Seven protest leaders in Thailand arrested by police

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Thai police have responded to a mass demonstration in Bangkok last Sunday with a series of arrests. The rally was part of the eruption of student-led protests across Thailand over the past month. Seven prominent members of the student movement organising the protests, Free Youth, were arrested this week on charges including sedition and inciting public unrest.

Six of the leaders were specifically targeted for their participation in a Bangkok student rally on July 18, which sparked the recent wave of anti-government protests. Since then, rallies have proceeded on an almost daily basis.

While originally confined to major universities, the movement has since gained wider support among students and workers around the country, as demonstrated in the Sunday protest, Thailand's largest since the 2014 military coup.

The three main demands of the protest leaders are to dissolve parliament, end the state persecution of political opponents, and rewrite the current constitution, which was drafted by the military junta.

Arrest warrants were issued during the Sunday rally for 15 leaders of Free Youth. According to the *Thai Enquirer*, a coordinated police operation was conducted throughout Wednesday night. The six people arrested over the July 18 protest were Baramee Chairat, Suwanna Tanlek, Korakot Saengyangpant, Natthawut Somboonsap, Tossaporn Sinsomboon, and Thanee Sasom.

Police also apprehended rappers Thanayuth Na Ayutthaya and Dechathon Bamrungmuang, leader of the highly popular and notorious hip-hop group Rap Against Dictatorship, for their performances at the protest.

The seventh protest leader targeted was Anon Nampa, a human rights lawyer and leading figure in the Thai protests. Anon was arrested, for the second time this month, over a speech on August 3 calling for reform of the monarchy. In Thailand, anyone who "defames, insults or threatens" the royal family can be prosecuted for violating the draconian law of lèse majesté, and faces up to 15 years in jail.

Ever since Anon's speech, student protests have openly criticised the political role of King Maha Vajiralongkorn, whose power over the constitution, the armed forces, and the palace fortune has grown considerably since he was installed in 2016.

The lèse majesté law has been used to silence political opposition as many as 90 times since the 2014 military coup. However, Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, former head of the military junta, has reportedly received instructions from the King not to use the law, for now. Anon was charged instead with sedition, which carries a maximum prison sentence of seven years.

Anon joined the Thai Lawyers for Human Rights organisation after 2006, when the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was overthrown in a military coup. He became known as a lawyer for the Red Shirts (a grouping of Shinawatra supporters who staged protests in 2010) and lèse majesté offenders. He has previously been charged in 13 cases for involvement in anti-junta protests.

State repression of the protests has been ratcheted up since criticism of the monarchy emerged as a focal point of the movement.

Earlier this month, two other student leaders—both known critics of the monarchy—faced arrest for sedition: Panupong Jadnok, a member of student group Eastern Youth for Democracy, based in Rayong Province; and Parit Chirawak, co-founder and former president of the Student Union of Thailand.

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At a rally in Phitsanulok Province on August 9, six youth leaders were abducted by men claiming to be Border Patrol policemen, in an attempt to derail the protest. *Prachatai* reported that so far five planned protests have been blocked by intervention from authorities.

Six further arrest warrants were also issued on Wednesday for students who led the August 10 Thammasat University protest, in which specific demands to reform the monarchy were first outlined.

In spite of these efforts, the protest movement continues to grow. This week saw whole classrooms in at least eight high schools across Bangkok wear white ribbons and raise three-fingered salutes during the national anthem, in a sign of solidarity with the protests. On Wednesday, hundreds of high school students gathered outside the Ministry of Education building, calling for greater freedom in schools as well as reiterating the movement's three demands.

Yesterday a major student rally took place in the northeastern city of Nakhon Ratchasima, at which Panupong Jadnok spoke about the reform of the monarchy to loud cheers of support from crowds of high school students. The North-Eastern Student Assembly Network will be holding a protest today in Khong Kaen at 5:00 p.m. and Free Youth is advertising a demonstration tomorrow at Bangkok's Kasetsart University, which will likely draw a large gathering of students from across the city.

Several of the arrested leaders, now released on bail, have indicated on social media that they will continue to be involved in rallies. As police sought to detain them, they stood in the Criminal Court with a number of MPs from the Move Forward Party and opposition Pheu Thai Party as guarantors.

Senators appointed by the junta have expressed suspicions that Free Youth is a front for opposition political groups, as with the Shinawatra-backed Red Shirts. In particular, they are investigating the funding for the large protests, which have included concerts, extensive lighting, and giant LED screens.

On its Facebook page, Free Youth has rejected these claims, saying: "Our funds come from the masses, who support us only because this is a movement of young people, by young people, and for young people."

Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of now-defunct Future Forward Party, has said he played no role in funding the protests, which first began in February when the party, which attracted support from young people, was dissolved by the Constitutional Court.

Royal Thai Army Commander-in-Chief Apirat Kongsompong is attempting to incite popular hatred against the protesters, saying last week: "The coronavirus can be cured, but the disease of *chung-chart* ['nation-hating'] cannot be cured." Apirat's use of this term, used by past military regimes to rally far-right nationalist forces against internal opposition, is significant.

The media, subject to intense pressure from the Prayuth government, has mostly refrained from reporting protesters' demands regarding the monarchy at all. Education Minister Nataphol Teepsuwan warned after last Sunday's rally that there was a limit to how far students should go.

This week's crackdown on the movement's leadership expresses fears in the ruling class that the protests could broaden and intersect with widespread discontent in the working population amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social inequality in Thailand, which greatly increased under the junta's rule, is set to skyrocket due to the pandemic's impact and the likelihood of a major economic contraction this year. A Credit Suisse report last year named the country the most unequal in the world, with the richest 1 percent of the population owning 66.9 percent of the nation's wealth.

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