

Thai 2021 Demonstrations: Losing Traction Online

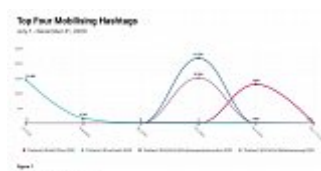
Wednesday 3 November 2021, by [SOMBATPOONSIRI Janjira](#) (Date first published: 26 October 2021).

A combination of political suppression and public fatigue appear to have resulted in a marked decline in online and offline political protests in Thailand this year.

In Thailand, the use of digital platforms has been instrumental in facilitating offline protests, as seen in the mass demonstrations by the [red and yellow camps](#) in the last decade. In 2020, [youth movements](#) intensified this trend – hundreds of anti-government protests were organised nationwide, many of which were mobilised via Twitter. But 2021 has so far witnessed a marked decrease in both online and offline protests. This decline has to do with intensifying clampdowns and overall public fatigue.

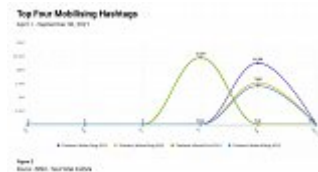
Driven by growing popular dissatisfaction of ruling elites, especially over the palace's political interferences, the youth protesters had introduced a host of [digital innovations](#) for collective action. These included the creation of secure communication platforms aimed at evading surveillance and censorship and the establishment of digital networks of transnational solidarity. In particular, [Twitter hashtags](#) turned out to be a powerful and versatile tool for “flash mob” activities. To attract public support, activists generated hashtags such as #TagYourFriendsToJoinMob or #[a specific date of protest event]JoinMob (e.g. #15OctGoToRactchprasong). Meanwhile, #IdeasForMob helped brainstorm ideas for “hip” and “cool” protest activities, and #WhatsHappeningInThailand drew international attention to the protests. At times, through hashtags, protesters deliberately “[leaked](#)” false information to the authorities regarding protest venues to delay the arrival of police cordon.

The graphic below illustrates the role hashtags played in mobilising large-scale protests offline from July to December 2020. Each of the peaks represents the number of mentions of a hashtag that was generated to mobilise participants in key protest events – for instance, the sustained anti-monarchy protests between 14-16 October and the protests against the [parliamentarian decision on constitutional amendment](#) on 17 November. In total, these hashtags received around 66.4 million mentions, with #16OctGoToPatumWanIntersection gaining the most mentions of 21.7 million in one day. Based on data drawn from [Mobdata](#) Thailand and the [Armed Conflict Location and Event Data](#) (ALCED), it is estimated that a total of 683 protests were organised with the help of mobilising hashtags. The sizes of the offline protests had also swelled over time. Before September, the sizes of offline protests had been fairly small, with hundreds of participants in each flash mob. But major protests targeting the monarchy on September 19 and mid-October gathered more than 100,000 and 20,000 participants respectively.



As a severe [Covid-19 wave](#) hit Thailand from April 2021 onwards, the conditions became ripe for further mass demonstrations. Many have become frustrated with sluggish vaccination rates, repeated [economic shutdowns](#), rising unemployment, and the [government failure](#) to alleviate these crises. However, there appears to be a marked decline in both online and offline protests in 2021.

Thus far this year, the top four most mentioned hashtags were #Mob18July, #Mob1August, #Mob7August, and #Mob10August, totaling 38.1 million mentions, just a little over half the number of mentions 2020's top four mobilising hashtags had generated in 2020. The most-mentioned hashtag #Mob18July, reaching 12.4 million mentions, had almost ten million less mentions than the most mentioned hashtag in 2020. Similarly, the number of offline protests has recently dropped to 554 (April-September 2021) compared to 683 in the same period last year (July-December).



One explanation for this decline could be the public's concerns about the fast-spreading coronavirus. But the pandemic factor alone is insufficient to explain this downward pattern of protests in Thailand. Other indicators suggest that first, political "costs" of participating in these protests have increased significantly due to intensifying clampdowns. From July 2020 to June 2021, [695 citizens](#) were charged with violating the emergency decree (imposed in light of Covid-19), royal offenses and computer crimes. In July and August 2021 alone, [615 protesters](#) were charged. In addition, the authorities have increasingly used [force](#) to quell street protests, from teargassing without warning to the use of rubber bullets that [injured several protesters](#).

Second, with the imprisonment of student activists, there has been a lack of leadership and strategic coherence to attract mass participation. Former red shirt activists such as Sombat Boonngamanong and Nattawut Saikua have taken the leadership role in place of jailed student leaders, but have struggled to draw followers. Moreover, these leaders have little control over other groups carrying out their own protests that at times have morphed into [radical direct actions and vandalism](#). [Existing studies](#) elsewhere show that social movements' lack of organisation and leadership are linked to declining popular traction for mass protests. Citizens often calculate whether they should risk joining street protests, and the ability to identify with a particular organisational movement has been a powerful incentive. Without the presence of a strong organisational movement, citizens may decide to remain by-standers.

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Lastly, the 2020 protests were considered the first major expression of popular defiance against the military-palace-backed regime since the 2014 military coup, thus animating many to join. However, the regime's strategy of zero negotiation in conjunction with [pseudo accommodation](#) of protesters' demands created the illusion that the protests did not achieve any concrete outcome. In the end, regime staying power seems intact. This situation may have contributed to "protest fatigue". Again, [research](#) shows that when there are too many protests without substantive outcomes, people are likely to feel exhausted and dissuaded from carrying on their activism.

As 2021 draws to a close, it is difficult to imagine that protest movements can be rejuvenated in the next two months, as the ruling coalition gears up for snap elections next year. Many Thais probably expect that the outcome of the national elections, rather than street politics, will reconfigure Thai politics and thus their future. To become relevant, current movements may need to convince citizens that their activism is beyond mere mass mobilisation, that they provide a platform complementary to electoral politics, in which citizens can amplify their policy preferences that address not only political, but economic demands.

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