

# Mounting anti-regime protests in Thailand as COVID-19 surges

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6 September 2021

The military-backed regime in Thailand faces mounting opposition to its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is surging out of control as the Delta variant spreads. More than 1.2 million people have been infected, and the number of deaths now is over 12,000, with most since April. Less than 100 fatalities occurred last year when the pandemic first hit the country.

The latest demonstration took place in Bangkok on Saturday, as the national assembly debated a no-confidence motion in the administration headed by former military head, now prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, who led the 2014 military coup that ousted the previous elected government.

Several hundred protesters marched through central Bangkok's main shopping mall district, despite heavy rain and a heavy police mobilisation that included riot police and water cannon. The police used shipping containers to block major routes to the advertised venue, where the march was due to conclude.

Prayuth survived a third no-confidence vote, as did five of his ministers who were heavily criticised for their pandemic policies. The motion to remove the prime minister was defeated by 264 to 208 votes in the lower house, with three abstentions.

At the start of the debate on Tuesday, Sompong Amornvivat, leader of the opposition Pheu Thai Party, demagogically denounced Prayuth as “a power-crazed, arrogant person unsuited to leading the country,” and warned of more deaths and infections if he remained in office.

Other Pheu Thai leaders condemned the government's delayed purchase and distribution of vaccines, as well as its decision to keep the country out of the World Health Organisation's COVAX program. Only 11.1 percent of the Thai population was fully

vaccinated as of August 30.

In March, banned opposition politician Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit was charged under the country's draconian lese majesté laws, which carry penalties of up to 15 years jail for criticising the monarchy. His “crime” was to question why Siam Bioscience, owned by King Maha Vajiralongkorn, was given the contract to locally produce the AstraZeneca vaccine when it had no experience in vaccine manufacture.

When the domestic AstraZeneca production failed to meet demands, Thailand had to import Chinese-made Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines, and received a donation of 1.5 million Pfizer doses from the US.

The number of COVID-19 cases recorded on Saturday was nearly 16,000, down from over 20,000 a day in August. However, the decline in infections is likely to be the result of decreased testing. Moreover, the dangers posed by the highly infectious Delta variant will increase, as the government has lifted most of its limited lockdown measures in a bid to boost the stagnating economy. Tourism has collapsed and manufacturing has declined.

Opposition fuelled by the COVID-19 surge rekindled last year's mass protests, largely of young people demanding an end to the military-backed regime, including the removal of Prayuth as prime minister, changes to the military-devised constitution, reform of the monarchy and abolition of the lese majesté law.

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Bangkok and other major Thai cities in the second half of 2020, before police violence and arrests stifled the movement for a time. A number of protest leaders were arrested and charged under the lese majesté law for criticising the monarchy. Some have contracted COVID-19 while in prison awaiting trial.

The latest wave of protests began at the end of June,

and has escalated over the past two months, despite police crackdowns. More than 10 demonstrations were broken up with force last month. During one protest, a 15-year-old boy was shot and remains in intensive care. Police deny firing live ammunition.

Tosaporn Sererak, a doctor who was part of the government ousted in the 2014 coup, commented in the *New York Times*: “Earlier, people said they were not coming out to protest because of Covid, but now the thinking has changed to, ‘You stay at home and you will die anyway because of the government’s inability to take care of people’.”

Thousands took part in an anti-government protest last Thursday, in central Bangkok, despite threats from police who warned that demonstrations were banned under coronavirus restrictions. A smaller protest, at which tyres were burnt and firecrackers set off, took place near the prime minister’s residence elsewhere in the city

Protest organiser Nattawut Saikua declared that parliamentarians had to choose between the people and Prayuth, who had caused more than 10,000 deaths. He warned that even if Prayuth survived the no-confidence vote, the protests to drive him out would continue.

The protests are an expression of far broader opposition to the government. Like its counterparts around the world, it places big business profits before the health and lives of working people.

The eruption, once again, of determined protests is clearly raising concerns in ruling circles. Opposition parliamentarians have sought to keep the movement within safe channels, with their toothless no-confidence motions and equally toothless denunciations of Prayuth.

Tanat Thanakitamnuay, the son of a wealthy real estate family, who supported the 2014 military coup, has joined the protests for similar purposes. He was hit by a hard object, possibly a tear gas cannister, during a protest on August 13 and lost the vision of his right eye. He has said some of his rich friends have begun attending rallies.

If the protests are dominated by bourgeois figures like Tanat, they will inevitably be sold out, as opposition politicians seek some sordid compromise with the regime and the military. The death and destruction from the pandemic are rooted in the capitalist system itself, which prioritises private wealth accumulation over

people’s lives and livelihoods. The measures needed to eradicate the virus are known, but they conflict with the requirements of the corporate elite.

Only by turning to the working class and rural toilers, who have borne the brunt of the pandemic and the government austerity measures, can the protesters develop the mass movement needed to fight for scientifically-based policies, to end the COVID-19 scourge. Such a campaign is necessarily global in scope and should be based on a socialist and internationalist program aimed at abolishing the profit system.



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