

Police crack down on Thai protesters demanding democratic rights

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The riot police clashed with thousands of protesters in the Thai capital of Bangkok on Sunday as they sought to deliver letters setting out their grievances and demands to the King Maha Vajiralongkorn. The ongoing protests, comprised mainly of students and young people, are demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and his military-backed government, a new constitution and reforms to the monarchy.

The protesters gathered at the city's Democracy Monument before marching toward the Grand Palace, where they planned to deliver their letters. While the police estimated the number involved at 7,000, Reuters journalists put the figure at more than 10,000. After the protesters broke through police lines and pushed aside one of the buses set up as a barrier, the police used water cannon and riot police to disperse the march.

One demonstrator, Thawatchai Tongsuk, told Associated Press: "If the police gave way, I believe that the leaders would have submitted the letters and then been finished. Everyone would go home... The more violence they use, the more people will join the protest."

The protests have continued for months despite the arrest of protest leaders and the imposition of a state of emergency. Broad layers of young people have been involved in what has been a politically diffuse movement that has included everything from references to the Hunger Games and Harry Potter to the involvement of activists demanding gay rights. The underlying motivation, however, is hostility to the political domination of the military in concert with the monarchy, the state bureaucracy and key sections of business.

Prime Minister Prayuth, as army commander in chief, led the 2014 military coup that ousted the Pheu Thai

government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra and was installed as head of the military junta. Yingluck Shinawatra and her billionaire brother Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted as prime minister by the 2006 military coup, represent sections of business whose interests have been stymied by the domination of traditional Bangkok elites.

While an election was eventually held last year, it was under an anti-democratic constitution drawn up by the military that stacked the 250-seat upper house with military appointees and allowed for the installation of an "outside prime minister"—that is, one who had not stood for election. Prayuth, who did not stand for election, was appointed by a joint sitting of the upper house with the 500-seat lower house. Even then, the military's Palang Precharath party came second in the election. It had to wheel and deal to obtain enough support to install Prayuth, who has nominally retired from the army, as prime minister.

The protesters have publicly criticised the monarchy, which has been the political linchpin of the Bangkok elites. In doing so, they risk jail terms of up to 15 years under the country's draconian *lèse-majesté* law—the repeal of which is one of their demands. The monarchy has become even more unpopular after King Maha Vajiralongkorn was installed in 2016 following the death of his father. The king, who spends most of his time in Germany, has attempted to consolidate his personal control over the huge crown assets and elements of the military.

The protest on Sunday was designed to expose the empty character of the king's gesture a week before. At a rally of thousands of royalists outside the Grand Palace, a reporter asked the king what he had to say to the protesters. "We love them all the same," he declared and said Thailand was a land of compromise,

hinting that concessions might be possible.

The government, however, has made no such moves. Amid an expanding protest movement, Prayuth revoked the state of emergency earlier this month and attempted to establish a meaningless “national consultation” aimed at enlisting the assistance of opposition parties. But he has flatly refused to resign. Protest leaders have rejected any participation in such a process.

The *New York Times* cited a right-wing royalist and publishing tycoon, Sondhi Limthongkul. At the end of last month, he called for the military to directly intervene so as to restore stability and protect the monarchy. “I see a coup as not a bad thing,” he said. Sondhi was central to whipping up “yellow shirt,” royalist opposition to Thaksin Shinawatra, paving the way for his overthrow in 2006.

Prayuth has refused to rule out a coup, saying in late October that he would not determine whether “there will be a coup or there won’t be a coup.” In reality, a military “coup” would do no more than shuffle the personnel in the regime, which is effectively controlled by the military in any case. However, the military would be brought onto the streets to suppress the protests, including by force. In 2010, the military violently suppressed protracted demonstrations by pro-Shinawatra “red shirts,” killing at last 90 and wounding hundreds.

The lack of a clear political program is the greatest danger confronting the protesters, who continue to have illusions in the opposition parties—including the Pheu Thai party of the Shinawatras and the smaller Move Forward Party (MFP) that, as the Future Forward Party, won a significant vote from younger people at the 2019 election. Like Pheu Thai, however, the MFP represents layers of big business that seek to end the domination of the traditional elites.

The founder of the Future Forward Party, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who was disqualified from parliament earlier this year on trumped-up charges, has personal wealth of \$US180 million. He was a top executive of the Thai Summit Group, which was founded by his father and is the largest auto parts manufacturer in the country.

Young people need to turn to a different political perspective. Around the world, the ruling classes, confronted with mounting economic and social crises, are resorting more and more to authoritarian forms of

rule to contain and suppress growing opposition in the working class. The fight for democratic rights in Thailand is intimately bound up with an orientation to the working class, not politicians such as Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and their parties, and the struggle based on a socialist program to abolish capitalism.



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