

Thai activists face charges of insulting king on eve of mass protest

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Summons for pro-democracy leaders are the first under lese-majesty rules for two years and come ahead of rally over monarch's wealth

Thai police have reportedly summoned 15 prominent pro-democracy protesters to face charges under the country's fierce lese-majesty law, ahead of a major protest that will call for the king to hand over control of the royal fortune.

Thailand's powerful and ultra-rich royal family is shielded from criticism by one of the world's strictest defamation laws, under which anyone who "defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent" can face up to 15 years on each charge.

Anyone can file a complaint against another person under the law, which rights groups have criticised as draconian and excessively broad in its criteria. Protesters, who are demanding major reforms to the monarchy - including curbs on its power and wealth - have called for lese-majesty to be scrapped.

On Wednesday evening, Parit Chiwarak, also [known as Penguin](#), confirmed that he had received a summons to face lese-majesty charges. He wrote on Twitter: "To those who thought to use this section [of the criminal code], let me tell you right here that I am not afraid."

"The ceiling is broken," he added, referring to how demonstrators have broken the taboo that has long prevented open discussion of the monarchy: "Nothing can cover us any more."

A police source told Reuters news agency that a total of 15 protest leaders had been summoned to acknowledge charges in relation to comments made about king's behaviour, lifestyle and spending. At a press conference on Wednesday morning, police did not confirm details.

For months, the [authorities have struggled to control](#) an unprecedented youth-led movement that began on university campuses and has since spread to streets across the country. Protesters have made [bold calls for reforms of Thailand's monarchy](#), an institution once considered beyond public criticism, arguing that it should be accountable and transparent. They have also demanded for wider democratic reforms including a new constitution.

Though other charges have been used against demonstrators - including, in some cases, teenagers - the authorities had not previously resorted to lese-majesty. Last week, however, Thailand's prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, [announced that "all laws, all articles"](#) would be used to respond to protesters.

"This is a signal that the authorities are going to start using increasingly harsh measures to crackdown - it's hard not to read it that way," said Tamara Loos, a professor at Cornell University. She added that such arrests were, however, unlikely to silence young people: "I think the genie is

out of the bottle. I don't think we will see a return to the kinds of self censorship in public that we saw before."

On Wednesday, protesters will gather outside the Siam Commercial Bank, Thailand's oldest bank, in which the King owns a stake of more than 23%. They had originally planned to gather outside the crown property bureau, the office that manages royal assets, but said they would move to avoid confrontation with royalists planning to rally at the same location. Police had blocked the area with shipping containers and razor wire.

After ascending the throne King Maha Vajiralongkorn took direct control of the bureau, which is worth tens of billions of dollars. Previously, the fund - which includes prime real estate in Bangkok, shares in the SCB and stakes in the country's largest industrial conglomerate, the Siam Cement Company - was under the supervision of the finance ministry. Its exact value is not known, though some estimates suggest it is worth \$US40bn.

Protesters have accused [the king](#) of wasting taxpayers' money, and have criticised him for spending most of his time in Germany, while Thailand faces economic devastation caused by the coronavirus pandemic. They believe such assets should be returned, and the king's private wealth should be separated from the crown funds so that there is greater oversight.

In a statement released ahead of Wednesday's demonstration, the protest group Free Youth said: "Transferring the crown property to the king's property is equivalent to a robbery of the nation's wealth." It also criticised the police response to their protests, stating that "being near the police does not make you feel safe."

Human rights groups have raised concerns over the authorities' use of teargas and water cannon at previous protests, as well as the growing number of arrests. The human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, co-president of the Clooney Foundation for Justice, criticised the recent charges brought under lese majesty, stating that: "No one should be arrested or imprisoned merely for criticizing public officials or a system of government. Thailand should not respond to peaceful protests by cracking down on protesters through prosecutions that muzzle speech."

The Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights also added that "lese-majeste must not be used to criminalize pro-democracy protest leaders and participants".

Responding to the criticism, government spokeswoman Rachada Dhnadirek said: "The government has been open-minded to rights and freedoms despite many imprudent expressions which offend the majority. The government must use its authorised powers."

Reuters

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