

Thai protests for democratic reforms continue despite violent police attack

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Thousands of young people, who have been demanding democratic reforms, continued to protest yesterday in Thailand after the police used water cannon and tear gas against demonstrators the previous day. At least 55 people were treated in hospital on Tuesday, including six with gunshot wounds.

The protests, which have lasted for months, took place as the Thai national assembly considered seven motions to amend the country's anti-democratic 2017 constitution drawn up by the military junta that seized power in a coup in 2014. The coup leader and now prime minister—former army chief Prayuth Chan-ocha—instigated the “national consultation” in a bid to enlist the support of opposition parties and defuse the ongoing demonstrations.

The politically heterogeneous protest movement has centred on demands for a new constitution, Prayuth's resignation, and measures to curb the monarchy. This includes the repeal of a draconian *lèse majesté* law under which anyone deemed to be insulting the monarchy can be jailed for up to 15 years.

The national assembly met as a joint session of the 500-seat House and 250-seat Senate—the former was elected in 2019 and the latter consists of military appointees. Any motion required not only a majority of the joint sitting but the support of one third of the Senate, ensuring that it would not pass without the support of Prayuth and the top military brass.

Only two of the seven motions were passed yesterday—to establish a constitutional drafting committee with a limited scope. In particular, it will have no mandate to change clauses of the constitution related to the military. A motion by iLaw, the Internet Law Reform Dialogue, that would have allowed all aspects of the constitution to be changed, was defeated. The two motions that were passed still have to be

ratified by a second and third vote, then by King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

Thousands of protesters gathered on Tuesday at a rally held outside the national assembly building in a bid to influence legislators. Police turned water cannon on the demonstrators after they attempted to break through barricades and enter the grounds of the legislature. Clashes also broke out with pro-monarchy supporters who hurled stones and other objects at the protesters.

Panumas “James” Singprom, a leader of the Free Youth group, said that three protesters were shot and two had suffered broken legs. Police claimed that they did not fire live ammunition, but did confirm that one protester had been shot in the thigh, and a passerby had also been shot in the hip. Erawan emergency services said that six people had received gunshot wounds and three remained in hospital.

While some reports indicate that the gunshots occurred after the police withdrew, the police and military have a record of using provocateurs. The clashes that ensued with pro-monarchy supporters may well have been used to turn firearms on the protesters in a bid to intimidate them and could presage a far more aggressive crackdown by the military-backed government.

The violent attacks on the pro-democracy protesters provoked a large turn-out yesterday. By Wednesday evening, more than 10,000 demonstrators surrounded a police headquarters building in Bangkok which was splashed with blue and yellow paint—the colours of the chemically-laced water fired at protesters the previous day.

Sucharn Thoumrungroje, a 20-year-old engineering student, said he decided to attend Wednesday's rally after learning of what happened at the national

assembly on Tuesday. “I feel that it is unacceptable that the state used force against its people,” he told Associated Press. “I understand that there are risks in taking part in rallies but I will come as much as I can to show that we are not afraid and stand firm on our demands.”

Before the demonstration broke up, a large protest was announced for November 25 at the offices of the Crown Property Bureau, which manages the vast holdings of Thailand’s royal palace. Its resources, controlled by King Maha Vajiralongkorn, are estimated to be worth more than \$40 billion.

The protracted protests reflect deep-seated hostility among young people in particular to the anti-democratic methods used by the traditional Bangkok elites—the monarchy, military and state bureaucracy—to maintain their political domination. The military, with the support of the monarchy, ousted democratically-elected governments in 2006 and 2014—the first led by the billionaire businessman Thaksin Shinawatra, the second by his sister Yingluck Shinawatra.

The current government is nothing more than a thinly veiled front for the military and its allies. Moreover, while he stepped down as army commander in chief to become prime minister, Prayuth has never been elected. He was appointed as an “outside prime minister” by a joint session of the national assembly, as allowed in the 2017 constitution.

The Shinawatras and their Pheu Thai party represent a layer of the Thai ruling class whose interests have been frustrated by the traditional elites and their business cronies. At the 2019 election, young voters supported the Future Forward Party (FFP) founded by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, a top executive of the Thai Summit Group, which was established by his father and is the largest auto parts manufacturer in the country. Thanathorn was disqualified from parliament earlier this year on trumped-up charges and the FFP dissolved. Its MPs have now formed the Move Forward Party (MFP).

Both opposition parties are seeking to exploit the protests to extract concessions from the military-backed regime. However, these oppositional layers of the ruling class are far more fearful of the student protests sparking a mass movement of the working class, than they are of the military. Moreover, neither party has any fundamental commitment to democratic rights and

improved living conditions for working people. In office, Thaksin Shinawatra was notorious for imposing pro-market restructuring and instigating a murderous “war on drugs.”

The danger confronting the student movement is the lack of a clear political perspective. As is the case around the world, the struggle for democratic rights is completely bound up with the fight to abolish capitalism which, in its worsening crisis, is driving the ruling classes to autocratic methods of rule. A genuine struggle for democracy requires a turn to the working class and the fight for a socialist future.



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