Thai protest movement spreads across country's northeast

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Thailand's student-led protest movement shows no signs of diminishing, as major rallies erupted over the past few days in the northeastern region of Isan. For more than a month now, large anti-government protests have been held almost daily.

Last week's police operation, in which seven student leaders were arrested on charges including sedition, has done little to intimidate or stifle the growing movement.

On Thursday, a protest in the northeastern city of Khon Kaen was organised by a local student group called Khon Kaen's Had Enough. Around 1,000 people, mostly high school students, gathered at the Chao Por Lak Muang Shrine, where numerous students were invited on stage to deliver speeches.

The protest's organisers also performed a Buddhist ritual, intended to chase Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha out of power. A main road was closed for the event, which drew a much larger crowd than anticipated.

Siwakorn Namnuad, a leader of Khon Kaen's Had Enough, told *Khaosod* reporters that Thursday was the first large-scale protest in the city centre. He noted the crowd's enthusiastic response to the three demands of the protest movement: to dissolve parliament, end intimidation of political opponents, and rewrite the constitution.

"If our demands are not met, we will increase the scale of our operations. Students are ready to call for change; we are waiting for working age people to join us," Siwakorn said. Opposition in Thailand's rural north and northeast to Prayut's military-controlled government has meant that the movement is expanding beyond high schools and universities in the region.

Another large demonstration was held on Thursday at the Yo Ma Monument in the city of Nakhon Ratchasima. As in Khon Kaen, the crowd was estimated at over 1,000, while the stage was dominated by high school pupils.

Speakers denounced the 250 senators in office, all of them appointed by the military junta that assumed power in 2014, under Prayut's leadership. They also made special appeals for the resignation of Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, widely despised for his critical role in the military coup and involvement in a 2018 corruption scandal.

Khon Kaen was the location for another rally on Saturday, arranged by student organisations from nine provinces under the name of the Isan Liberation Network. At the same time, a protest in Ubon Ratchathani was notable for the appearance of Parit Chirawak, a central leader of the Free Youth movement that has orchestrated the Thai protests.

In the north, a significant student rally within the grounds of Chiang Mai University was held by student group Community of MorChor. Attendance was so much greater than expected that the venue overflowed with students, and barriers had to be dismantled to accommodate members of the public drawn to the event. Police officers were reportedly scattered through the crowd taking pictures of the organisers.

According to *Prachatai*, student representatives on stage read out a list of Chiang Mai University students who had been killed during the bloody Thammasat University massacre in 1976. They also read the names of members of the Farmers' Federation of Thailand (FFT), involved in the peasant revolts of the 1970s, who died in the massacre.

One student leader called on the Red Shirts movement to participate more openly in upcoming protests. The Red Shirts, supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, staged mass demonstrations in Bangkok in 2010, and were largely

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based in the north and northeast.

Anti-government activity in Bangkok, meanwhile, has continued since the August 16 rally, which drew tens of thousands of people and was the largest demonstration since the 2014 coup.

Around 400 high school students from across the capital besieged the Ministry of Education on Wednesday, showing the three-fingered salute in solidarity with the protests. When Education Minister Nataphol Teepsuwan and his aides appeared outside, the students treated them with contempt, jeering loudly and making thumbs-down gestures and then ordered them to the back of the crowd.

Some students blew whistles as he tried speaking to them, a disruptive tactic notoriously used in the 2014 protests that helped trigger the military coup, in which Nataphol himself had played a role.

Students from Rajini School, a private girls' school in Bangkok, yesterday wore white ribbons (a symbol of the protests), even after the school's administration banned all forms of political expression on campus. A group of nearly 1,000 alumnae have signed an open letter to protest the ban.

On Sunday, students from four major Bangkok universities—Kasetsart, Silpakorn, Bangkok, and Rangsit—assembled on Sunday at the Lan Khon Meaung Square in Phra Nakhon district.

They were campaigning against the state persecution of political activists, in particular those condemned under the country's draconian lèse majesté law, which criminalises any alleged criticism of the Thai monarchy. The student leaders announced that they would gather more often every time the government used the law to arrest protesters.

The response of Prayut's government to the protest movement changed markedly after a rally on August 3, when student leaders added to the three initial demands a call to reform the monarchy.

King Vajiralongkorn's ties with the military-backed government, along with his personal possession of crown assets, has provoked hostility throughout the population. This was demonstrated in the outrage on social media when Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the disbanded Future Forward Party, exposed a steep rise in the annual budget for Palace agencies over the last three years.

The amount was pegged at $US285 million for the next fiscal year—up 16.8 percent from last year, compared to a 3.1 percent rise in the overall national budget, *Nation Thailand* reported.

After the seven arrests last week, protest leader and vocal critic of the monarchy Panupong Jaadnok was arrested yesterday on sedition charges related to his participation in the August 10 rally, where a manifesto of 10 demands for monarchy reform was declared. Yesterday evening, he was transported to a police station in Pathum Thani, where Parit Chirawak said a protest would be held in his defence.

Two organisers of a student rally in the northern city of Lamphun have been ordered to report to police and hear charges against them. One of the students, Thanatorn Vitayabenjang, said in an interview with Al Jazeera: "There's been many cases where [police] tried to report protesters, but at the end of the day, after everyone is over that fear, it becomes a catalyst to come out more and go against the government."

Many more protests are planned for the coming weeks. In Nakhon Ratchasima, protesters announced that a major student rally would take place on September 19 at Thammasat University's main Tha Prachan campus in Bangkok. Free Youth has not yet revealed details, but stated its plans to camp out overnight, in what could be a massive rally of students and broader sections of society.

The *Bangkok Post* reported that security agencies were fearful of the upcoming protests. A meeting between Prime Minister Prayut and high-ranking military generals was held on Friday, in which preparations for possible mass upheavals were discussed.

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