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The 2020 Student Uprising in Thailand: A Dynamic Network of Dissent

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Following the government's use of high-pressure water cannons against demonstrators on 16 October, the student uprising in Thailand has morphed into decentralised protests springing up in Bangkok and different parts of the country.
- The mass protests are rooted in a crisis of legitimacy due to the failed return to democracy after last year's general elections, the court verdict disbanding the Future Forward Party in February, the abduction of a political activist in June, and the waning popularity of the monarchy.
- The Internet is not a public sphere privileging rational and ideal speech that leads to consensus. Rather, it is mediated space with human and non-human actors acting in heterogeneous relations to amplify and aggregate allies.
- One of these actors is popular culture, which serves succinctly to communicate complex issues to a global audience.
- Thailand's young protestors have transgressed the realm of fear and entered unchartered territory, reconfiguring along the way the conversations necessary for the future that they envision.

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INTRODUCTION

Thailand has now seen three months of a student-led mass movement, the first in four decades. Middle school, high school and university students have called for change that goes beyond demands for Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha's resignation. Their demands for structural change — a new constitution and reform of the Thai monarchy — put the root causes of the last two decades of prolonged political conflicts on centre stage.

After the government's deployment of high-pressure water cannons with blue dye and unknown chemicals on crowds of young students on 16 October at Bangkok's Pathumwan Intersection, the movement has shifted into fragmented and loosely-connected gatherings, galvanizing larger support from the Thai people. Flash mobs and rallies have appeared at key locations in and on the outskirts of Bangkok and across the country. Coordinated by social media communication, the young protestors have been playing a high-stakes cat-and-mouse game with the authorities every day since the crackdown on 16 October. On some days, they surprised the police by calling their rallies off at the last minute,¹ or by changing the locations and thus leading the police on a fruitless chase. The government announced on October 20 that it would ban four media outlets and a Facebook page: The Reporters, Prachatai, The Standard, Voice TV, and the Free Youth movement Facebook page, which announce the locations of planned rallies of the day.² Netizens immediately migrated to the encrypted Telegram messaging application to coordinate their gatherings.

The palace has not issued any statements regarding the students' ten-point demand for reform of the monarchy, announced at rallies on 15 August and on 19 September. The government has responded by putting student leaders in police custody. On the evening of 23 October, King Vajiralongkorn and royal family members greeted supporters clad in yellow shirts at the Grand Palace. In a video circulated on social media, the king tapped the shoulder of a man who had held up a large photograph of the late King Bhumibol at an anti-establishment rally on October 20 and said, "*Kla mak, kla mak, keng mak, khopchai*" (Very brave, very brave, very good, thank you).³ While royalists embraced the king's words and interpreted them as encouragement, pro-democracy netizens responded with mocking memes and a rally in front of the German Embassy on 26 October.⁴ At that rally, the students called for an investigation into the king, who spends most of his time in Germany. They demanded the records of his travels to determine whether he had exercised political power on German soil and whether he is required to pay inheritance taxes on the billions of dollars that he inherited from his father while a resident in Germany. They also urged the German government to probe the king's possible involvement in the abduction of Thai political activists and his treatment of his staff, as these practices might violate human rights and German law.⁵

As the uprising develops and unfolds, the protestors' demands for reform of the constitution and the monarchy have led the Thai people to confront the deeply rooted political conflicts and sources of divisiveness in their country.

This essay examines the crises of legitimacy that have contributed to the rise of Thai student activism in 2020, explains activism in the digital age, and discusses the network of student dissent in which diverse actors exert differing degrees of force.

CRISES OF LEGITIMACY

While many observers have called attention to the role of social media in the ongoing student uprising in Thailand, it is also crucial to examine the political context, nature of the authoritarianism that bred online contention, and the growing critical sentiment against the monarchy's privileges.

In 2014 the Thai military staged a *coup d'état* to ensure a smooth transition from the reign of the popular King Bhumibol to his successor, the current King Vajiralongkorn. The coup plunged the country back into authoritarianism.⁶ Despite general elections held in 2019, the current constitution, written under the purview of the military, ensures that the 250 senators, hand-picked by the junta, wield significant influence in Parliament.⁷ The elections that promised to bring back democracy thus failed to do that. Instead, the Thai military government, backed by the monarchy and elite groups, retained power even after the elections.

The 2019 polls saw the new Future Forward Party gain tremendous popularity and support from first-time voters and the youth demographic. The party won the 87 seats, the third highest total in Parliament. Its success was partly due to its strength in using social media to engage and gain support from young voters.⁸ In February 2020, however, the courts dissolved the Future Forward Party in February; this left its supporters feeling robbed of their votes. High school and college students took to the streets to defy a court ruling that reflected political motivation to demolish the popular party.

In early June, in another incident that illustrated the Thai state's illegitimate use of power, the activist Wanchalerm Satsaksit was abducted from his apartment in Cambodia. Wanchalerm was an administrator of a Facebook page focused on political satire. The hashtag #SaveWanchalerm began trending on Twitter the day he was abducted, prompting mainstream news media to report on his disappearance. The protestors argued that the Thai authorities had captured the activist, an accusation that the government denied. The hashtag soon mysteriously disappeared from among those most trending in Thailand.

Since 2019, Twitter hashtags have also made the declining popularity of the Thai monarchy evident. The charisma of and reverence for the late King Bhumibol did not transfer to his successor. By means of hashtags, people expressed their frustration over the monarchy's privileges. For example, in October 2019, the trending #RoyalMotorcade illustrated people's exasperation over traffic congestion on a rainy Bangkok evening, congestion worsened by police action that brought all traffic to a halt to clear the way for a royal motorcade. On New Year's Day 2020, the hashtag #Pitko (#ClosedIsland) alluded to the rumour that a Thai princess had vacationed in Southern Thailand and that authorities had closed certain tourist attractions to guarantee her security. Netizens reacted by tweeting #Pitko along with the news report about a petition in France against the closure of a beach on the Riviera for a royal visitor from Saudi Arabia.⁹ The Twitter battle accelerated when netizens claimed that the person defending the princess was the princess herself using a Twitter account under an alias. Photos of the king's lifestyle in Europe circulated on social media while Thai people suffered from the economic downturn resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, fanning anti-royalist sentiments.

ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Discussions about the Internet and struggles for democracy often cast the Internet as an example of Jürgen Habermas's public sphere — a place privileging rational and ideal speech that leads to consensus. That notion is, however, flawed. Humans rarely behave according to pure objectivity and rationality. Kendall R. Phillip has pointed out that the Habermasian model excludes dissent and marginalized people.¹⁰ In other words, it privileges consensus over dissensus, even as the latter is crucial to democracy. Communication scholars Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples argue against the idea of public sphere, positing the importance of public screens, by which they mean environments in which mediated media and images that surround us render persuasion beyond the realm of rationality.¹¹

Activism in the digital age in its various and vibrant forms over the last decade has highlighted the growing role of technology. A debate has thus arisen over technological determinism, in which technology takes precedence in human affairs, in contrast to sociological determinism where human agency comes before technology. For example, some have considered communication technology as the crucial factor leading to the downfall of the Egyptian government during the Arab Spring. Later, scholars have argued that that success did not solely rest on social media, but that interpersonal communications in such places as cafes and taxis were important.¹² Similarly, youths in Hong Kong have also argued that they set up booths to persuade people to support their cause, and did not rely strictly on the Internet.¹³

These cases emphasize human agency while downplaying the role of digital technology. Departing from these dichotomies, I argue that we need to expand understanding of new media by taking technology into account and engaging the concept of actor-network theory to explain “new species of social movements”¹⁴ that ceaselessly reconfigure themselves into dazzling transformations.

Digital technology produces certain kinds of conditions and long-term effects in unexpected ways.¹⁵ The medium “shapes, and controls the scale and form of human association and action”.¹⁶ People are decentralized, splintering from the tyrannical order of print, linear order, roads, hierarchy, and have adopted the characteristics of “nomads”.¹⁷ Networked communication makes it “ridiculously easy”¹⁸ for these nomads or decentralized individuals to connect, raise funds and organize. When Occupy Wall Street or *Los Indignados* in Spain mobilized online and evolved into large-scale movements, Bennett and Segerberg explained that large-scale action networks are situated in the logic of connective action: with personalized calls to action and communication technology that allows people to share and further personalize these calls to action.¹⁹ At the same, we cannot ignore the agency of non-human actors such as Twitter and elements of popular culture such as memes, fandom or television series that have proliferated on social media. Despite their fragmented messages, these non-human actors exert force in recruiting allies and persuading people to participate in collective action. Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory examines the heterogeneous associations among human and non-human actors.²⁰ The term network should not be confused with the technology that allows information to travel instantaneously or in an unmediated way.²¹ Rather, according to Latour, the theory refers to a series of

transformations enacted by human and non-human actors.²² The concept is useful for us in rethinking digital activism.

TRACING THE NETWORK OF DISSENT IN THAILAND

The student-led mass protests that turned into leaderless protests of the scale, number and speed unfolding in Thailand now are mindboggling. They have galvanized unprecedented support since August, when human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa gave a speech breaking the silence about the monarchy's role in Thai politics. This act shattered taboos on criticism of the monarchy, an unchallenged institution protected by the draconian criminal law of *lèse majesté*. At a mass rally on 19 September, student activist Panusaya "Rung" Sithijirawattanakul directly addressed the king and asked him to respond to the students' ten-point declaration²³ on reforming the monarchy and bringing it into alignment with democratic principles. Although Arnon and Panusaya are now in police custody, the student-led rallies expand each day, gaining strength through ties and associations.

In this section, I trace what scholars call the "actants" in this network, including diverse actors, Twitter, and elements of popular culture. Following on Latour's concept, "an actant can make an ally out of anything".²⁴ Each actant in the protests exerts force with its own agency. They are nodes, connected with allies with varying strengths. At each nodal point, the acts, the messages, and force are mediated, translated, and transformed into multiplicities of resistance.

Diverse Political Actors

The explosion of student protests started in February and resumed in June after the pandemic measures were lifted. These protests manifested participation from diverse groups of people. I focus here on a few of these groups to illustrate the dynamic of the protests. These groups include college, middle and high school students, LGBTQ+ groups, vocational school students, and pro-democracy groups outside Thailand. At the start of the student movement, college students crafted hashtags with their institutions' identities, with names, mottos, and catchy political statements infused with humour. Several groups have been notably active, for example, the Free Youth and the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, which comprise college students who organized the mass rallies in August and September. They reached out to vocational school students to join the protests as security guards. Piyarat "Toto" Chongthep connected with other colleges to galvanize support from the public to volunteer as "guards" at the protests.²⁵ Among high school students, the Bad Students group was active in organizing mass protests at the Ministry of Education. That group connects more than 30 schools in Bangkok to mobilize for education reform. Middle and high school students retweeted video clips of the students who raised the three-fingered salute at schools in the provinces. Some of these students were assaulted or harassed by teachers.

Another group that gave colour to the protests are LGBTQ+ activists who have called for democracy, gender equality, and same-sex marriage.²⁶ Members of the Thai diaspora such as the historian Somsak Jiamteerasakul, who lives in exile in France, raised critical questions of the monarchy's role in politics and political scientist Pavin Chatchavalpongpun, who works in Japan, are vocal critics of the monarchy. The latter

started the Royalist Marketplace Facebook page, which has two million members. The group, previously banned in Thailand, caters to political criticisms, gossips, and TikTok video parodies critical of the monarchy.

Twitter

Twitter has been a popular entertainment platform for young people who follow celebrities and pop culture. As of July 2020, Thailand had 7.15 million active Twitter users, placing it eleventh in the world in number of users. While social media algorithms curate what people see on their personalized feeds, Twitter hashtags connect users to tweets and thus to the loosely-connected network of people who share common interests. The student networks in Thailand have expanded exponentially via hashtags for each student-led flash mob and rally. With daily demonstrations, hashtags for the rallies now take simplified form, giving just the date of the rally in question; for example, *#mob21tula* or *#21Octmob*.

Hashtags also link fragmented ideas of decentralized individuals. This was evident in *#idiaokmop* or *#ideasforrallies*, with which users can offer creative pictures, memes, and parodies for their next gathering. These creative ideas proliferated at great speed and transgressed social media's territory, exceeding the control of the binary codes of algorithms and transferred into parts of the protests on the streets.

The Appropriation of Popular Culture

Capitalizing on popular culture's global appeal, Thais have reappropriated materials from popular culture to attract global allies. The young demonstrators adopted the three-fingered salute from "The Hunger Games", in which it figures as a symbol of resistance to the autocratic Capitol in a fictional dystopia. They recast the meaning of the salute to represent liberty, equality, and fraternity.

In July, high school students reappropriated the Japanese anime Hamtaro character into their political expression, using the hashtag *#wingkannahamtaro* (*#letsrunhamtaro*), to criticize the corruption plaguing the government. High school students joined forces to repurpose Hamtaro's theme song with the Thai lyrics that end with the line, "taxpayers' money is the most delicious".

Proposed in the *#ideasformob*, the Harry Potter-themed rally, "Harry Potter vs. You-Know-Who/He-Who-Must-Not Be Named", turned out to be a significant rally. Held on 3 August, it saw human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa publicly announce the necessity of including the Thai monarchy in the political conversation. The fictional taboo against mentioning Voldermort's name converged with the Thai reality that prohibits critical mention of the king. Thai police, like Voldermort's Snatchers alerted to Harry Potter's whereabouts, followed and arrested Arnon. Harry Potter's Voldermort succinctly communicates what young Thais are up against.

The protestors also mustered the power of K-pop fandom in Thailand. With almost 400,000 followers, the Twitter account for Thai fans of the Korean boy band BTS, *@BTS_Thai*, tweeted cancellation of its advertisements for their idols' birthdays at Bangkok's elevated railway and subway stations. This move was a response to the train systems' closure, which

“made it difficult for people to go home and put them at risk”.²⁷ The account for Thai fans of Girls Generation, @WithSNSD_TH, tweeted a spreadsheet detailing expenditures to support the rallies. As of 20 October 2020, K-pop and other fan clubs had raised more than four million baht to fund the protests.²⁸

A final example originates from the Internet meme concerning Twitter trolls against Weeraya “New” Sukaram, the girlfriend of the leading actor Vachirawit “Bright” Chiva-are on the Thai television show *2gether: The Series*. Weeraya replied to the comment on her Instagram photograph calling herself “as beautiful as a Chinese girl” with the phrase “Taiwanese girl”.²⁹ The answer upset Bright’s fans in China, leading the Chinese fans to troll the actor’s Thai and Southeast Asian fans. Deriving from a shared love of milk tea, the #MilkTeaAlliance is a coalition of netizens in Thailand, Taiwan, and Hong Kong vowing to fight against Chinese power in the region. The alliance started in the spring, during the Covid-19 pandemic and the beginning of the student protests. Its message has recently included support for the fight against autocratic governments and against elites whose members exert political influences in these three places.³⁰ With 720,000 Twitter followers, Joshua Wong tweeted in support of the Thai protests with this hashtag and explained what it meant. He also tweeted that he believed “the #MilkTeaAlliance could create a ‘pan-Asia’ grassroots movement that would draw more attention to social causes in Asia”.³¹

These are some of the actants in the network of dissent, loosely linked together to generate messages in the fight for democracy with diverse political actors, Twitter, and popular culture interacting and creating differing degrees of forces in galvanizing support and amplifying their resistance to the Thai establishment.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

This essay has offered contextualized background to the crises of legitimacy that have given rise to the Thai student uprising of 2020. It also discusses the debates on the role of digital technology in activism and the different actors in the network of student discontent.

As the uprising develops and unfolds, the protestors’ demands for structural reforms to the constitution and the monarchy that undergird the current government have led the Thai people to confront the critical need to resolve deeply rooted political conflicts and divisions in the country.

At the time of writing, Prime Minister Prayut has announced that he will not step down as demanded by the students and opposition parties in parliament. While it is not easy to predict the resolution to Thailand’s two-decade-long political conflict, what is evident is that the country’s youth have forged a strong network of resistance with allies and global amplification. They are decentralized nodes, acting in heterogeneous relations with human and non-human actants, and adaptive in response to state suppression. These actants exert force in what might seem fragmented but they are related to one another in depicting the strong determination to untangle the knots of the political crises. They have transgressed the realm of fear and reconfigured the conversations that Thailand needs to have in order to create the future that they envision.

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