

Thailand: Democracy movement calls for a general strike

Monday 28 September 2020, by [BOYLE Peter](#) (Date first published: 24 September 2020).

At the conclusion of a 30,000-strong overnight rally in Bangkok on September 19-20, the young organisers of the new democracy movement now rocking politics in Thailand called for a general strike on October 14, the anniversary of the historic student uprising of 1973 that brought down the Thanom Kittikachorn military dictatorship.

This is a significant choice of date as the new movement confronts a military regime that seized power in a 2006 coup with the endorsement of the Thai monarchy.

While protesters in Bangkok were still trying to get through military blockades and checkpoints to assemble on the Sanam Luang, a large field in front of the royal palace, usually reserved for royal ceremonies, a three-part solidarity action began in front of Sydney Town Hall. This was just one of 19 solidarity events held in other countries that day.

One of the organisers of this solidarity action, Kanyanatt Kalfagiannis, gave a succinct background to the new student-led democracy movement.

She said this latest round of the democracy struggle kicked off after a “20-year-old history nerd”, who had been tweeting about Thai history for quite some time, was arrested for a tweet about King Vajiralongkorn, the current monarch.

He was imprisoned for six days before being released, with his hair shaved off in an attempt to “suppress his free spirits”.

But his arrest spurred outrage about the “crime” of *lese-majeste* (insulting the monarchy). Up to that point, Twitter had been a relatively safe zone for Thai teenagers and young adults to freely express their opinions and thoughts. Now it was no longer safe.

“And that’s how this year’s protest started”, said Kalfagiannis.

“Students started digging up history, especially on military repression and the dictatorial government. People were sharing records from international journalists and academic sources. Pictures and old newspaper clips were shared on Twitter.

“Starting with Thammasat University, students all around the country organised flash mobs on their campuses to protest the injustices they have been facing all their lives.”

Over the past few months, the movement has kept growing and spreading across the country, pausing only temporarily, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is demanding an end to the repression of dissidents (including the use of the criminal charge of *lese-majeste* and the abduction and murder of dissidents abroad), reforms to curtail the power and privileges of the monarchy, and for the government of former general Prayut Chan-O-Cha to resign and fair and free elections held.

The young organisers of the new democracy are very aware of the brutality of the reactionary military-backed forces in Thailand.

Kalfagiannis reminded the Sydney action of the 1976 Thammasat Massacre, a violent right-wing revenge for the 1973 uprising.

“Students were killed. Their bodies were desecrated. Female students were sexually assaulted, raped and killed. The official death toll was just 46 but thousands were missing. There were rumours of bodies dumped into the ocean.

“The aftermath of the massacre was also horrendous. None of the perpetrators were held accountable. A total of 3094 students and civilians were detained. Many of these detainees were brutally abused by police.

“Most of these students were eventually released without charges, except for 18 protest organisers, who were accused of rebelling against the state, causing public unrest, attempted murder of government officials and affiliating with communist acts.

“However, after pressure from within and outside the country, the last 18 detainees were eventually released two years after they were arrested and given amnesty. It is speculated that the amnesty given to protesters was in the interest of the government and military, to avoid further discussion of who should really be held accountable for the massacre, thus indirectly giving the perpetrators amnesty.”

In Thailand, rumours of an impending new coup are rife. A new strongman, [Apirat Kongsompong](#), the current Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, is believed to be gaining factional ground within the military.

The current head of the military regime, Prayut, was the army Commander-in-Chief who led the crackdown on the Red Shirt demonstrations of April 2009 and April-May 2010. One of the active leaders of this bloody repression was Apirat.

As the Sydney solidarity actions on September 19 wound up, the main speeches were just beginning at the rally in Bangkok. The atmosphere there was festive. An eyewitness recounted the next day on social media: “What an incredible day. Full of drama, excitement, fear, dread, and then relief this morning.

“It was so festive, joyful, and diverse. Socialists swapping roses for your bills, provincial Red Shirt ‘aunties’ and ‘uncles’ dancing to [molam](#) [traditional music form from the poor rural north-east of Thailand that is being revived with a modern twist] blasted from truck sound systems next to drag queens performing on a huge rainbow flag.

“Labour unions from across the country, human rights organisations and an NGO collecting signatures for constitutional reform.

“And kites! What a wonderful sight to see them flown again on Sanam Luang, fenced off for many years.”

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