

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 6 November 2020

Youthquake Evokes the 1932 Revolution and Shakes Thailand's Establishment

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Grievance and frustration resulting from the government's authoritarian style, its restrictions on freedom of expression and the dissolution of the Future Forward Party have been accumulating among students and youths in Thailand since the 2014 military coup.
- While high school and college students are overwhelmingly represented among participants in the ongoing protests, young people from various other sectors across the country have also joined the demonstrations.
- The flash-mob style of demonstration is a venting of anger against the political system, expressed in calls for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha, a new Constitution and, more importantly, reform of the Thai monarchy.
- The protests are a flashback to the 1932 Revolution, in that they are conveying the message that ordinary people, not the traditional establishment, own the country and have the legitimate right to determine its future course.
- In response, the crown and the royalists are using traditional methods of smears and labels to counteract the youths.

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INTRODUCTION

A number of Thais have gathered annually at Thammasat University's Tha Phrachan campus and at the 14 October 1973 Memorial site on nearby Ratchadamnoen Avenue to commemorate the student uprising on that date which restored democracy to the country. This year was unusual. Thousands, predominantly young people and most notably high school and college students, came together at Democracy Monument on the same road not only to recall that earlier struggle for democracy but also to protest against the existing order and to call for reform of the royal institution. They believe that the monarchy sits at the top of the pyramid of their country's problems.

During the demonstrations 47 years ago, protesting students were seen holding portraits of King Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit and the tri-colour national flag, reaffirming the 'royal nationalist democratic ideology'¹ developed and articulated during the Cold War. In contrast, the youthful protesters of 2020 apparently reject the role of the Thai monarchy in politics. They have called for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha to step down and for rewriting the military-sponsored 2017 Constitution that enhances the role of the monarchy. At the same time, they strongly oppose the idea of military intervention in installing a royally sanctioned replacement for Prayut.

On the afternoon of 14 October, a royal motorcade carrying Queen Suthida and Prince Dipangkorn Rasmijoti encountered marching demonstrators, who flashed three-finger salutes—a rebellious symbol famously borrowed from the "Hunger Games" films to protest against the establishment since the 2014 military coup. They yelled "*phasi ku*" or "my taxes", expressing anger over the expenditure of public money to support the royal family's lavish lifestyle and the glorification of royalty. This incident led to tough reactions on the part of the government which declared a 'serious state of emergency' to disperse the protesters and led to arrests of some of them in the coming days.²

This paper explains the unique characteristics of this new wave of protests and the narrative the protesters have used. The young protesters' message amount to demands for drastic changes in the fundamentals of Thai politics.

SPONTANEOUS DISRUPTIONS

Grievance and frustration among young Thais have been accumulating since 2014 after former Army chief General Prayut toppled the elected government under Yingluck Shinawatra and then consolidated his power as junta chief and prime minister until 2019. Elections that year saw his utilization of all legal and political instruments at his disposal, such as a mixed-member proportional electoral system and a hand-picked Senate as well as military support, to remain in power. In the polls held in March 2019, Prayut won only a slim majority of 252 out of 500 seats in the House of Representatives, and had to face strong opposition from the Phuea Thai Party, which won most votes in those elections, and from the progressive Future Forward Party (FFP) that was popular among the new generation of voters.

While the dissolution of the FFP in February 2020 strengthened Prayut's government in Parliament after parties in his coalition took in nine defections from that defunct party,³ the move disappointed many young people, some of whom were first-time voters who had supported a party that they hoped would bring a brighter future for them. In the past six years, Prayut's authoritarian style, his restrictions on freedom of expression, and the country's poor economic performance—with an expected GDP contraction of 7.8 percent for 2020—had widened fault lines to cause a youthquake already in late February this year. High school and university students, as well as young activists, formed “flash mobs” across the country to vent their pent-up frustrations.

The expression “flash mob”, coined in 2003 by journalist Bill Wasik, refers to a sudden assembly of people in a public place to briefly perform actions including political demonstrations before dispersing quickly. The tactic became famous in Thailand after the 2014 coup, when youngsters used it in the face of restrictions on assembly and freedom of expression. A week after Prayut's coup, for example, a group of four activists gathered at Bangkok Art and Cultural Center in the heart of the capital for an hour to read George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to protest against the military junta. The junta subsequently banned assemblies of five or more people in public from expressing political opinions.⁴ Flash-mob tactics have been widely used since then to play a cat-and-mouse game with the authorities. Billionaire activist Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit employed flash-mob tactics to kick off his struggle in December 2019 when the Election Commission sought a verdict from the Constitutional Court to disband his FFP.⁵

Unlike other political protests in recent history, such as those of the yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), the red-shirted United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) or the whistle-blowers of the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), youthful protest is now decentralized, with no umbrella organization to steer its movement. Groups of students and activists, known by different names such as the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD), Student Union of Thailand, Free Youth and Free People came together on an apparently *ad hoc* basis. Free People demonstrated on 16 August, demanding that the government to cease acts of intimidation, that a new constitution be drafted and that the House of Representatives be dissolved.⁶ The UFTD took the lead in protests held on 19 September, at which there was a call for reform of the monarchy.⁷ At the demonstrations that took place on 14 October, the protesters called themselves People's Party 2563, and had three demands: Prayut's resignation, a new constitution, and, again, reform of the royal institution.⁸

A LGBTQ grouping under the name Serithoei Plus also mounted a street protest expressing its members' sexual orientation and demanding democracy and equal rights.⁹ High school students formed a group known as Nakrian leo or Bad Students, to demonstrate at the Ministry of Education on Ratchadamnoen Avenue in August, wearing white ribbons, blowing whistles and showing three-finger salutes. They demanded an end to harassment in schools and the resignation of Education Minister Nataphol Teepsuwan.¹⁰ Students from prestigious schools and colleges across the country demonstrated alongside other groups against the educational authorities and joined protests to call for democracy. Many called themselves Red Shirts and wore a red shirt to express their political stance during the demonstration, although they were not representatives of the UDD. Some PDRC protesters switched sides to join the young demonstrators. Singers, artists and celebrities such as

members of the girl group BNK 48, K-pop superstars and beauty queens came out to support the demonstrations after the protesters were dispersed with water cannons on the night of 16-17 October. Some of these celebrities attended the rallies and helped raise further funds for the protests. Film star Intira “Sai” Charoenpura said she was surprised to find that fan clubs for Korean and Chinese pop idols poured millions of baht in financial support through her accounts for the protest.¹¹ The fan group for Girls’ Generation, the Elfs or fans of Super Junior, fans of Chinese actors Wang Yibo and Sean Xiao, Thai Exo-Ls or of the Exo K-pop group raised a total of more than two million baht in a day or so. Intira, who was at protest sites frequently, used these funds to purchase helmets, raincoats, gloves and safety hats for protesters.¹²

Social media play a crucial role in the current social movement. Youth utilize new media to express their views, and to communicate and create networks of like-minded people in both the virtual world and the real world. They used the hashtag #MobFromHome on social media, to express their frustration during the state of emergency imposed since March 2020 by the government to contain COVID 19. Famous social media platforms—notably Facebook, Line and Twitter—carry all kind of protest messages, including those breaking the taboo on criticism of the monarchy which the mainstream media have avoided reporting.

The modus operandi of the protests works like blockchain technology, in which social media play the role of a chain to connect peer-to-peer nodes or groups of protesters. Every node in whatever location has its own autonomy and agenda. This decentralized style of operation has been able to survive after the massive arrests of so-called key protest leaders following the serious state of emergency imposed in the early hours of 15 October¹³. After that day, protesters such as Free Youth used Facebook to call for simultaneous gatherings in flash-mob style in several locations, including major elevated train stations and intersections in the capital and many other provinces. These gatherings did not require stages to be set up, high-volume loudspeakers, orators or protest leaders. Some protesters joined the events with their own equipment such as megaphones, posters, banners or spray paint to express their views. Like Hong Kong protesters in recent years, the Thai protesters created their own means of communication and coordination. Authorities have struggled to contain their rallies, with the protesters obviously enjoying playing cat-and-mouse with security officials. A new vocabulary was also invented: “*kaeng the pho*” meant “to fool the police”,¹⁴ “carrot” and “baby carrot” meant monk and novice in their saffron robes, “mocha coffee” mean the police, “o-liang” (a type of sweet cold coffee) meant riot police, “broccoli” referred to the military, “minions” were men with crew cuts in yellow shirts, “Natasha Romanoff” meant secret agent, and Smurfs were protesters hit by water cannons spraying blue liquid.

RE-READING NATIONAL HISTORY

The protest that set a precedent for the current wave of political movement in Thailand occurred when thousands of Thammasat University students staged a demonstration at the university’s Rangsit campus on 10 August. The ten demands that they read out shook Thailand. The demands included restriction on royal power in politics, the abolition of the Royal Office, the reallocation of crown property and the official budget for the monarchy, and the abolition of the *lèse majesté* law. It was the first time in recent Thai history that students had sought accountability on the part of the royal institutions. They called for the

revocation of Article 6 of the 2017 Constitution, which forbids accusations against the king, and the addition of an article to allow parliament to examine wrongdoings of the king, as was stipulated in the constitution promulgated by the People's Party or *Khana ratsadon* which replaced Siam's absolute monarchy with a constitutional monarchy in 1932.

“The people ought to know that the king of our country is not above politics. This has consistently been the root of political problems. He has neglected his duties of being the head of state that binds him to the hearts of the people and uses the people's taxes to seek pleasure and reside outside the country. This takes place while the people are experiencing hardship from the economic downturn. He also has close relationships with the rebels who foment coups to topple democratic rule”, the protesters of the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration said in their written statement.¹⁵

While criticism of the monarchy is outlawed, ideas for putting the royal institution in its proper place and for limiting royal prerogatives in accordance with the norms of constitutional monarchy have been current in the country for a long time. Progressive intellectuals have produced a number of works of history and other materials to prove that the spirit of 1932 Revolution has consistently been undermined by royalists over the decades. Coups in 2006 and 2014, as well as military-sponsored charters, enhanced the role of the monarchy in politics. Without proper explanation from the authorities, symbols of the revolution such as the People's Party plaque at the Royal Plaza, the Defense of Democracy Monument at Lak Si intersection, and statues of the leaders of the revolution including Field Marshal Plaek Pibunsongkhram and Colonel Phraya Phahon Phonphayahasena in Lopburi Province were removed in 2017 and 2019. Such events were reported in the social and alternative media. Books on history, the monarchy and royal-nationalist ideology written by eminent scholars such as Thongchai Winichakul and Nattapoll Chaiching have sold like hot cakes.¹⁶ Students have been telling the media that members of the younger generation have grown interested in political history since the 2014 coup.¹⁷ The 21-year-old Thammasat student Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, who dared to take the stage to break the taboo of criticising the monarchy at the 10 August protest, told the media that she had questioned the monarchy since she was a high school student, an age when Thai youth are usually heavily indoctrinated with the royal-nationalist ideology.¹⁸

On the Facebook fan page Royalist Market Place, Kyoto University Professor Pavin Chatchavalpongpun has attracted more than a million followers for discussions on the Thai monarchy. While messages concerning the monarchy had in earlier years occasionally been posted on social media, notably Twitter, criticisms of the monarchy have been increasingly seen during rallies and flash mobs in recent months. The protesters always refer to the 1932 Revolution.

On 20 September, they installed their own *Khana ratsadon* 2563 plaque at Sanam Luang, where they had gathered the day before and which they renamed “*Sanam rat*”, to imply that the royal ground in fact belonged to citizens, not the king. Since 2010, political activities on Sanam Luang had not been allowed; and the place had been reserved for royal ceremonies.¹⁹ The plaque, which was removed by officials within a day, apparently stated: “Right here! The people have expressed their conviction that this country belongs them; it is not the property of the king as they have deceived us to believe.”

RE-DEFINING THE NATION

Former Army chief General. Apirat Kongsompong, who was appointed deputy secretary to the Royal Office after his retirement at the end of September, alleged that the young protesters were people who very much hated the nation, as they resisted all conventional and traditional elites, establishments, institutions, norms and culture. “Infection with COVID 19 can be healed, but *rok chang chat* [hate-the-nation sickness] cannot”, he said.²⁰ The royalist Apirat was a leading figure among those accusing government critics and anti-monarchists of loathing the country. The charge of hating the nation has been widely used by royalists and pro-government figures to smear dissidents in recent years. For royalists, those who did not express their loyalty to the crown are nation-haters.

The protesters have consistently said that they are not nation-haters but that they oppose the elite’s monopoly over the nation. They also choose a different narrative to define the term ‘nation’. “Nation is not the monarchy. Nation is the people. So we do not hate the nation as they claim”, Panusaya said.²¹

King Vajiralongkorn, who appeared in public quite often during the October protests, told a group of elderly former communist insurgents on 15 October at Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University in Northeast Thailand that the country needed people who loved the nation and the (royal) institution. “You have experience that can be used for the benefit of the country. You can use it to teach a new generation. It will be very useful”,²² said the monarch, who when he was the crown prince had encountered communist insurgents in combat in 1976. The king did not directly mention the present youthful dissent but his meeting with these former insurgents who had obtained assistance from royal projects since they returned to normal live at the end of their insurgency, took place while the protests were taking place in the capital and in major provinces across the country. During his speech, the monarch praised the yellow-clad royalist Thitiwat Tanagaroon, who had confronted the student protesters in front of Central Pinklao shopping mall on 20 October. Queen Suthida introduced the man to King Vajiralongkorn, saying “this man held a poster [showing an image of the late King Bhumibol] amid the protesters. Thank you very much. I remember. Thank you so much.” The king touched his shoulder saying to him, “*kla mak keng mak khop chai*” or “Very brave. Very good. I thank you.” Ultra-royalist Suwit Thongprasert, formerly a key member of the PAD and the PDRC and also known as the monk Buddha Issara, also received similar praise and a similar gesture from the monarch.²³ The king’s action indicated that the crown was in the fight to withstand the wind of change.

CONCLUSION

The youthful protests in 2020 have challenged all aspects of the traditional establishment in championing the ‘equal rights’ of every Thai citizen. While Prayut’s government and royalists employ old tactics in labelling the protesters as an anti-monarchist movement seeking to topple the royal institution, the young protesters have made it clear that they wish to reform the monarchy, rather than overthrow it. They want it to accord with the concept of ‘constitutional monarchy’ as understood in Thailand since the 1932 Revolution. It is for this reason that students have referred to the earlier historical moment, calling themselves the People’s Party and installing a small plaque to reaffirm the spirit and principle of the

Revolution. The message is that the monarchy has to operate within the constitution, with accountability and in compliance with the rule of law.

The decentralized, disruptive and disordered nature of the protests, taking the form of flash mobs without the need for strong leadership from individuals or organizations, indicates the reality that a huge number of Thai people seek drastic changes in the fundamentals of the political order. As many students put it during their demonstration, they do not want power to run the country for their own sake. Rather, they want to change the rules of the game for the future of the country.

¹ Prajak Kongkirati, *Laelae kwamklueanwai ko prakot* [And now, the movement appears] (Bangkok: Thammasat University Press, 2005) p.525-533. Prajak defines the ideology as a combination of nationalism, royalism and democracy.

² Masayuki Yuda. "Thailand protests prompt 'serious emergency' decree banning crowds", *Nikkei Asian Review*, 15 October 2020 [<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Turbulent-Thailand/Thailand-protests-prompt-serious-emergency-decree-banning-crowds>, accessed 18 October 2020].

³ "Bhumjaithai ranks second largest in the coalition government following the defection of Future Forward MPs", Thai PBS World, 25 February 2020 [<https://www.thaipbsworld.com/bhumjaithai-ranks-second-largest-in-coalition-government-following-defection-of-future-forward-mps/>, accessed 18 October 2020].

⁴ "Pratuang rathaprahan duai kanan nangsue" [Protesting the coup by reading books], *Prachatai*, 27 May 2014 [<https://prachatai.com/journal/2014/05/53587>, accessed 18 October 2014].

⁵ "Thanathorn: Rally 'just the beginning'", *Bangkok Post*, 14 December 2019 [<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/politics/1815979/thanathorn-rally-just-the-beginning>, accessed 18 October 2020].

⁶ "Poet tua khana prachachon plotaeak natphob 16 singhakhom yam yut khukham-rang rathathammanun mai-yup sapha" [The launch of Free People set for 16 August, demand halt to intimidation, new charter and lower house dissolution], *Prachatai*, 7 August 2020 [<https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/08/88929>, accessed 19 October 2020].

⁷ "Chumnum 19 kanya: muanchon suea daeng ruam yaowachon ruamtua lon sanam luang kaennam nenyam patirup sathaban" [19 September protest: Red Shirts join youth at rally overflowing Sanam Luang, leaders insist on monarchy reform], BBC Thai, 19 September 2020 [<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-54217719>, accessed 21 October 2020].

⁸ "Khana rat thalaeng chumnum 14 tula chi nayok la-ok poet prachum wisaman raprang rathathammanun prachachon lae patirup kasat" [People's Party calls for demonstration on 14 October demanding PM to step down, open the Lower House to consider people's charter draft and monarchy reform], *Prachatai*, 8 October 2020 [<https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/10/89873>, accessed 19 October 2020].

⁹ "At Thai protests, LGBT activists strengthen calls for gender and marriage equality", *South China Morning Post*, 21 September 2020 [<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3102312/thai-protests-lgbt-activists-strengthen-calls-gender-and>, accessed 19 October 2020].

¹⁰ "Ongkon nakrian leo: nakrian buk krasuang sueksa pao nokwit lai rathamontri Nattaphon adit ko po po so" [Bad Student Organization: Students protest at education ministry blowing whistles to oust Minister Nattaphon Teepsuwan, a former PDRC protester], BBC Thai, 19 August 2020 [<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-53837728>, accessed 19 October 2020].

¹¹ “Sai Charoenpura thueng kap ueng nai phalang faen khlap kaoli-chin radom borichak ruam lan” [Sai Charoenpura is surprised as Korean and Chinese fan clubs pour in nearly one million baht to support protest], *Khom chat luek*, 18 October 2020

[<https://www.komchadluek.net/news/ent/446380>, accessed 19 October 2020].

¹² “K-pop fans raise millions for democracy protest”, *Khaosod English*, 19 October 2020

[<https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2020/10/19/k-pop-fans-raise-millions-for-pro-democracy-protest/>, accessed 19 October 2020].

¹³ At least 78 protesters including human right lawyer Anon Nampa and students Parin Chiwarak and Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul were arrested after the rally on 14 October, while activist Jatupat Boonpattaraksa was detained on the evening of 14 October. Police said 70 of them were released on bail after the lifting of the serious state of emergency. See “Tamruat phoei chuang prakat sathannakan chukchoen rairraeng ruap phutongha 78 khon yam phu thi mi maichap-chapkum yang tong thukdamnoen khadi” [Police reveal arrests of 78 people during serious state of emergency, insisting protesters with arrest warrant face cases], *MGR Online*, 23 October 2020

[<https://mgronline.com/crime/detail/9630000108586>, accessed 24 October 2020].

¹⁴ For readers of Thai interested in this joyously employed vocabulary, the expression is “แกงเทโพ”.

(“แกง” มาจากคำว่า “แกส้ม” “เท” แปลว่า “ทิ้ง” และ โพ คือ police “แกงเทโพ” รวมความแล้วแปลว่า แกส้มตำจริง)

¹⁵ “Full statement: the demonstration at Thammasat proposes monarchy reform”, *Prachatai English*, 11 August 2020

[<https://prachatai.com/english/node/8709>, accessed 20 October 2020].

¹⁶ “An fa diaokan an prawatsat thi mai mi nai baeprian” [Read Fadiaokan, read history which does not exist in school text books], *Prachatai*, 12 October 2020

[<https://prachatai.com/journal/2020/10/89919>, accessed 20 October 2020]. The publisher has produced an outstanding series of studies of the monarchy and critical works on Siam since 2010. These have shaped new perceptions of the role of monarchy and royalists since the 1932 Revolution and countered mainstream history.

¹⁷ Watchiranon Thongthep, “Prachachon plotak: krasae kwanniyom nangsue prawatsat kanmueang naiklum khon run mai kiaophan yangrai kap kanchumnum riakrong prachathippratai” [Free People: How fever for reading political history among new generation relates to demands for democracy], *BBC Thai*, 31 August 2020 [<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-53970497>, accessed 20 October 2020].

¹⁸ Rebecca Ratcliff and Thanit Nilayodhin, “The king and I: the student risking jail by challenging Thailand’s monarchy”, *The Guardian*, 13 October 2020

[<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/13/panusaya-sithijirawattanakul-the-student-taking-on-thailands-monarchy-?fbclid=IwAR0F6mWUzjW5IG1jWRdBnft6UXtMJ-oQ6AF57yj31Vfx3K7HtTVjwj7pqfk>, accessed 20 October 2020].

¹⁹ “Chumnum 19 kanya: poet pho ro bo boransathan rabiap ko tho mo waduai sanam luang” [19

September protest: Historical Site Act on Sanam Luang], *BBC Thai*, 18 September 2020

[<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-54191728>, accessed 20 October 2020].

²⁰ “Apirat Kongsompong: Kowit pen lae hai ta, rok chang chat raksa mai hai” [Apirat

Kongsompong: COVID can be cured, hate the nation disease cannot be cured], *BBC Thai* 5

August 2020 [<https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-53660467>, accessed 27 October 2020].

²¹ Ratcliff and Thanit, op cit.

²² “King meets ex-communists”, *Bangkok Post*, 17 October 2020

[<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2003459/king-meets-ex-communists>, accessed 20 October 2020].

²³ “King praises man who confronted student protesters”, *Khaosod English*, 24 October 2020

[<https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2020/10/24/king-praises-man-who-confronted-student-protesters/>, accessed 24 October 2020], and “King, Queen thank supporters”, *Bangkok Post*, 24

October 2020 [<https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/2007555/king-queen-thank-supporters>, accessed 24 October 2020].

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