

Thai protesters defy threat of draconian lèse-majesté law

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Thousands of mainly young Thai protesters demanding democratic reforms gathered outside the Siam Commercial Bank's headquarters in Bangkok yesterday despite a threat by the military-backed government to charge rally leaders under the lèse-majesté law. Section 112 of the criminal code makes insulting the king and his close family an offense punishable by up to 15 years in prison.

Some 15,000 demonstrators joined the protest which was directed against the monarchy and the current King Maha Vajiralongkorn in particular, who in 2018 had the huge assets previously held and managed by the Crown Property Bureau transferred into his own hands. The assets, estimated at a value of \$US40 billion, include a 23.4 percent stake in the Siam Commercial Bank (SCB) worth around \$2.3 billion at its current share price.

Outside the bank, the protesters erected a sign declaring that the king had “robbed the nation's business by stealing shares in SCB.” The protest group Free Youth issued a statement prior to the rally declaring: “Transferring the crown property to the king's property is equivalent to a robbery of the nation's wealth.”

Protest leader Panupong “Mike” Jadnok was cheered when he told the demonstrators: “This is the country with the biggest inequality, but it has the richest king in the world.” The *Guardian* cited one of the protesters, Nik, as saying: “At least people should have the space to investigate [how money is spent] and check the institution—not only the monarchy but also other institutions. We will not accept military power anymore.”

The reform of the monarchy, including the abolition of the draconian lèse-majesté law, is just one of the demands of the diffuse protest movement that has continued for months. The protesters are also

demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a retired general who as army commander in chief led the 2014 coup that ousted the democratically-elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

In addition, the protests are seeking the rewriting of the anti-democratic constitution drawn up by the military to ensure its continued political domination. The upper house of parliament is stacked with military appointees virtually ensuring a majority at the joint sitting with the elected lower house that selects the prime minister. Moreover, Prayuth did not have to stand for election as the constitution allows the selection of an “outside” prime minister.

The extreme sensitivity of the traditional Bangkok elites to any criticism of the monarchy underscores the linchpin political role it has played. In times of crisis, the king has stepped in to impose a compromise and shore up faltering bourgeois rule. King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who was installed in 2016 after the death of his father, has none of his father's political skills and spends much of his time in Europe. In addition to taking over the crown's assets, Maha Vajiralongkorn has also assumed control of key military units.

Prime Minister Prayuth is determined to defend the monarchy at all costs, announcing this week that all laws, including the lèse-majesté section of the criminal code, would be used against the protests. The police have issued summonses for more than 12 people, including protest leaders Parit “Penguin” Chiwarak and Panusaya “Rung” Sithijirawattanakul, on charges of lèse majesté. No one has been charged under the law since 2017.

After receiving his summons, Parit told the *New York Times*: “I am not scared. I am more worried about the

country if they are still using this 112 in politics like this. This will cause the monarchy to deteriorate further.” A 16-year-old student leader Benjamaporn Nivas told the newspaper that the threat of lèse-majesté did not alter her determination to protest for reforms. “I want to fight until the day when no one can fight anymore, then I will join the others in prison,” she said.

Last week, the police also stepped up their attacks on protesters using water cannon and tear gas against a rally outside the national assembly which was debating possible constitutional amendments. Several people suffered gunshot wounds. While the police deny the use of firearms, it is possible that provocateurs among a royalist counter-demonstration fired on the protesters. The only motion that passed in the national assembly was to establish a committee to examine limited changes to the constitution, but excluding any amendment to the clauses dealing with the monarchy.

While yesterday’s protest passed without incident, a significant factor may have been a last-minute decision to change the location which had been set down as the offices of the Crown Property Bureau. The police had prepared for a major confrontation at the initial location, mobilising some 6,000 officers and blocking roads near the building with shipping containers and barbed wire.

The government had been hoping to enlist the support of the opposition parties and to use the parliamentary debate to dissipate the protest movement. However, as protests have continued, Prayuth has begun to resort to more repressive measures.

The fear in ruling circles is that the longer the protests go on, the more likely that sections of the working class will begin to join in to fight for their own class interests. A World Bank assessment in August of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Thailand projected a 5 percent economic contraction in 2020, a doubling of the number of people surviving on less than \$US5.50 a day and a loss of 8.4 million jobs.

Protest leaders, however, are making no appeal to the social situation facing working people, other than general references to the immense disparity between rich and poor in the country. No faith should be placed in the opposition bourgeois parties—Pheu Thai and the Move Forward Party—both of which are tied to wealthy business families that resent the political domination of the Bangkok elites, but share their hostility to any

movement of the working class.

Around the world, the ruling classes are turning to anti-democratic methods of rule amid a deep crisis of the capitalist system and growing opposition among working people to their deteriorating living standards. In Thailand, as elsewhere, the struggle for democratic rights is bound up with a fight against the profit system and based on a socialist perspective. This means a turn to the working class and the building of a revolutionary leadership capable of leading such struggles. We would encourage Thai students and youth to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to discuss the principles and program needed to wage this political fight.



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