

Thailand cuts COVID quarantine measures ahead of borders re-opening

John Braddock
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Thailand will waive its mandatory quarantine requirement in Bangkok and nine regions from November 1 to vaccinated arrivals, as authorities desperately try to revive the moribund tourism sector. Like its counterparts around the world, the Thai military-backed government is placing business profits before the health and lives of working people.

Besides Bangkok, the regions targeted for opening include tourist areas Chiang Mai, Phangnga, Krabi, Hua Hin, Pattaya, and Cha-am. Before the pandemic hit, Thailand's tourism sector attracted nearly 40 million visitors annually and generated \$US60 billion per year, accounting for 20 percent of the country's economy.

Southeast Asia is under imperialist pressure to remove control measures to free up trade and global supply chains. *Bloomberg* lists Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines at the bottom of its Covid Resilience Ranking. Data from 53 countries underscores where finance capital deems the virus is being handled with the least economic and social upheaval, on the basis of virus containment, "the economy" and "opening up."

Last week, the Thai government raised the public debt ceiling to about 70 percent of GDP. In another attempt to kick-start the economy, a new scheme aims to attract as many as 1 million people on special 10-year visas, hoping to lure "high end" tech workers and retirees who cannot roll over short term stays elsewhere. Potential applicants have to invest up to \$US250,000 in Thai government bonds or property.

Though Thailand managed to contain COVID-19 throughout 2020, it has experienced its most severe wave over recent months, after the Delta variant spread quickly through slum housing, markets, and factories.

The country's manufacturing and export sectors have

been seriously disrupted. By late July, the Industry Ministry reported the virus had spread to 518 plants with 36,861 workers infected. They were spread over 49 of the country's 77 provinces, and included food processing, electronics, apparel, metal works and plastics manufacturers. The situation is now much more serious.

While case numbers are currently on a downward trend, on 2 October, 11,379 new cases were recorded, with the seven-day average at 11,046. Over 1.6 million people have been infected, with 16,937 deaths, most of them since April. There are 112,251 active cases, including 3,324 that are critical. Fewer than 100 fatalities occurred last year when the pandemic first hit the country.

The country's Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) cut quarantine mandates from 14 days to seven on October 1. It also approved the reopening of businesses, including theatres, sports venues and nail salons in 29 provinces with high infection rates classified as "dark red". A nightly curfew in many parts of the country has been cut by one hour.

Bangkok is aiming to reopen to tourists by November 1 if double-dose vaccinations cover at least 70 percent of the city's population. By late last month, just 42 percent of Bangkok's 7 million residents are fully vaccinated and the capital was still logging high numbers of daily cases, including 2,455 infections on September 22.

The decisions by the CCSA, chaired by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha, the former military head and 2014 coup leader, are part of its "living with COVID" strategy to restart the economy. The moves come after the pace of inoculations was ramped up in major population and economic centres, with 1 million

doses administered daily in the past two weeks.

The vaccination rollout has been belated and chaotic. Only 33.1 percent of the country's 69.8 million people are fully vaccinated. The CSSA has recently approved a plan to procure 3.35 million doses of vaccines, although no delivery timeframe was provided. It is seeking to buy 2.79 million doses of Pfizer and BioNTech vaccines and 165,000 AstraZeneca shots from Spain and 400,000 AstraZeneca doses from Hungary.

The Southeast Asian nation has delayed and changed its tourism reopening several times due to low vaccination rates amid concerns that the easing of rules would see infections surge again, overwhelming the health-care system.

In July, the government promoted its "Phuket sandbox" pilot, reopening the tourist resort island to fully vaccinated visitors from designated "low risk" countries. Flights into Phuket soon arrived from Singapore, Israel and the Middle East with hundreds of visitors. Tourists were able to roam the island, but not travel to other parts of the country for 14 days.

The regime's "living with the virus" strategy is, however, provoking determined social opposition. Street demonstrations that predate COVID have recently evolved into pandemic-related rallies.

Last year's mass protests saw thousands of mainly young people demand an end to the regime, including the removal of Prayuth as prime minister, changes to the military-devised constitution, reform of the monarchy and abolition of the draconian lese majesté law. This movement was temporarily stifled by police repression and COVID restrictions.

The latest wave of protests began at the end of June and has escalated, despite police crackdowns. More than 10 demonstrations were broken up with force over the last month.

Bangkok's Din Daeng district has become the site of a two-month long uprising by young people. The area has turned into a battleground with nightly clashes between protesters, mostly students from vocational colleges and poorer neighbourhoods, and police, who routinely respond with rubber bullets and teargas.

More than 1,000 people currently face legal charges for political activities, including at least 132 for lese-majesté, or insulting the monarchy, which can lead to 15 years in prison.

One protester, a 19-year-old trainee electrician, told the *Guardian* that the economic situation and the government's management of public funding cannot be tolerated. He declared: "Everything has culminated, everything has exploded now during COVID."

A 17-year-old said: "It's as if they look at us not like a citizen, it's as if they see us as slaves." Two of his family members died after becoming infected with COVID. "They don't have connections, so they had to wait and wait [for a hospital space]," he said, with one dying at home.

The wider population, including locals offering protesters protection from the police, are increasingly sympathetic to the young protesters. Prajak Kongkirati, a professor at Thammasat University, told the *Guardian*: "They are below 18 years old, some of them are only 13 or 14... Many of them lost their parents because of COVID, many of their parents lost their jobs, so they had to quit education."

According to Prajak, the government could face a "dilemma" over fully lifting COVID restrictions. The Din Daeng protests remain small, he noted, but reopening the country could lead far larger numbers of young people taking to the streets. "Their ideology hasn't changed, their commitment to political struggle hasn't changed," he declared.



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