

# Pro-democracy demonstrations return to Thailand despite increased repression

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Several hundred protesters gathered in Thailand's capital of Bangkok on Saturday to denounce the government's use of draconian *lèse majesté* law against critics and participants in last year's pro-democracy demonstrations that demanded the law's abolition and the reform of the monarchy. Similar protests also took place last Wednesday.

Activists climbed Bangkok's Democracy Monument and draped it in a red cloth, which they stated represented the blood of fighters for democracy. When hundreds of people attempted to march to the Grand Palace, the residence of Thailand's King Maha Vajiralongkorn, police in full riot gear surrounded them, instigating small scuffles. Some protesters threw paint at the police while authorities claimed some also threw firecrackers at officers.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and his military-backed government continue to refuse to yield to the demands of demonstrators and resorted to increasingly repressive methods since pro-democracy protests began last year.

Chutima Kaenpetch, one of the protesters on Saturday, stated the reason for the renewed protests. "We want Article 112 to be revoked plus the release of four of our leaders and other political prisoners convicted by this law." Article 112 of Thailand's criminal code contains the *lèse majesté* law which provides for jail terms of between three and 15 years for anyone, including minors, deemed to have insulted the monarchy.

The immediate impetus for that latest protests was the Thai authorities' denial of bail to four prominent activists while awaiting trial on sedition, violating the *lèse majesté* law, and other charges. The four include Arnon Nampa and Parit Chiwarak, two of the most well-known leaders in the pro-democracy movement. At the

same time, many activists in Thailand have been drawn inspiration from pro-democracy demonstrations involving hundreds of thousands in neighboring Myanmar against the February 1 military coup there.

Wednesday's rally of around 1,000 and the second protest on Saturday were the largest since gatherings declined last December as the number of COVID-19 cases in Thailand rose drastically. Smaller demonstrations also took place in January as the police charged protesters and activists for their involvement in the movement.

The protests began last year, led by students and young people demanding democratic reforms. This included the re-writing of the Thai constitution, Prayuth's resignation, and an end to the persecution of government critics. Prayuth seized power in 2014 in a military coup, ousting the government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, the sister of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, also ousted in a coup in 2006.

Since last July, more than 50 people have been charged under the the *lèse majesté* law, with most but not all released on bail. The high number of people charged and the severity of the sentences are clearly aimed at intimidating protesters.

Patsaravalee Tanakitvibulpon, a university student facing multiple charges including two *lèse-majesté* counts, told the *New York Times* earlier this month: "The government does not act according to a democratic system. The government is using the law to shut us up, not allowing us to talk."

In January, the Thai courts sentenced Anchan Preeert, a former civil servant, to 43 and a half years in prison for sharing audio clips on social media in 2014 and 2015 supposedly critical of the Thai monarchy. Originally sentenced to 87 years behind bars, this was

halved after Anchan agreed to plead guilty.

Sunai Phasuk, a senior researcher on Thailand for Human Rights Watch, commented: “[The] court verdict is shocking and sends a spine-chilling signal that not only criticisms of the monarchy won’t be tolerated but that they will also be severely punished.”

The political opposition led by the Pheu Thai party is trying to divert anger towards the Prayuth government behind a no-confidence vote slated for this week based on its mishandling of the COVID-19 outbreak. Last week’s protests were originally called to back the no-confidence vote, with the focus only altered after the authorities refused to grant bail to the prominent protest leaders.

The way forward for Thailand’s pro-democracy movement is not through bourgeois parties or the parliament. The opposition postures as opponents of the government in order to prevent young people from breaking with establishment politics. While they may differ on how best to carry out the interests of the capitalist class, they are united in their opposition to any mass movement particularly of the working class.

Young people and students wanting to fight for democratic rights should turn to the working class, in Thailand and internationally. Around the world amid the deepening social and economic crisis accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling classes are turning to autocratic and fascistic methods of rule to crush a resurgence of the class struggle.

Democracy is incompatible with the present political and economic system of capitalism. As a result, the struggle for democratic rights is intimately bound up with the fight for social rights and a socialist future.



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