

Thai students continue protests in face of government repression

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16 October 2020

Tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Thailand this week in defense of democratic rights as part of the protest movement that has intensified since July. The latest rallies began Wednesday and continued into Thursday and Friday. The military-backed government has responded with stepped-up repression, with police violence and the declaration of a state of emergency.

Demonstrators, many of them students, gathered on Wednesday at the city's Democracy Monument before marching to Government House, the location of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's offices. Protesters chanted, "Down with dictatorship. Long live democracy." They have called for three core demands since July: Prayuth's resignation, a new constitution, and an end to the suppression of government critics.

Demonstrators also criticized the monarchy by chanting "our taxes" and raising a three-fingered salute as a royal motorcade that included Queen Suthida drove past them. In addition to the three demands, protesters are also calling for ten reforms of the monarchy, issued in August. These include the abolition of the draconian lèse-majesté law, a separation of the king's personal and royal assets, a reduction in the monarchy's budget, and an end to propaganda promoting the king.

The government seized on the motorcade incident to announce a state of emergency, banning gatherings of five or more as well as censoring any news deemed to "create fear" or "affect national security." The measures allow police to detain protesters without charge for up to 30 days without access to lawyers. At least two protesters face life in prison over the incident.

Although overwhelmingly peaceful on Wednesday, some protesters were provoked into scuffles with pro-monarchy counter-protesters dressed in yellow. The counter-protesters were suspected to be police or

military due to their similar, cropped haircuts and the fact that they were bussed in from provincial areas.

Without providing any evidence, Prime Minister Prayuth stated, "There was an action that had an impact on a royal motorcade... There are reasonable grounds to believe that there have been severe acts affecting the national security, life and property of the state or of individuals."

Police attacked a protest encampment early Thursday morning outside Government House set up the previous day. Police arrested more than 20 people, including protest leaders Anon Nampa, who is a human rights lawyer, activist Prasit Krutharote, and student leaders Parit Chiwarak, Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, and Nathchanon Pairoj. Some 20 others were arrested earlier in the week.

The ban did not prevent protesters from gathering at the busy Ratchaprasong intersection in Bangkok on Thursday to demand the release of those arrested. Free Youth, one of the group's leading the demonstrations, denounced the arrests, saying, "This is an action to perpetuate the authoritarian power of the state, not for the greater good of the people. The state avows the monarchy as one of the reasons to declare the decree. Therefore, it can be asserted that the monarchy is standing against democracy."

When protesters returned to the streets on Friday, they were met with police water cannons and attacks by officers with riot shields and batons. Prayuth declared, "I'm not quitting," while threatening protesters with further violence: "Just wait and see... If you do wrong, we will use the law."

A call by some of the student leaders for a general strike on October 14 did not take place. Thailand's largest union with nearly 200,000 members, the State Enterprises Workers Relations Confederation, refused

to endorse the strike. Representatives of big business expressed their belief that no walkouts would take place. “I don’t see any sign of a big strike at the moment,” said Supant Mongkolsuthree, chairman of the Federation of Thai Industries.

Student protesters should reach out to workers by raising demands to improve working and social conditions in addition to current democratic demands. No faith can be placed in any section of the bourgeoisie that claim to defend democratic rights. These ruling class layers will attempt to utilize the protests and the legitimate democratic demands of young people for their own ends.

Sections of the bourgeoisie criticize King Maha Vajiralongkorn because the monarchy cuts across their own business interests. In 2018, Thailand’s Crown Property Bureau (CPB), which had held the monarchy’s assets, transferred tens of billions of dollars directly to the king. This included stakes in Siam Commercial Bank (SCB) and Siam Cement Group (SCG), a leading bank and the country’s largest industrial company respectively. The exact amount has not been disclosed, but CPB’s portfolio is estimated to be worth \$US40 billion.

Parit, one of the arrested student leaders, denounced the SCB as “a money pot of feudalism.” Members of parliament from the opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) have sought to investigate the king’s finances. MFP is the de facto successor of the Future Forward Party, which the constitutional court dissolved in February for allegedly violating the election law. The party’s leader, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, was also disqualified as a member of parliament.

Thanathorn has criticized the king’s growing influence in business spheres, saying, “It’s taxpayers’ money, it has to be transparent.” He also said of the king’s stakes in SCB and SCG, “The king is now a player in the market. It’s just wrong. It’s undemocratic.”

Thanathorn is the son of the founder of Thai Summit Group, the largest auto parts manufacturer in Thailand. He served in a leading position in the company from 2002 to 2018, before entering politics. He was the richest member of parliament while in office, reporting assets last year worth 5.6 billion baht (\$US180 million).

Thanathorn penned an article for the *Diplomat* on

September 24 in a clear attempt to curry favor with Washington. He wrote: “Thailand has been an important ally of the United States for over 200 years, and our political stability wields great influence over other ASEAN countries. Today, the pro-military government has become increasingly friendly with China, alienating our democratic allies in the process.”

This appeal to the Trump administration has nothing to do with defending democracy and, if successful, will embroil Thailand more closely in the war drive by US imperialism against China.



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