

Tens of thousands of Thai protesters call for a new constitution

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Thailand's student-led protest movement spread to wider layers of the population, when a large demonstration on Saturday night, at Thammasat University in Bangkok, drew tens of thousands of people from around the country.

The protest is thought to be the country's largest, since the most recent US-backed military coup in 2014, far outdoing the last mass rally on August 16.

The gathering started late on Saturday and continued through the night, into Sunday morning. Organisers estimated the turnout at over 100,000 people, while security forces put the figure at 50,000.

Bangkok's police department offered a much lower estimate of 18,000 protesters. But police mobilised 10,000 officers to monitor and contain the protest, a sign of escalating social tensions and the looming threat of state repression.

For over two months, university and high school students have staged growing protests against the government of Prayuth Chan-ocha.

The movement's leaders, including Free Youth and other student groups, have demanded that Prayuth resign and parliament be dissolved, as well as a new constitution and an end to the persecution of government critics.

Prayuth, a former general, orchestrated the 2014 coup and ruled as head of a military junta before becoming Prime Minister in last year's rigged election.

Protest leaders have also called for reform of the monarchy. Since his ascension to the throne in 2016, King Maha Vajiralongkorn has consolidated control over crown assets and the military.

The United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, a student group that organised the Saturday protest, has previously issued 10 demands to curb the king's constitutional powers.

Some have called for the abolition of Thailand's *lèse majesté* law, which subjects anyone perceived to have insulted the king to a prison sentence of up to 15 years.

The king was not in Thailand on Saturday night and has spent much of his time in Europe, since taking the throne from his late father in 2016.

For weeks in advance, the protest was widely anticipated to draw a large crowd. The date, September 19, was chosen specially to commemorate an earlier military-backed 2006 coup against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a billionaire populist who is now in exile.

Among the protesters were many of Thaksin's "red shirt followers," who clashed with pro-royal establishment "yellow shirts" a decade ago, before being brutally suppressed by the army, which killed more than 80 people.

The event began when protesters burst through the locked gates of Thammasat University, a historical hotbed of student opposition to the Thai military. The university had earlier refused student leaders permission to hold the rally on campus grounds, announcing the cancellation of all classes and closure of the campus. The nearby Silpakorn University was also closed, due to the rally.

The growing crowd moved to a neighbouring open field, called Sanam Luang, or the "Royal Ground," where demonstrators listened to speeches for many hours and stayed overnight, despite rain. The field, located in front of Bangkok's Grand Palace, is traditionally used for royal cremation ceremonies. Protesters declared they would instead name it the "People's Ground."

Early Sunday morning, a brass memorial plaque was cemented in the ground, engraved with the words: "At this place, the people have expressed their will: that this

country belongs to the people and is not the property of the monarch as has been falsely claimed.” Cheers erupted as the plaque was installed, with people chanting: “Down with feudalism, long live the people.”

The plaque was intended to replace another, which disappeared in 2017, marking the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, in 1932, by the Khana Ratsadon, a coalition of civil and military officers. Student leaders declared that this protest signalled the creation of a new Khana Ratsadon, or “People’s Party.”

The crowd then marched toward Government House, in order to deliver a letter outlining the 10 points for monarchy reform, but were blocked by police-manned control barriers. They turned instead to the Supreme Court, where the letter was submitted to the Privy Council. Police chief Phukphong Phongpetra said on a video broadcast that police would decide how to proceed with the letter.

Parit Chiwarak, a leader of the movement, told crowds: “Today is a historic moment. No matter what happens, I can confirm that Thailand will never be the same again tomorrow.”

Parit encouraged Thai workers to join a general strike, planned for October 14, the anniversary of a mass student-led uprising in 1973 that toppled the military dictatorship of Thanom Kittikachorn.

The working class is becoming increasingly involved in the protest movement. In addition to workers in Bangkok, busloads of protesters arrived from provinces across the country’s north and northeast, particularly Khon Kaen.

Discontent among the urban and rural masses of Thailand has been exacerbated by the social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Widespread job lay-offs, a lack of sufficient financial aid, and delayed pension payments for the elderly, have all contributed to the country’s ever-widening social inequality.

Parit also called for people to withdraw their money from the Siam Commercial Bank (SCB), of which the king is the largest shareholder, with a 22 percent stake. “Get all your money out and burn your bank book,” he added. Support for Parit’s demands erupted on Twitter, with the hashtag #???SCB (“Ban SCB”) gaining more than 347,000 tweets by Sunday evening.

The military-dominated government’s fear of the growing movement is expressed in its relentless efforts,

over recent weeks, to intimidate protesters. At least 61 people have been charged for various offences after taking part in the rallies. Authorities have charged 28 leaders with sedition, while ordering Facebook to block people in Thailand from viewing content that is critical of the monarchy.

On Saturday morning, before the protest, police confiscated 50,000 booklets from student group leaders, containing the monarchy reform demands, reportedly because they wanted to determine if the leaflets contained illegal content. Students had intended to distribute the booklets at the rally.

There have been reports of protesters traveling to Bangkok from northern provinces, such as Lamphun and Phayao, being stopped at police checkpoints on Friday night and having their ID cards photographed by officers.

Parit posted on his Facebook account that musicians from Chiang Mai, who planned to perform at the Bangkok protest, were visited at their homes by police, who told them not to attend.

The next scheduled protest will be held on Thursday in front of Parliament House, to press the demand for amending the current constitution, which was drafted by the military junta.



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