poor majority, including universal education and health care and funds for locally controlled development. This gave him a large electoral margin, based on the votes of people previously ignored and alienated from the political process.

The Yellow Shirts who opposed Thaksin were based on the urban middle classes and quickly made common cause with Thailand's traditional elite, in particular the military hierarchy. The Red Shirts who began their sit-in protest in early March were peasants, urban poor and workers demanding democracy as a means of seeking economic and social justice.

From April 10, the military increased violence against the protesters, killing 26 in an initial assault. The government claimed the Red Shirts were armed and fired first. This was refuted by protesters.

Kaewta said protesters had no guns, but used improvised non-lethal weapons when confronted with the army's use of lethal force.

"We did have bamboo, small rocks, slingshots and sometimes chilli with vinegar, thrown in a small

plastic bag”, she said.

Sae Dan, a retired general and prominent protester, was shot in the head by an army sniper while giving an interview to the International Herald Tribune on May 13. After this, the military increased its attacks.

Kaewta said: “Sae Dan was shot at about 7.20pm. At 9.30pm the army shot M79 [40mm grenades] at us four or five times and shot at us with M16 [rifles]. That night was horrible — it was scary.”

Other attacks were more subtle. Kaewta described an incident in which 36 people were hospitalised, and three killed, by poisoned coffee given to protesters.

Before the military launched their May 19 assault, both sides agreed to recognise the Wat Pathum Wanaram temple as a safe refuge. The protesters included children and the elderly. However, Kaewta, who was in the temple for the duration of the assault saw army snipers on the elevated “Skytrain” railway shooting into the temple.

“At least six people were killed inside the temple. Another four were shot just outside but we couldn’t take them into the temple because the army would shoot at us.” A health worker trying to help the injured was also shot.

Officially, more than 80 protesters were killed during the protest and its suppression. The real number is likely to be significantly higher. Kaewta said the army shot at protesters to stop them from retrieving bodies and took the bodies away themselves.

After the military assault, hundreds of protesters were taken into custody and others were sent back to their villages.

Repression, however, has continued.

Kaewta told GLW that government agents kidnapped and electrocuted a Red Shirt protester after he returned to his home village in the north-east. She said many protesters were afraid to return to their villages and have gone into hiding.

Conor Purcell, of Perth, was charged under emergency powers decreed by the unelected Abhisit government. He was refused bail on June 4 when he appeared in court.

Purcell, an Australian army veteran working as an English teacher in Thailand, was arrested on May 23. During the protest, he had been liaising between the Thai army and the Red Shirts. But, after he saw the army kill 25 protesters in April, he gave a passionate speech from the Red Shirts’ stage, in which he called on the soldiers to stop killing their own people.

When he was arrested, the Thai media suggested he used his Australian Defence Force experience to train armed Red Shirts. However, the charges against him are for having spoken from the Red Shirts’ stage.

Arriving in court in chains on June 4, he told journalists: “I was bashed by seven people — pre-planned bashing, ordered bashing — with sticks by seven armed people beat the crap out of me in jail so they could move me to maximum security and put me ... in chains like this.”

On June 4, AAP quoted “prison sources” as saying “Purcell had been bashed by prison trustees with bamboo sticks, inflicting welts and bruising to his back and shoulders”.

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P.S.

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