

Thai Prime Minister Calls for Reconciliation, but Firm on Rule of Law

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Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva of Thailand, told more than 400 of Asia's leading decision-makers at the 19th World Economic Forum on East Asia in Vietnam that his country is swiftly moving forward after the disruptions of the violent opposition protests in April and May. "I am open to have early elections, but those elections must be helpful to reconciliation," he declared.

In a special update session on Thailand, moderated by Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman, World Economic Forum, the prime minister called on everyone in Thailand, including the Red Shirt protesters, to engage with the government in its efforts towards national reconciliation. If the opposition joins in, he said, most of the issues concerning the constitution, the media and the divisions in society can be settled.

But he was firm on bringing to account the protesters who were responsible for the violence that erupted in May. "Everybody needs to follow the law," said the prime minister. "No person can be above the law." In apparent reference to former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who has been accused of supporting the violent protests, Abhisit said the national interest should not be held hostage to the interest of one person.

Abhisit said the fundamentals of Thailand's economy remain strong, noting that first quarter GDP growth was a robust 12%, which was achieved against a backdrop of opposition protests in March. He said the original target of 16 million visitor arrivals may not be achieved this year, but was confident that the 14 million figure last year could be equalled.

The prime minister promised to address the "legitimate grievances" of the protesters, the majority of whom wanted to achieve their end through peaceful means. "People have a right to good education, healthcare and insurance in old age," he said. "We will also open up the political space more, especially in the rural areas where people may feel too much power is concentrated in the capital. We are going to push this agenda forward."

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