

A state of emergency in the land of smiles

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BANGKOK, THAILAND -- I've been living under a state of emergency for the past week. The funny thing is that you would never know it.

After a month of anti-government red-shirt protests in Thailand's capital, things have finally come to a head. The protests remained peaceful until April 10, when the worst political violence the country has seen since 1992 erupted, leaving 24 dead (including a Japanese

Thompson Reuters photojournalist) and more than 800 injured. The protests against the government essentially come down to class warfare, and the red shirts are calling for Prime Minister [Abhisit Vejjajiva](#) to step down, dissolve parliament and hold new elections.

The day the violence broke out, I fortunately escaped the clashes while on my visa run to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Since then, I've heard from various friends, family and readers urging me not to return to Bangkok until things settled down. I was asked to reconsider my plans and even heard from travelers asking me if they should reconsider theirs because other media outlets were making the situation out to be a bloody coup.

I hopped my first flight back to Thailand Monday morning to see the aftermath first-hand.

I walked down the streets where the riots took place and talked to protesters and travelers who were on Khao San Road when the clashes broke out. (Two friends were directly affected by the tear gas.) The area has since been restored to its normal bustling self as the reds abandoned that protest site in Bangkok's Old City to consolidate more in the city's center.

What makes the protests so interesting is that they have extended beyond the rural poor versus the government and the city's middle- and upper classes. Unexpectedly, many Bangkok residents began to participate. Cab drivers are decorating their windshields or car antennas with red flags and caps, and street food vendors and shop owners are decked out in red T-shirts or bandanas. Much of Bangkok's monk population has joined in the protests, and police and army personnel converse freely with protesters.

This, in part, is to blame for the government's failure to disperse the protesters.

The "reds versus yellows" conversation is pretty unavoidable no matter where I am or who I am with. Everyone from expatriates, to other travelers to my cab drivers and landlady are interested in knowing what foreigners think of the situation and whether it makes us uncomfortable living in the city.



I have yet to personally feel as though the protests are threatening my stay or safety in Bangkok. I am still able to travel the city freely on the SkyTrain and the subway, and have not felt at all limited or in harm's way when doing so. Vendors are still out selling their goods, and much of life in Bangkok continues as normal.

Thailand's tourism industry, which accounts for about 8 percent of its income, is taking a big hit. In the first three weeks of the protests, despite their peaceful nature, Thailand saw a loss in more than \$300 million, according to the [Wall Street Journal](#). This number will only increase as the political unrest continues to unfold.

Despite what the State Department's travel warnings say, Bangkok is still safe to visit, and I encourage travelers to keep their plans. While it is sad and scary that innocent lives were lost in the riots, it is important to remember that it is not everywhere. It's easy to avoid the parts of Bangkok that are still heavily affected by the protests, but even those areas have more of a festival feel to them than a danger zone. All of the activity has taken place in a small, concentrated area of the massive city. Someone visiting New York City wouldn't avoid Yankee Stadium because of an incident in Times Square.

This past week was also the three-day celebration of the Thai New Year, Songkran. Despite the weekend prior's events, no matter what color they supported, Thais came out to celebrate in the ritual throwing of water and cleansing of the Buddha. Thais lined the streets brandishing Super Soakers, garden hoses, buckets and clay to douse passersby. Bangkok was full of smiles and laughter (even amid the protesters and soldiers), putting to rest any uneasy minds about safety in the city and proving that, despite political turmoil, Thailand still is The Land of Smiles.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. Visit her blog, Passport: The World, at www.stamfordadvocate.com. To read Sarah's blog, go to <http://blog.ctnews.com/lipman>.

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