

Against Thailand's military regime

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An interview with Netiwit Chotiphathaisal, Thai student activist, writer and president of the Political Science Student Union of Chulalongkorn University

On July 18, thousands of Thai protesters gathered around the iconic Democracy Monument in Bangkok to call for the dissolution of their government. Defying a coronavirus ban on public gatherings, the protesters [demanded](#) the dissolution of the parliament, an end to harassment of government critics, and amendments to the military-written constitution.

The student-led rally also demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former general of the Royal Thai Armed Forces who successfully launched a coup d'état against the elected government in 2014. The demonstration is a continuation of the anti-establishment protests that were prematurely stopped in March when the pandemic prompted lockdown measures.

This protest comes amid a larger wave of uprisings that have swept the globe since 2019—most recently the Black liberation movement in the US and the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Like Filipinos who have protested Duterte's anti-terror law or Hongkongers who are finding new forms of resistance against the newly enacted national security laws, the demonstrations in Bangkok are also a response to increasingly militarized and unaccountable governments.

Netiwit Chotiphathaisal, Thai student activist, writer and president of the Political Science Student Union of Chulalongkorn University, spoke with Lausan editor JS about the recent demonstrations.

This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

JS: This is the largest protest that Thailand has seen in many years. What caused the demonstration?

Netiwit: During the elections held in 2019, the former military general Prayuth Chan-ocha won his second term as Prime Minister. But it's now known that his government rigged the election to defeat the opposition and remain in power.

Given that Prayuth was the same military leader that had led the coup d'état in 2014, this kind of manipulation of the elections shouldn't come as a surprise. Since then, Prayuth has been responsible for countless human rights abuses and has enacted draconian legal measures over the nation, such as Article 44 that allows the ruling junta to suppress any act that "undermines public peace and order or national security, the monarchy, national economics, or the administration of state affairs."

Even now Prayuth's government claims that they were elected by the people, but the military is still in their control. This gives them the power to threaten Thai people's civil liberties and silence dissenting voices. Furthermore, with the Constitutional Court of Thailand in their pocket, Prayuth's government forced the dissolution of a major opposition party, the Future Forward Party.

In fact, the current constitution comes from the 2014 coup d'état. After Prayuth and his party

decided that the last constitution (which was already manipulated to serve the then ruling party) was not going to work for them, they ousted the government and wrote a new constitution—the one that currently governs our country.

Beyond the political disdain that Thai people have of Prayuth, his government's failure to manage the economy was also a major contributing factor to the demonstration. Despite the threat of military violence, the government's incompetence has given protesters a sense of urgency.

JS: You took part in this recent demonstration. Can you describe the moment? What were people feeling?

Netiwit: Being at the demonstration was wonderful and amazing. I have waited such a long time for this moment to happen.

At the rally, most people were chanting "Prayuth, Get Out!" There was so much energy and momentum that the leaders of the protests were saying that they'd stay out overnight. But they ended up deciding against the idea because they found out that there were police hidden among the demonstrators, and felt that it was too risky.

Thai people, especially the young, are furious at their government. Before that, I think people tried to be optimistic. Or maybe they were just naive. Back then, they believed that the government would gradually improve or that the opposition would win the elections and take over. However the government has only become worse and has used covert or legal measures to diminish the power of the opposition party.

Ultimately, young people feel like they have no choice at this point. Either they do nothing and become complicit in ruining the country's future, or they take to the streets.

JS: What are protesters' grievances and what are their demands?

Netiwit: I think this demonstration goes beyond a typical protest in Thailand. Previously, anti-establishment protests have focused on the failings of the government. But this recent movement takes it much further: it calls to question the (sometimes covert) actions of the Thai palace itself. What this recent protest shows is that many believe that the palace itself has too much power and has given the military-dominated government the legitimacy to oppress people.

To some extent, we could even say that Thai people live in a "deep state"; there are many groups behind the government that might have much more power such as the palace, the military and the supreme court of Thailand. If you hope to create change in the country—like the opposition Future Forward Party—and your agenda does not align with the interests of these "deep state" organizations, you can expect that your party will get shut down.

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Thus, many people are calling for the end of this political system. A system where power is consolidated into the hands of a select few will not create an economically viable future for our country.

JS: The protest was primarily organized by the students and young people. Can you tell me more about them?

Netiwit: The Free Youth group and the Student Union of Thailand among others were the main

forces behind the demonstration. These student organizations have a diverse set of political orientations including liberal and social democrats. Many also identify as feminists. These different factions will often have heated political debates. But one thing they can all agree on is that they oppose the Prayuth government and the palace. At this moment, these different and diverse groups are united on the agenda to put an end to this government.

JS: The demands of the protests are nothing short of ambitious. Are the protesters hopeful? What's next for this movement?

Netiwit: At this point, there is no way to turn back. People are no longer naive about the current regime. Many who used to cower in fear have decided to step up to reimagine their country. Now, they are willing to fight to change it.

“We now live under a system of ‘rule by law’ and not ‘rule of law.’”

Moving forward, the young in Thailand will continue to rely on social media as they grow more competent at using it as a tool to organize. Using the internet will not only help them face the realities in the streets, but also connect them to other movements in other countries where they can learn new ways to express resistance.

Indeed, our struggles share many similarities with those of Hong Kong and the Philippines. We were once considered a free society and a very vibrant one at that. However, our liberties have eroded. Like Hong Kong’s new national security laws and the Philippine’s anti-terror law, the once trusted institutions in Thailand are now using the law against our civil participation. We now live under a system of “rule by law” and not “rule of law.”

These connections are important to make. My hope is that transnational activism will become normalized among young Thai activists.

Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal

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