

Thailand: A House Divided: Ideological Clashes Split Families As Protests Heat Up

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“Don’t be stupid, shitty kids. You are victims of the communist dictators owned by power-hungry millionaires,” reads a placard held by an elderly woman attending a neo-monarchist rally on Aug. 16, 2020.

I-tim’s mother says that if they still want to remain mother and son, he must stop criticizing the monarchy.

As soon as her dad turns on The Nation – a news channel that often dishes out attacks on the student movement – Nat gets into heated arguments with her father about fake news.

Duangkamol forbids her grandchildren from going to pro-democracy protests, and gathers the family every night to watch the royal news broadcasts.

After a six-year hiatus, Thailand’s political conflicts are making a comeback, ignited by the latest wave of student-led protests against PM Prayut Chan-o-cha.

Although polarized politics are not new for the Kingdom – home to the rival camps of the Redshirts and Yellowshirts prior to the coup in May 2014 – the current clashes of ideas pose a far larger division, as they touch upon Thailand’s much revered institutions beyond its conventional politics.

Generational divide is more obvious, too. Many aunts and uncles, parents and grandparents who support the monarchy now see the student protesters as traitors to the institution, while their children and grandchildren view them as backward ‘dinosaurs,’ and sneak out of the home to call for the barest of basic rights.

At the pro-democracy rally on Aug. 16, a leader on stage was met with loud applause when he said through the mic, “Anyone of you have *salim* parents?” using a derogatory term for pro-establishment supporters. “You are what you eat. Tell your mom to stop watching The Nation.”

Sompop Jaemchan, a psychologist who works at the Knowing Mind counseling service, said the best way for disagreeing families to get through this tumultuous times is for the older parties – parents, especially, to listen to their children even if they do not agree.

“Parents must accept the truth that they cannot force their children to think the way they do. Adults must be open-minded and listen to their children,” he said. “Even if parents want to constrict them physically and not let them go to protest, if the kids really want to go they will find a way anyway.”

“Their children must also understand the consequences of what they choose to do,” Sompop continued. “But since the power dynamic in the home is not equal, I would rather campaign for parents to be the ones to listen more to their children.”

I-tim, 23, and his mom, 52

I-tim and his mother fight often about politics – and arguments immediately escalate as soon as he mentions the monarchy.

“If I mention Prawit’s watch scandal, she changes the topic,” he said. “But the monarchy is a very sensitive matter to my mother. If I mention the monarchy she says I’m *chung chart*, or hate the nation,” he said.

“If you still want to consider me your mother, don’t say things like this,” his mom will comment on his political Facebook posts, which he says he posted specifically so his mother might see them.

I-tim says he’s tried to show her news and evidence about the monarchy to “open her eyes,” but “she never listens and just argues with me. I’m telling her the truth and she doesn’t care,” I-tim said.

Duangkamol, 60

Duangkamol was one of the elderly people attending a pro-monarchy counter-protest on Aug. 18, and forbids her university-age grandchildren from going to any pro-democracy rally.

“I saw the kids, even little kids protesting there. I thought, ‘where are their parents?’ Duangkamol said. “Gen. Prayuth should send in soldiers to tell these kids to not hold up such vulgar signs. Why are kids these days always crossing the line to touch the monarchy?”

She says at home, she always turns on the nightly royal news and talks to her entire family about how great King Rama X is. Duangkamol is also a member of the *jit arsa*, a civic volunteer group founded by His Majesty the King.

“When talking to young people, I always go back to history. These little kids don’t know about how great the kings who built our country are,” Duangkamol said. “We have a benevolent King. He provides generous assistance in terms of food and help to old people and *jit arsa* volunteers.”

Ploy, 24, and her parents

“If you get jailed, I won’t go bail you out. Let those instigators bail you out instead,” Ploy’s dad said to her when he knew she was joining a rally to protest against PM Prayut.

Ploy’s entire family are what she describes as “ultra-royalists:” she says her 58-year-old father is an “extreme *salim*” and her uncle used to give her whistles from when he went to the pro-establishment protests that prompted the 2014 coup.

Her mom also asked that Ploy never criticize the monarchy. “She’s quite emotional. She pleads, ‘please leave them out. They are all so good.’ I said no.”

Ploy still plans to continue going to the pro-democracy protests.

Nat, 30, and her dad, 62

Nat helps her father run their family gold shop. As soon as he turns the TV in the shop to The Nation, a conservative news outlet that airs [conspiracy theories](#) that the US manufactured COVID-19 and even obviously [doctored](#) audio clips (which her dad still believes are real to this day), intense shouting matches immediately break out.

“I told him, ‘Papa, I’m so disappointed in you. How can you believe what they say on The Nation?’”

she said. "He replies that, 'everything that's on the news is true. How would they air it otherwise?'"

The pandemic forced her to stay at home more than usual, and news about the pro-democracy protests spurred more arguments since her dad always commented that "The kids are being tricked by university professors and capitalists." As he talked, she transferred donation money to the protestors via a banking app.

Nat, who is 30, says her dad still treats her like a child and disparages her ideas. "Our generation is able to filter news and historical information. For him, he just gets news from one source and uses Google to check up boxing stats and Facebook to stream funny clips."

Pin, 23

In just a few minutes after Pin posted online to show support for an abducted and possibly murdered democracy activist exiled in Cambodia, her relatives phoned up her mom to tattle.

"They said, 'Why do you need to save Wanchalearm? Save yourself. Delete it; it's unsafe to share it,'" Pin said. Those relatives unfriended her on Facebook soon after.

Tanat, 26

Perhaps unlike many younger people his age, Tanat is a young monarchy supporter who reveres the Royal Family and disapproves of the ongoing pro-democracy protests.

"I do not agree with the **10 demands** they are asking. The other set of three demands are more reasonable, but the 10 are definitely overstepping boundaries and touching on the institution," he said. "The monarchy should continue to have a role in our society."

Tanat said he doesn't just get news from one source, but instead follows even anti-monarchy Facebook pages, like the one run by Japan-based academic Pavin Chachavalpongpun. "Some I believe, some I don't believe at all. I can't draw conclusions from that."

When asked about reports about the King circulating online that could be considered lese-majeste, he said, "Some are deep fakes. And a lot of stuff is his personal business. He just has a different style of working, unlike his father."

Noi, 29, and her mom, 69

Noi and her mother could not be more different; the former sympathizes with pro-democracy views, whereas the latter is a royalist, conservative, and used to attend Yellowshirt protests.

Even at home, her mother would insist that she stand up whenever the royal anthem is played or is heard. But at a recent phone conversation about current events, Noi was taken aback by her mother's open attitude.

"It was an unexpectedly productive conversation," she recalled. "Before, whatever I said, she would argue with strong emotions. But we were able to exchange views after I teased her saying, 'You can watch Voice TV too, not just The Nation.'"

On the phone, her mom unexpectedly said that she wasn't okay with Gen. Prayuth, and offered a hint of understanding to the younger generation, "If I had lived like you did, then I might think like you. But I lived like this, so this is my way of thinking."

Asaree Thaitrakulpanich

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