

Mass student protests in Thailand continue to grow

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At least 10,000 demonstrators attended a rally on Sunday in the Thai capital, Bangkok, in what was the largest protest since the military seized power in 2014. It is the latest in a month of student-led protests that have swept across the nation.

Protesters gathered at the Democracy Monument, flooding the city's major thoroughfare, Ratchadamnoen Avenue, and holding public speeches for nearly eight hours. The rally's organisers, the student movement Free Youth, estimated an attendance of between 20,000 and 30,000 people. Hundreds of police were deployed.

The protesters are calling on Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha and his cabinet to resign. Their three chief demands are: the dissolution of Parliament and a new election, an end to the intimidation and persecution of political opponents, and the drafting of a new constitution.

In addition, protesters are demanding the reform of the monarchy, particularly the revoking of the *lèse majesté* law, under which it is illegal to "defame, insult, or threaten" the royal family. Penalties under this draconian law, which is used to intimidate and silence critics, involve jail for up to 15 years.

Prayuth Chan-o-cha, a former military general, led the 2014 coup d'état that overthrew a democratically elected government and brought the military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order, to power. The current constitution was drafted by 21 appointees of the junta and was designed to prolong military power and block any challenge from opponents.

While the junta ended nominally in 2019, Prayuth became Prime Minister in a blatantly rigged election, with the result that today the military still maintains control over Thailand's political institutions.

One notable feature of the election was the unexpected rise of the Future Forward Party (FFP),

which ran its election campaign on a call for democratic rights and opposition to the military dictatorship. Founded only the year before, the FFP's leadership consisted largely of young business executives and academic lawyers, representing a dissident layer of the Thai bourgeoisie and affluent middle class.

The FFP won significant support among young people, while also appealing to workers with its calls for a fairer distribution of wealth and a social welfare system that promotes human dignity." The party finished with 6.3 million votes and garnered the third-largest number of parliamentary seats after Prayuth's party and the opposition Pheu Thai party linked to former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

After the election, the FFP came under relentless attack in the government's Constitutional Court. Its leader, multimillionaire auto company director, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, was accused of violating election law and was disqualified as a member of parliament.

A protracted legal battle ensued over a supposedly illegal donation of \$US6 million from Thanathorn to the FFP, which resulted in a blatantly political decision by the constitutional court on February 21 to disband the party. As various commentators noted, the finances of other parties were not similarly scrutinised. Following its disbanding, the elected MPs from the defunct FFP joined its de facto successor, the Move Forward Party.

The court decision provoked shock and outrage among students resulting in a wave of protests in universities and high schools nationwide during which the three main demands were formulated. Concentrated in Bangkok, rallies were held daily until the shutdown of universities in late February due to the outbreak of

the COVID-19 pandemic.

Protests erupted again on July 18, when a demonstration of 2,500 students at the Democracy Monument was organised by a student movement named Free Youth, a collective of disparate university groups and clubs across the country on the basis of the demands. Protests subsequently spread to at least 44 of the country's 76 provinces and have been held almost every day.

The protests arose after the government again extended the state of emergency imposed during the pandemic that banned public gatherings. As there had been no confirmed local infections in Thailand for two months, students accused the government of exploiting the pandemic as a pretext for preventing protests.

Opposition had also grown to the “enforced disappearances” of government critics, including the abduction in June of pro-democracy activist Wanchalerm Satsaksit, who was bundled into an unmarked vehicle by armed men in Cambodia and is still missing.

Through late July, protests were organised by various political tendencies within Free Youth, including an LGBT student group campaigning for the legalisation of same-sex marriage. Another grouping aligned itself with the anti-China movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan, collectively dubbed the Milk Tea Alliance.

Protester leaders drew attention to the pandemic’s devastating economic impact on workers. On July 23, a student group called the New Life Network staged a hunger strike outside Government House, making reference to the worsening social conditions and lack of financial aid for the millions of newly-unemployed, many of them students.

A key turning point came on August 3, when human rights lawyer Anon Nampa, 35, delivered a speech raising the demand to reform the monarchy. Anon has a record of defending junta opponents and *lèse majesté* offenders.

A large rally at Thammasat University’s Rangsit campus on August 10 centred on a manifesto that proclaimed 10 new demands, including the revoking of *lèse majesté* and reducing the portion of the state budget allocated to the royal palace.

Tatthep Ruangprapaikit, president of Free Youth, told the *Manager Daily* that it is not their aim to overthrow the monarchy. However, the mounting hostility towards

the King was reflected in the popularity of Twitter hashtag #WhyDoWeNeedAKing?, which has been a trending topic over the past two weeks and received millions of tweets.

After his ascent to the throne in 2016, King Vajiralongkorn consolidated his rule by expanding his constitutional powers, taking control of two army units, and direct ownership of the Royal Family’s assets valued at over \$US30 billion. During his reign, which has been intimately tied to the military, the *lèse majesté* law has been frequently used to imprison critics of the monarchy.

Prayuth last week declared that the student demands regarding the monarchy were “unacceptable,” “risky,” and “went too far.” He also confirmed the king, currently taking refuge in Germany, had requested that nobody be prosecuted for *lèse majesté* for now—a sign of the deep fear in ruling class of sparking far broader unrest.

Shortly after his August 3 speech, Anon and another student leader, Panupong Jadnok, were arrested by police on multiple unrelated charges. Parit Chirawak, 22, a student leader from Thammasat University and outspoken critic of the monarchy, was also arrested for apparently breaking coronavirus regulations. Human Rights Watch reported on Saturday that police are targeting at least 31 other student leaders.

The protest movement shows no signs of subsiding.



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