

Interview: Women and Students Are Leading Thailand's Fight for Democracy

Monday 16 November 2020, by [SMITH Ashley](#), [UNGPAKORN Giles Ji](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2020).

A mass movement for democracy has swept Thailand since July. Led by a new generation of students and workers, protests have taken place throughout the country. They are fighting for a profound transformation of Thai society. Thai socialist Giles Ji Ungpakorn [1] is a former associate professor of politics at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. He was forced into exile in Britain, after being charged with lèse-majesté (insulting the monarchy) in late 2008 because of his book, *A Coup For the Rich*, which criticized the 2006 military coup. In this interview, Ungpakorn discusses the uprising and how activists across the world can build solidarity with the Thai struggle.

Ashley Smith: Thailand is in the midst of a massive uprising against the government, military and monarchy. What are the underlying causes of these protests and what is the movement demanding?

Giles Ji Ungpakorn: The movement is led by young people, mostly students in secondary school and university. But it has attracted older ordinary working people; they've joined in very large numbers. Some of the demonstrations in Bangkok have been over 100,000 people.

The movement has raised three central demands. The first one is the resignation of the prime minister, Prayut Chan-o-cha. He is a former military general that seized power in 2014 in a military coup. He came to power through fixed elections last year.

The second demand is the complete re-writing of the constitution. It was drafted by the military and is not a democratic constitution. The third demand is the reform of the monarchy, specifically stripping it of new powers it was granted in the new constitution.

What is striking in these protests is the courage of young people, especially young women. They don't carry the baggage of people who protested 10 or 20 years ago and were crushed, some of them brutally shot down in the streets by the military. The young people are fearless and determined to fight to democratize Thailand.

They are particularly angry about the behavior of King Vajiralongkorn. He spends all his time in Germany with his harem. He treats women in an appalling fashion. And even though he is the richest man in Thailand, his greed drives him to try to accumulate even more wealth.

What role has the pandemic and economic crisis played in driving wider layers of people to join the protests?

The pandemic mainly affected the economy. The actual number of cases and deaths is quite low. But

the economy has been dramatically impacted because Thailand is so dependent on the world economy for export, services and tourism. All of these have been severely impacted by the global recession.

That's why young people are worried about their futures. They don't see much hope for getting good jobs, and it's one of the reasons why they show no fear in the demonstrations. They don't see what they have to lose.

The older generation actually share the frustrations and anger that the young people have. Millions of Thai people are very unhappy about what's happening in the country.

They hate their economic conditions and despise the military's domination of politics, fixing election after election. That's why the parties that oppose the military actually won the largest number of the votes in last year's election. That's why the military had to fix it to ensure Prayut Chan-o-cha won.

This anger and resistance among young people, of course, is not something unique to Thailand. It is a global phenomenon. In the U.S. presidential election, it was young people who voted against Donald Trump. It's young people who are organizing the Black Lives Matter protests. It's young people who are rising up in Hong Kong, Chile and Nigeria. It's young people who are organizing the global climate strike.

What is the nature of the Thai state and ruling class that the movement is fighting? How has the government, military, monarchy and their right-wing supporters responded to the uprising?

At the center of the Thai ruling class is the military. It has played a central role in the country's politics since the 1930s. They have been supported by the middle class, especially since the protests in 2005 and 2006 against then-elected prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

On the basis of that support, they overthrew Thaksin Shinawatra. But the military is not all powerful. There have been at least two successful mass uprisings against military governments, one in the 1970s and another in the 1990s.

Another important part of the Thai ruling class is the capitalists just like in every other country. They have large conglomerates that dominate the economy like the Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group as well as business moguls like Shinawatra.

Finally, there is the monarchy. Most of the activists believe that King Vajiralongkorn wants to bring back an absolute monarchy. They see him as all powerful.

This is a complete myth. Like his father, King Bhumibol, Vajiralongkorn is only on the throne because the military wants him to be there. The military in fact holds all the power. They use the monarchy in order to justify everything and strike fear into people's minds.

The monarchy, like those in Europe and elsewhere, is a symbol the ruling class relies on to justify social inequalities as the "natural order" of things. It ratifies myths like there are people who are born to rule and others who are born to be ruled.

The monarchy itself doesn't have any power. The current king spends most of his time in Germany living like a playboy and plays almost no role in decision making. Contrast this with actual dictators; they rarely leave their countries because they fear they'll be overthrown when they're abroad.

Then there is the character of this particular king. He's proved himself completely incapable of

ruling anything. Britain's Channel 4 TV recently managed to corner him for an interview [2]. They asked him some questions about the protests. His response was quite typical. He couldn't string a sentence together. The idea that this man could somehow wield power is quite ludicrous. The monarchy is a powerful symbol that is controlled by the iron fist of the military.

This is important for the movement to grasp so that activists know what must be done to bring about democracy. We have to overthrow the military.

The movement is a direct threat to this Thai ruling class and its institutions. They have responded to the movement by threatening the protesters, enacting emergency laws and banning demonstrations. But young people simply ignored all of this and continued the struggle.

The regime then deployed the police to attack the protests. They used water cannons that shot water laced with chemical irritants onto the crowds in the hopes of driving them off the streets. But that only made people angrier.

At the moment, the ruling class and military seem to be waiting and hoping for movement to burn itself out. This is a real danger. If movements don't go forward, they tend to go backwards.

Some journalists and activists have said that there is a possibility of yet another military coup to stabilize the country. Is that a possibility?

I am always hesitant to say that a coup is unlikely in Thailand. In 2006, I told a class of my students that there wouldn't be a coup. And then the next day, the military overthrew Thaksin Shinawatra's government.

That said, because there have been so many military coups, people in Thailand are always worried about another one. But the question for the military is: What would they achieve by overthrowing the current government?

They could stage a coup or just shut down parliament and rule by decree. But they almost rule by decree anyway. A faction of the military might be tempted to overthrow the government, but I do not see any evidence of that at the moment.

In reality, the military is already in power. They rule through Prayut Chan-o-cha and his government. I think they believe that the current façade or charade of democratic rule is their best option right now.

What are the kinds of social groups and classes involved in the struggle? What have been the kind of predominant strategies and tactics of the movement? What do you think the movement needs to do to take the struggle forward and win?

As I said before, the movement is led by young people, mostly students, and especially women. The students as a group come from a cross-section of classes.

It's important to remember that the biggest class in Thailand is the working class. The students are ordinary, working-class kids. They may be the children of white-collar workers, but they're still working class.

Some of them may be from middle-class backgrounds. This is a new development. In the past, the middle class in Thailand has tended to support the military and monarchy.

The movement has attracted large sections of the working class. There have been trade unions

involved in some of the protests, for example, on the eastern seaboard in Chon Buri and to the north of Bangkok at Rangsit and also in Saraburi.

These have been organized by labor militants, but they remain a minority in the organized labor movement. Workers turn out to protests, of course, but not as organized forces at this point.

The strategy and tactics of the movement are very interesting. Since many leaders of the movement have been arrested and now face multiple charges, they are emphasizing that everyone is a leader.

They highlight the self-organization of the movement's rank and file. They stress that the movement is democratic and that no one is instructed from above. This is a very good thing. It's a breath of fresh air.

There is a downside to this, though. It makes it difficult to organize and strategize, because they don't have a collective, elected leadership able to coordinate the struggle. It's very decentralized, with all sorts of people organizing protests in different areas.

That makes the job of the police harder, which is good. But you can't go on organizing flash mobs, week after week, with the hope that the government will just fall. If the movement is going to overthrow the military, it must make the country ungovernable.

There are only two ways of doing that. One is rioting in the streets. That would lead to terrible bloodshed. The military would come in and shoot people down as they have done in the past.

The more preferable option is that the young people and the militant trade unionists get together and visit organized workers in factories, offices, transportation hubs, and so on, and talk to them about the possibility of strike action to shut down the economy.

Strike action is the best way to make Thailand ungovernable. We've seen how strikes in other countries have played a crucial role in winning reforms and fundamentally social change. Unfortunately, people have not yet adopted this strategy.

What has been the role of the left and political parties?

There isn't an organized left in Thailand. I tried to build a small grouping of organized socialists before I was forced to leave the country. That organization fell apart under the coup regime.

Today, though, there are a growing number of individuals who regard themselves as left-wing. They need to get together and talk about forming some kind of party.

They need an organized group of people in all the different arenas of the movement to win the argument for a turn to the working class and strike action. Uncoordinated individuals cannot do that.

Has the movement in Hong Kong had any impact on the Thai movement?

There are links between the Hong Kong activists and the Thai activists. One of the things that the current movement has learned from Hong Kong and the recent history of Thai struggle is that it's dangerous to occupy areas overnight.

The previous Red Shirt movement, [3] which was a large pro-democracy movement that arose 10 years ago, occupied key sites in Bangkok for days. The Thai military took advantage of that tactic and massacred activists in cold blood.

Wanting to avoid that at all costs, the current movement gathers people in large numbers, people make speeches, and then the crowd disperses and goes home. That is quite sensible. But such actions must be supplemented with strikes to win.

How have regional powers as well as the U.S. and China responded to the uprising? What impact will the movement have on similar struggles in the region?

The U.S. and China have not taken a public position. The two powers are rivals and each want the Thai state in their camp. The Thai regime is exploiting this situation by currying favor with both.

There are conspiracy theories that say the U.S. is backing the demonstrations. This is nonsense. The demonstrations are self-organized by young people for their own very good reasons. They are nobody's puppet.

The U.S. government under Trump is hardly in favor of overthrowing the Thai state. It wants stability and this will not change with the incoming Biden administration. The Chinese government also wants stability.

It successfully pressured the Thai government to ban a visit by Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong, who had planned to go and meet with Thai activists. The Chinese state doesn't want the struggle in Hong Kong to spread out to the region then and back into Hong Kong.

The movement is very important for the region. The people in Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and other countries are closely following events in Thailand. If the protesters win, their victory would send shock waves through Southeast Asia, giving people inspiration to fight their own regimes.

What are the prospects for the movement?

We're at a crucial moment right now. If the movement doesn't increase the action one way or another to make Thailand ungovernable, then I fear it will end in a shoddy compromise.

What it is likely is that only one of the demands will be met, but not met in full. That will likely be the one about the military's constitution. I think that the ruling class is prepared to amend the constitution.

That is not actually what the people want. They want the whole constitution scrapped and rewritten. The government will try and lure activists into accepting a rotten compromise on this demand and will ignore the other two — for the prime minister to resign and the monarchy to be reformed.

If the movement ends up kicking the ball into parliament and letting the parliamentarians sort it out then there will be a very shoddy compromise. Almost everyone in the current parliament would be happy with that result. But the people will not be.

What can activists outside of Thailand do to build solidarity with the Thai struggle?

One thing people can do is call for the release of all political prisoners. But, more importantly, activists throughout the world, especially in the United States, should build their own struggle to show to Thai activists that it's possible to win.

For example, the Black Lives Matter struggle has been very inspirational to people in Thailand and throughout the world. If the Black Lives Matter activists turn toward organizing the power of the working class as they have done to some extent, they will provide a great example for activists in Thailand.

P.S.

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This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

- Ashley Smith is a socialist writer and activist in Burlington, Vermont. He has written in numerous publications including Truthout, *The International Socialist Review*, *Socialist Worker*, ZNet, *Jacobin*, *New Politics*, and many other online and print publications. He is currently working on a book for Haymarket Books entitled *Socialism and Anti-Imperialism*.

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Footnotes

[1] <https://uglytruththailand.wordpress.com/>

[2] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6s-HOgk4rE>

[3] <https://isreview.org/issue/95/thailands-crisis-coup-and-fight-democracy>