

Demonstrations in Thailand continue as government rejects protesters' demands

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Students, young people, and other protesters are continuing to demonstrate against the government in Thailand, defying a state of emergency declared last Thursday. On Monday evening, protesters issued two new demands to the government—the release without charge of all those who have been arrested and the revocation of the emergency declaration—and warned that there would be a “surprise” if these demands are not met.

Monday was the sixth day of protests in a row. Thousands protested in the Thai capital of Bangkok at three main locations, with a rally taking place at the city's Kaset intersection and the Bangkok Remand Prison where activists such as Jatupat Boonpatararaksa and nearly 20 others have been held since being arrested last Tuesday. The third location was the Ministry of Public Health Station on the MRT, Bangkok's mass transit system. Protests over the weekend also took place in Chiang Mai in the north and in other cities.

Authorities in Bangkok have attempted to prevent rallies by shutting down public transportation, but thousands have continued to gather to press for their demands. Police previously attacked peaceful demonstrators with water cannon, chemical irritants, and tear gas on Friday.

In an indication of growing dissatisfaction with the government, Perakorn Tangsamritkul, a 23-year-old demonstrator, told the *New York Times* on Saturday, “I wasn't always politically active. You should have met me three months ago. Now I understand why we have to be here. We have to speak out.”

According to the police, 74 people have been arrested since October 13. The Thai Lawyers for Human Rights organisation stated that only 19 have been released on bail. However, the government has flagged hundreds of

thousands of messages across various social media platforms and threatened legal action against protesters who post pictures of themselves online at rallies.

The protesters are continuing to call for their three core demands: the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and his government, the writing of a new constitution as well as for reforms to the monarchy, and the end of political repression by the government. Prayuth recalled parliament on Monday, which had been in recess, to discuss means for ending the protests.

Parliament President Chuan Leekpai also called for talks between parties on Sunday to discuss how to end the protests, an indication that parties like Move Forward will attempt to use their influence among youth to shut down the demonstrations. Prayuth stated last Friday that he would not resign. He claimed on Monday that “the government has already compromised to some degree,” though none of the protesters' demands have been met.

None of the main protest leaders who were arrested last week has been released on bail. In addition, two protesters who have been accused of “violence” against Queen Suthida's motorcade, which drove past a rally on Wednesday, face life behind bars under the country's draconian *lèse-majesté* law. The monarchy and King Maha Vajiralongkorn have drawn the scorn of young people for his control of tens of billions of dollars, his use as a government propaganda symbol, and the attack on free speech as a result of the *lèse-majesté* law, which protesters want abolished.

At the same time, the government is stepping up repression under the state of emergency declaration issued last Thursday by launching investigations into four media outlets: VoiceTV, Prachathai.com, The Reporters, and The Standard. They have been accused

of spreading information that could “cause unrest in society.”

Shawn Crispin, senior Southeast Asia representative for the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists, commented: “There is no legitimate reason for Thai authorities to block coverage of the ongoing protests in the country, and the press must be allowed to work freely.”

The government is attempting to restrict access to messaging apps like Telegram, which have been used to organise protests. The Ministry of Digital Economy and Society sent a letter to the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission calling on the latter to block the app. Activists moved from Facebook to Telegram fearing online censorship and the deletion of their pages.

Numerous connections are also being drawn between the protests in Thailand and those that began in Hong Kong in 2019. Young people and workers in both regions face social and economic inequality.

The Bank of Thailand has reported that in a country of nearly 70 million people, just 500 people control 36 percent of Thailand’s corporate equity, each amassing approximately 3.1 billion baht (\$US100 million) in annual profits. At the same time, 91.7 percent of Thais earn less than \$US10,000 annually, according to the Credit Suisse Research Institute.

Youth also face a serious growth of unemployment. The government estimated that in March more than half a million recent university graduates were unable to find jobs. The Federation of Thai Industries estimated in July that eight million people overall could be out of work by the end of the year due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, the World Bank estimates that nearly 10 million people so far have been made economically insecure. Since March, 70 percent of the Thai workforce has seen their average monthly wages slashed by nearly half. With Thailand’s GDP expected to contract by as much as 10 percent this year, the government and big business will attempt to force the working class and youth to foot the bill for this economic decline, further exacerbating declining working and social conditions.

Thai students and youth should reach out to workers throughout the country by raising demands to improve working and social conditions in addition to their

current democratic demands. They should also reach out to the working class in Hong Kong, mainland China, and throughout the region. The struggles faced by millions in Thailand are shared around the world.

At the same time, students and youth must place no faith in politicians who claim to negotiate on their behalf with the Prayuth government. The root cause of conditions in Thailand, including the attacks on democratic rights and social conditions, is capitalism, which every section of the Thai bourgeoisie defends.



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