

# Thai protest leaders charged under draconian lèse majesté law

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9 December 2020

Charges were brought against 15 pro-democracy activists on Tuesday for challenging the Thai monarchy in recent mass protests. The conflict between the largely student-based demonstrations, which have involved tens of thousands in Bangkok, and the military junta has reached an impasse in recent weeks and there are signs that the government is preparing a crackdown.

Ex-general Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha gave the go-ahead to police last month to resume enforcement of the draconian lèse-majesté law, which has not been used for over two years. Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code deems it an offence to defame or threaten the King—currently Maha Vajiralongkorn—or his close family and carries prison terms of up to 15 years.

“It will be necessary for the government and the concerned security agencies to enhance our measures by enforcing all the pertaining laws against protesters who violate the law or infringe on the rights and freedoms of other citizens,” Prayut declared.

Four protest leaders reported to a police station of their own accord in Northaburi, north of Bangkok, where around 100 supporters gathered, chanted “cancel 112” and protested the summons to reporters.

Parit “Penguin” Chiwarak, a student activist, stated that, “if the institution shows signs that they will listen to the people, it will show to the public that they are open-minded. But if the institution responds by using article 112 to silence the people, it will show the public and the international community that the institution is afraid of truth.”

Indicating that the protest movement was showing no signs of slowing, Panusaya “Rung” Sithijirawattanakul told the press: “I have to say this will not affect our movement. We will continue our activities in order to achieve the three demands we make.”

Alongside them were Panupong “Mike Rayong” Jadnok, also charged with lèse-majesté, and Shinawat Chankrajang who was only charged with violating the emergency decree. The government’s state of emergency has been used to break up student demonstrations supposedly in the interest of public health and combating COVID-19.

All four protest leaders were permitted to leave after being charged. Another eleven participants in the pro-democracy movement were charged for defaming the monarchy in different locations.

These included Jatupat Boonpattarasaksa and Somyot Pruksakasemsuk. Both have already spent time in prison in the past for breaking the lèse-majesté law. Jatupat spent 2.5 years for the crime of sharing a BBC article about Thailand’s king on Facebook. Somyot, who is editor in chief of a magazine, served 7 years beginning in 2011 for articles deemed insulting to monarchy.

In a Facebook post Monday, 55-year-old Somyot stated that the lèse-majesté law should not be used as a weapon against the new generation.

Arnon Nampa, one of the defendants and a human rights lawyer, stated in a Facebook post: “We’re heading toward more conflict. The Thai establishment has used lèse-majesté law as its weapon.”

The resumption of section 112, which has been used 90 times since the 2014 coup, indicates the sensitivity of the Thai ruling class to any challenge to the monarchy, the linchpin of the bourgeois state apparatus. Since 1932 and the ending of absolute monarchy, twelve coups have ensued in Thailand, each time with the blessing of the king to cement a new dictatorship.

The latest military-backed government has systematically undermined rights to assembly and free speech, limited access to information critical of the

government, and operates with unlimited powers granted to the cabinet.

Thailand's student protests have been ongoing for months, fuelled by levels of extreme inequality exacerbated by the government's response to the pandemic. The three main demands—the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut, constitutional reforms and greater constitutional oversight on the monarchy—have not in any way been met.

Prayut, who ousted the democratically-elected government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in a military coup six years ago, has adamantly refused to step down and has defeated all constitutional reform using the appointive senate.

The conflict in Thailand is being watched closely by its long-term treaty ally, the US. Last week, a draft resolution was put forward by the Democratic Party to the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, expressing full support to the anti-government protests.

The draft resolution, urging the Thai government “to protect and uphold democracy,” was promoted by nine US senators including Thai American war veteran Tammy Duckworth, who was mentioned as a possible defense secretary under a Biden administration.

US Senator Bob Menendez, a ranking member of the committee, led a group of seven senate colleagues in endorsing the bill last Thursday.

“Thailand's reformers are not seeking a revolution,” Menendez stated approvingly. “They are simply yearning for democratic changes to their country's political system, for freedom of speech and assembly, and for Thailand to be a part of the community of democratic nations.”

The moves by the Democratic Party are not guided by concerns for democracy, but are driven by the interests of US imperialism. A Biden administration would intensify the US economic and strategic confrontation with China throughout the Indo-Pacific that began under the Obama administration's “pivot to Asia” and escalated by Trump.

Like other governments in the region, the Prayut regime has attempted to balance between longstanding strategic and military ties with Washington and its economic relations with China. The Thai military itself has been increasingly dependent on arms and training from China, including the purchase of large items such as submarines.

The rather cautious bill promoted by Democrat senators indicates that a Biden administration could use the issue of “human rights” in Thailand to pressure its government to realign its foreign policy more closely to Washington.

The anti-government protests are ongoing. According to a Twitter post by the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, a protest will take place today in Bangkok in opposition to the lèse-majesté law.



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