

Chiang Mai (Northern Thailand): Hundreds of Thais protest, defying military ban

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Government luxury housing project draws ire of northern Thais with one of the largest protests since 2014 military coup.

More than 1,000 people demonstrated in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai against the building of a government luxury housing project on forested land - one of the largest protests during the nearly four years of military rule.

Thailand's military seized power following a 2014 coup and the ruling generals imposed a ban on public gatherings of more than five people. The restrictions have largely curbed freedom of expression in the Southeast Asian nation.

Images of the housing project for judges, circulated on social media over the past few months, showed construction has carved into the forested foothills of Chiang Mai's popular Doi Suthep mountain, inciting public anger.

Protesters, many wearing green ribbons, demanded the government demolish the new buildings, said the military government must comply in seven days or face more protests.

Demonstrators shouted "te-kwang" - a word in the northern dialect that means "demolition" - before dispersing after about two hours, the Bangkok Post reported.

"Around 1,250 people took part in the protest," police Colonel Paisan, deputy commander of Chiang Mai Police, told Reuters news agency.

"The protesters were focused on environmental issues and not politics, and they cleaned the street afterwards," he said.

Organisers made a proper request for the gathering beforehand and so the protest was allowed to proceed, said Paisan.

'Return the forest'

Public officials have defended the housing project, pointing out construction was legal and on state-owned land, which does not encroach into the national park that covers the mountain.

But the arguments have failed to mollify opponents.

"We want the demolition of the houses and a return of the forest," the rally's organisers said in a statement on Sunday. "Bring back the forest to Doi Suthep. Bring back the forest to the people."

Thai officials said protesters could face legal action if the housing is demolished, and the homes should be used for 10 years before the public can reassess any environmental impact.

Construction started in 2015 and has faced opposition from local environmental groups who regard the mountain as sacred for Chiang Mai and as a “natural lung” for the north’s largest city.

The military government, which has promised to hold an election next year, has faced a growing number of public protests in recent months [1], including a pro-democracy demonstration in Bangkok last month demanding the military withdraw support for the ruling generals.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA AND NEWS AGENCIES

P.S.

* AL JAZEERA, 29 Apr 2018:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/hundreds-thais-protest-defying-military-ban-180429171504350.html>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/thailand-protesters-demand-national-elections-180210140026958.html>