

The Return of Thailand's Democracy Movement - A Crossroads

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Thailand's conservative military regime holds power through repression and a rigged political system. This year, however, the government has faced an unprecedented challenge from a pro-democracy movement spearheaded by young activists.

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Thai protesters have now joined the ranks of young rebels rising up against injustice and authoritarianism in different parts of the world, from Hong Kong to Chile, Nigeria to Lebanon, Belarus to the USA. Since August, large youth-led pro-democracy protests have rocked the Thai military junta and dared to criticize the country's monarchy.

On September 19, the anniversary of a military coup against an elected government in 2006, crowds in Bangkok swelled to over 100,000. Then on October 14, the forty-seventh anniversary of a mass uprising against the military dictatorship of the 1970s, protesters gathered in similar numbers, marching to Government House to demand the resignation of the dictator Prayut Chan-ocha. They also demanded a new constitution and reform of the monarchy.

As the queen was driven through the protesting crowds in October, she was met with the pro-democracy three-fingered salute (and even a few middle-finger gestures). The crowd shouted "my taxes!" at her. In November, protesters turned their backs on a royal motorcade and again raised the three-fingered salute.

Although the Thai government invoked emergency powers to ban demonstrations and its police force used water cannon on two occasions, the protests have continued. When the police sprayed demonstrators with water that contained a chemical irritant, this merely provoked greater anger and swelled the numbers of protesters.

A Crossroads for the Protest Movement

Thus far, the reaction of the military government has been mild compared with episodes in the past when troops were deployed to shoot down unarmed demonstrations. Even so, there have been arrests of many leading activists, and some face multiple court cases. The response of the movement

has been to declare that “everyone is a leader,” and rank-and-file activists have carried on organizing protests.

However, Prayut and his gang of military thugs are not about to go easily. They have spent the years since their coup in 2014 putting in place measures to maintain their power: writing a new constitution, appointing the senate, drawing up a twenty-year “National Strategy,” and fixing last year’s elections.

Prayut already has blood on his hands: in 2010, when he was the army’s commander-in-chief, he and the military-appointed government of the time ordered the shooting down of unarmed pro-democracy Red Shirts. The Thai military have also used death squads against dissidents sheltering in neighboring countries.

The movement is at a crossroads. Organizing flash mobs over and over again risks tiring out protesters, and such actions are not sufficient to make the country ungovernable, which is a necessary condition for victory. There are ominous signs that the junta is seeking to pressure the movement into a shoddy compromise with the help of the political parties.

The aim of this gambit would be to merely amend some parts of the constitution through a parliamentary process. The government has also been trying to divide the protesters by holding talks with some secondary-school students about education conditions.

Anatomy of the Protests

The protesters are made up of students and working people, organized by a group of mainly young activists, who initially called themselves the “Free People” organization. They have now created a coalition calling itself the “People’s Party” after the movement that led the 1932 revolution that successfully toppled the absolute monarchy. Young women occupy leading roles in the movement.

What sets this latest movement apart from the previous Red Shirt movement for democracy ten years ago is that its activists are independent of any political parties. In fact, the mainstream opposition parties have been unable to keep up with the movement — unlike the mobile meatball vendors who arrive at protest sites just as people start arriving.

Secondary-school students are an important part of the movement and have staged three-finger salute protests during the compulsory flag-raising ceremony before the start of the school day. They defy and argue with their teachers — and often it is young women who are the most militant voices.

On one occasion, a group of school students left their classes to protest outside the Ministry of Education. As the minister tried in vain to address the students, he was sent packing with shouts deriding him as a “lackey of the dictatorship!” There are even reports of a primary-school student speaking at one rally.

The three-fingered salute was borrowed from the *Hunger Games* movie series: it became a symbol of opposition to the military dictatorship during anti-coup protests in 2014. Thai demonstrations are always full of symbolism. The organizers of the mass pro-democracy mobilization ten years ago were known as Red Shirts, while royalist supporters of the military wore yellow shirts.

These middle-class reactionaries later tried to pretend that they were non-partisan by wearing different colored shirts. Their opponents immediately branded them as “Salim,” in reference to a multi-colored noodle dessert. “Salim” has become a widely used derogatory term by the pro-

democracy side to describe its conservative foes.

A New Generation

Students have managed to enliven and expand the pro-democracy protests, which have occurred sporadically since the last military coup in 2014, because members of this new generation have seen the futility of pushing for reforms within the military-controlled parliamentary system. They are fed up with the entrenched conservatism in Thai society, especially in the education system.

The country's economy is in a mess due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Thai youth see little reasons to be hopeful for the future. They share these feelings of anger and frustration with much of the adult population: more than half voted against the military party in 2019. A recent poll conducted by Bangkok University found that over 40 percent of the population are struggling to make ends meet.

The generational difference is that young people don't feel the same fear that is common among older activists who have experienced brutal military crackdowns in the past — a feature that the Thai protests share with similar movements in other countries. As with all mass protests, the demands of the movement are expanding. LGBT and abortion rights activists have joined in, along with activists campaigning for self-determination in the Muslim Malay region of Patani. Older pro-democracy Red Shirt activists have also taken part for the first time since the army brutally suppressed their movement in 2010.

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The emphasis of the youth movement on devolved leadership, without clear organizational structures, is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it has enabled the protests to continue despite the periodic arrests of key activists. On the other hand, it means that strategy is determined in practice by a group of key non-elected activists without much opportunity for face-to-face debate within the wider movement.

Origins of the Thai Political Crisis

The roots of the present crisis lie in events leading up to the 2006 coup against the elected government of businessman-turned-politician Taksin Shinawat. Although many commentators try to explain the ruling-class conflict between Taksin and the royalists in terms of “the old feudal order” fighting back against “the modern capitalist class,” this is not what the conflict is really about.

Both Taksin and his conservative opponents are royalists. The conservatives are not feudalists in any meaningful sense but should rather be seen as authoritarian neoliberals. In supporting the idea of the monarchy, they are also supporting one of the largest capitalist corporations in Thailand.

The current military junta is the strongest faction among these conservatives. They have used force to seize power in the interests of capital, personally enriching themselves in the process. The Thai military also owns a large bank and various media outlets and has its own network of companies.

Taksin is a rich capitalist who started out in the IT business and became the owner of one of Thailand's leading mobile phone and communications networks. However, Taksin was prepared while in office to use a kind of grassroots Keynesianism mixed with free-market policies at national level in order to modernize the country. He called this the “dual-track” approach. In the early years

of his government, which came to power in 2001, he received widespread support from all sections of the Thai elite because of his success in pulling the economy out of the Asian financial crisis.

The conservatives gradually turned against Taksin out of fear that they would lose their privileges as a result of his sweeping modernization program, which included large-scale infrastructure projects and government policies that brought benefits to the poor. Taksin's political machine, Thai Rak Thai, won the hearts and minds of the electorate through such policies. His government introduced Thailand's first universal health care scheme, established job creation funds in rural areas, and arranged debt relief for farmers.

The strong popular support for Taksin frightened his conservative opponents. Their own political ideas could not challenge his base at the polls, which is why the conservatives eventually resorted to a military coup in 2006.

After Taksin

Taksin was hardly a socialist. Nor was he a principled democrat or an advocate of human rights. His vision was of a modernized Thai society where the state and big business could incorporate the majority of the population in economic development, looking to countries like Singapore for inspiration. Since 2008, he has lived in permanent forced exile, and has no intention of supporting a mass uprising.

The leadership vacuum that resulted from Taksin's abstention and the refusal of the new opposition Move Forward Party [1] to build a mass movement helps explain why the current protest mobilization has moved beyond mainstream politics. The movement against Prayut's junta is now totally independent of Taksin's political apparatus and aspires to equality, freedom, and social justice.



*Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte with Prayut in Bangkok, Thailand on March 21, 2017.
(Wikimedia Commons)*

Since the 2006 coup, the Thai military has been in the driving seat, with a brief interlude when Taksin's sister, Yingluck, formed a government between 2011 and 2014. Following the violent crackdown on the Red Shirt democracy movement in 2010, free elections in 2011 brought a Red Shirt-backed administration to power with Yingluck as Thailand's first woman prime minister. The military and the conservative-controlled judiciary repeatedly undermined her government, which was finally overthrown by Prayut's coup in 2014, with middle-class "Salim" elements supporting Yingluck's ouster.

After Prayut seized power, elections eventually took place in 2019, but under anti-democratic rules and a reactionary constitution drawn up by the military. The pro-junta Palang Pracharat party led by Prayut himself won less than a quarter of the popular vote, but the military-appointed senate helped propel the junta back into government with Prayut as prime minister. The military's tame courts also dissolved two opposition parties. Even the so-called National Human Rights Commission is packed with soldiers and policemen.

The Monarchy in Decline

Thais are fed up with the behavior of the new king, Wachiralongkorn, who succeeded his father Pumiwon after the latter's death in 2016. Underlying anger towards this thuggish and rather dim-witted monarch has now come out into the open. People are angry about laws that shelter the king from criticism and accountability.

Wachiralongkorn spends much of his time with his harem in Germany, having changed the constitution to allow him to live abroad, and his treatment of women is one important cause of his unpopularity: when consorts fall out of favor, they can often end up in jail. Wachiralongkorn pushed for another constitutional amendment to bring all of the wealth associated with the monarchy under his personal, centralized control.



The Thai royal family, 1966. Wachiralongkorn is on the far right. (Wikimedia Commons)

Demands to reform the Thai monarchy reflect a widespread feeling that its influence and privileges should be cut back. As time goes on, more people find the idea of a republic attractive. It is the first time in decades that Thais have had the confidence to criticize the king in public, in defiance of draconian laws.

The powerful military has traditionally used the weak monarchy as a tool to justify authoritarian rule. Many activists in Thailand mistakenly believe that there is an absolute monarch ruling the country. In truth, the monarchy has had very little power in its own right since 1932: its function is to serve as a willing tool of the military and the conservatives.

Although the very welcome public criticism of the monarchy can help weaken the junta and hasten the day — long overdue — that Thailand becomes a republic, the military dictatorship remains the main enemy of democracy and popular power.

A Ruling Facade

The absolute monarchy that was overthrown in 1932 was a capitalist monarchy, arising from Thailand's revolution that ended feudalism in the 1870s. The absolutist regime [2] had proved to be an unstable one, leading to the 1932 revolution and the establishment of a constitutional monarchy under the control of Thailand's capitalist class.

For decades, the country's elites have ruled Thailand through a conservative royalist network [3] which creates an image of the king as an all-powerful god (the term "network monarchy" comes from Duncan McCargo, although I believe that his analysis exaggerates how powerful the monarch really is). Yet the previous king, Pumiwon, was always weak: he had no "character," and his power was a fiction.

The Thai elite reproduced Pumphipon's rambling, opaque speeches as if they were sacred texts, but the words contained little substance until conservative members of the ruling class interpreted them to suit their own interests. His son often finds it difficult to string a coherent sentence together, creating difficulties for foreign diplomats who have had to make polite conversation with the king.

"The people who really matter among the Thai elites are the army, high-ranking state officials and business leaders. They pay homage to the king on TV while exercising real power behind this façade."

The people who really matter among the Thai elites are the army, high-ranking state officials and business leaders. They prostrate themselves on the ground and pay homage to the king on TV, while exercising real power behind this façade and enriching themselves. It is an ideological play, acted out to bamboozle the public. Throughout the modern world, monarchies perform an ideological role in reinforcing the status quo. Thailand is no exception to this rule.

Thailand was a close US ally during the Cold War, but the Thai state has been gradually moving away from this alliance since the US withdrawal from Vietnam. Today, the Thai government is trying to balance its relationship between the two main imperialist powers in the region: China and the US. The Thai military often buys hardware from Chinese suppliers.

For its part, Washington has been reluctant to put forward any serious criticism of the Thai government, whether under Obama or Trump. Joint US-Thai military exercises have continued throughout the period of military rule. Conspiracy theories that suggest the US must be behind the protest movement are baseless and carry the insulting implication that ordinary people cannot organize themselves without outsiders pulling strings.

The Missing Link

There are now two possibilities for the near future. Either the protest movement pushes forward to organize more powerful and militant actions, such as strikes, or else the momentum will be lost. Given the level of public support for the protests, it is important that activists now try building for workplace stoppages that would add power to the movement.

Many Thai trade union activists want to fight in a politicized manner. These militants, who are mainly based in private-sector workplaces, oppose the military and the Yellow Shirts. In recent months they have turned up to support the youth-led pro-democracy demonstrations, both as individuals and in trade-union groups.

On the eastern seaboard, where there are clusters of automobile assembly, vehicle parts, and electrical machinery plants, a rank-and-file trade-union organization that calls itself the Eastern Relations of Labor Group has organized rallies against the junta. Textile workers in Sarabury, just north of Bangkok, have also staged a rally. However, the influence of these militants remains limited, and we have no information about any possible discussions concerning strike action.

As well as the factory workers in the auto and textile industries, the Thai working class includes white-collar workers in the country's offices, banks, and universities; transport workers; and people working in Thai hospitals. To build for strike action against the junta, youth activists need to link up with worker militants and visit workplaces to discuss how to get rid of the dictatorship.

The lessons from the 1970s, and from the defeated Red Shirt protests of a decade ago, are clear on this point: it's vital to expand the movement into the ranks of the organized working class. The

weakness of left-wing groups in Thailand, which have lacked a significant presence in the country's political life since the decline of the Thai communist movement [4] in the 1980s, will make this task harder to achieve. But we can only hope that the new generation of militants will start taking the necessary steps along this path.

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 11.26.2020:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/11/thailand-protests-democracy-prayut>
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Footnotes

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Move_Forward_Party

[2] https://books.google.ie/books/about/The_Rise_and_Decline_of_Thai_Absolutism.html?id=4JxrL2S-pCQC&redir_esc=y

[3] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09512740500338937>

[4] <http://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article44465>