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“Thalu Gas”: The Other Version of the “Thai Youth Movement”

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Police, wearing protective gear in anticipation of a possible confrontation with anti-government protesters, patrol outside a BTS train station in Bangkok on 14 October 2021. Picture: Jack TAYLOR, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While the protests in Thailand which started in 2020 mark students' return to the political arena, they differ from the student movements of the mid-1970s in that one of their demands is for the reform of the country's monarchy.
- The protests reached their peak between July and October 2020 and were in decline by the end of the year, curbed by the second wave of COVID-19, the prosecution of protest leaders and violent crackdown measures.
- Protests resumed vigour with the emergence of the Thalu Fa movement and with initiatives taken by Red Shirt leaders and previously active student groups in August 2021.
- The fresh round of protests gave birth to the Thalu Gas movement, whose members later staged protests on their own, focused on clashes with crowd control police at Din Daeng Intersection.
- Thalu Gas protesters are primarily youths of lower-class backgrounds, but also include some from middle-class families. Participants relate their personal experiences of hardship with structural factors in Thai society.
- Violent suppression notwithstanding, Thalu Gas has continued the protests because its members are suffering the current crisis most. They are also aware of the deeper roots of their suffering.
- Thailand will not find "peace" unless the protesters' demands are properly accommodated.

INTRODUCTION

The protests in Thailand which started in early 2020 are of great significance. On the one hand, they mark students' return to the political arena after "disappearing" for more than four decades.¹ On the other hand, their return differs from the well-known "student movements" of the mid-1970s. While students back then resorted to appeals to the monarchy in fighting against military dictatorship, students now demand the reform of Thailand's royal institution.²

In addition, since August 2021, one segment of the protests has charted a new path. Rather than speeches on stage or marches to strategic places, these protests are focused on confrontation with crowd control police. They have thus been dubbed "Thalu Gas" protests, in a reference to the clouds of tear gas the participants confront.³ Importantly, these protests are not led by university students, but rather staged by vocational students and youths of relatively low educational backgrounds. While university student-led protests seem now to be in decline, these other protests take place on a daily basis despite being violently suppressed.

This paper examines the Thalu Gas protests as the other version of the current "Thai youth movement." It begins with an examination of the student-led protests which started in early 2020. It then studies how segments of the protesters began to stage their own protests, which later were called Thalu Gas. It analyses the complexity of violent confrontations and how they reflect a core problem in Thai society, arguing that these protests, violent suppression notwithstanding, will not disappear unless the root cause of protesters' dissatisfaction is addressed.

THE STUDENT-LED PROTESTS OF 2020

University students began to play a leading role in Thai politics again after the military coup of 22 May 2014, in which a junta led by Army commander General Prayut Chan-ocha seized power. With political groups disbanded, students were the only group capable of staging protests against the coup.⁴ Initially, the number of students involved was small; it included only those who were highly politically motivated.⁵ However, after experiencing suppression on the part of the military junta, as well as certain behaviour on the part of members of the royal family, more students began to get involved with politics, primarily "online."⁶

Students only began to stage protests after the Constitutional Court dissolved the Future Forward Party on 21 February 2020. The party had appealed to them as the party of the younger generation, and a majority of them voted for it in the 24 March 2019 election with hopes that it would bring positive change. But their hope was shattered after the Phalang Pracharat Party – the military junta in disguise – formed a government despite coming in second place in the polls. The Constitutional Court ruling was "the straw that broke the camel's back" and eventually led Thai students to protest "offline."⁷

The Students Union of Thailand (SUT) was the first student group to stage a protest. It hung a banner with a defiant statement at Thammasat University right after the Constitutional

Court ruling was released. It then held a gathering at the university the following day which, according to its leader, was “the first time that students [were] interested in politics.”⁸ Then students at other universities came forward. The gatherings spread like “wildfire” across the country and totalled at least 70 protests, before halting in mid-March 2020, primarily because of the spread of COVID-19.⁹

After a hiatus, students resumed the gatherings following the arrest of two youths for their protest against the prime minister. On 18 July 2020, the SUT and a group called “Free Youth” gathered at the Democracy Monument to make three demands – an end to threats against critics of the government, the dissolution of parliament, and a new constitution. The gathering drew more than 2,000 participants despite a ban on gatherings under the Emergency Decree to curb the pandemic. Importantly, it was the first time that students staged protests outside campuses; “holding gatherings inside universities lacks people’s participation; we want people to participate”, the SUT’s leader said.¹⁰

Given that “various groups wanted to take part in the gatherings and the number of demands was increasing”,¹¹ “Free Youth” and the SUT together with other groups then formed a group called “Free People” and held a gathering on 16 August 2020. In addition to the previous three demands, the group added two new ones: no coup and no “national government”. And it voiced one “dream”: democracy with the monarchy under the constitution.¹² Later, on 19 September 2020, the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD) held a gathering at Sanam Luang, which, said a UFTD leader, “[was] the biggest gathering ever held.”¹³ Then students in cooperation with other groups formed a “People’s Party” and staged a gathering on 14 October 2020 at the Democracy Monument to demand the resignation of the prime minister, the drafting of a new constitution, and reform of the monarchy. In addition to these major gatherings in Bangkok, others were held in provinces across the country. It is estimated that between July and December 2020, there were 385 protests in 62 provinces by 112 groups, something “completely unprecedented in Thai political history.”¹⁴

Their unprecedented nature notwithstanding, the student-led protests were in decline by the end of the year in the face of the second wave of COVID-19, the prosecution of protest leaders, and violent measures taken to crack down on protests.¹⁵ It was not until the emergence of “*thalu fa*” that the protests began to be vigorous again.

THALU FA

On 16 February 2021, “People”—as the “People’s Party” was renamed in accordance with a “no-leader strategy”—held an activity called “Walk through the Sky” or “*doen thalu fa*”, at the Thao Suranari Monument in Nakhon Ratchasima Province. The goal was to walk 247.5 kilometers from the monument to Bangkok to demand the release of protest leaders. The march reached Bangkok on 7 March 2021. Then, on 13 March 2021, UNME of Anarchy¹⁶ along with the UFTD and other groups under the name “People” held the second “Walk through the Sky” marching from the Democracy Monument to the Government House to set up the “Thalu Fa Village” nearby. However, on 28 March 2021, police cracked

down on the village and arrested protesters for violating the Emergency Decree and the Communicable Disease Act.

After the crackdown, UNME of Anarchy continued to hold activities but now under the name Thalu Fa because, said its leader, “people began to know Thalu Fa and to get confused.”¹⁷ Initially, Thalu Fa joined activities held by other groups. But after the number of infection cases had rose sharply and measures to curb the pandemic had increased people’s suffering, they decided to take the lead. As one of its leaders put it, “We thought the situation was unbearable and the government had failed miserably. It was also at a time when other groups were tired and were taking a break. So it looked like Thalu Fa was spearheading [the protests].”¹⁸

Thalu Fa gave first priority to ousting the prime minister, followed by drafting a new constitution and reforming the monarchy. Thinking that a conventional style of protest like delivering speeches on stage was “no longer effective and boring”,¹⁹ they initiated “symbolic activities” in which everyone could participate. They vowed to take the lead while other groups were not able to hold gatherings on their own. When leading groups “recover”, they “will step back and play a supporting role.”²⁰

In addition to Thalu Fa, there is the other group that stages protests in parallel. Initially, this group was part of Thalu Fa as well as previous student groups. But after student groups deployed a “no-leader strategy”, focused on marching to strategic places, and the resultant confrontation with the authorities, this group came to life under the name “Thalu Gas”.

THALU GAS

August 2021 saw a surge in protest activities. On the one hand, Red Shirt leaders and activists initiated new activities to support student protests. On 1 August 2021, the prominent Red Shirt Sombat Bunnngamanong held a “car mob” in Bangkok to call for the resignation of the prime minister. Given his reputation and the novelty of the activity, hundreds of cars and motorcycles joined his demonstration. This “success” led Red Shirt leader Nattawut Saikua to hold a second “car mob” on 15 August 2021. Nattawut’s popularity among Red Shirt supporters drew to this event hundreds of cars and motorcycles, many decorated with Red Shirt symbols. At the same time, major student groups resumed their protests. On 7 August 2021, Free Youth held a gathering. Initially, they planned to gather at the Democracy Monument and march to the Grand Palace. But, after police blocked streets with containers and occupied the area near the monument, they changed the meeting point to the Victory Monument and made the prime minister’s residence the march’s destination. Then, on 10 August 2021, the UFTD, following Sombat’s initiative, held a third “car mob” to visit strategic places. In addition, Thalu Fa continued its protests. On 11, 13, and 16 August 2021, it called demonstrators to the Victory Monument and led them to the prime minister’s residence to demand his resignation.

Although these protests drew smaller numbers of people than those of 2020, they gave birth to a new group of protesters. These protesters joined “car mobs” and marches like other protesters, but they kept protesting even after protest leaders had terminated the

demonstrations. For example, a group of protesters gathered around Din Daeng Intersection even though Sombat had announced the termination of his “car mob.” Police fired water cannons, tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse these protesters, who fought back with marbles, bottles and slingshots. The clash lasted until 10 p.m. before the protesters retreated. Likewise, a group of protesters left Nattawut’s “car mob” for the Din Daeng Intersection to clash with crowd control police. They kept battling the police even after Nattawut arrived to call them back.

This also happened with student-led protests. Concerned with the situation at Din Daeng Triangle, a spot near the intersection of the same name where protesters were clashing with police, the Free Youth terminated their protest and asked protesters to go home. However, many protesters kept clashing with police into the night.²¹ This was also true of Thalu Fa’s marches. In all three marches to the prime minister’s residence during which the protesters clashed with crowd control police, many protesters kept fighting even after Thalu Fa had terminated the marches.

In addition, these same protesters have been staging protests on their own since late August. For example, on 17 August, a group of protesters clashed with crowd control police at Din Daeng Intersection while Thalu Fa was holding a protest in front of the headquarters of the National Police Office. Likewise, the following day, a group of protesters clashed with crowd control police at Din Daeng Intersection once again while Thalu Fa was holding a “symbolic activity” at the Democracy Monument.²² Importantly, these demonstrators clashed with crowd control police at Din Daeng Intersection on 20 and 21 August 2021 although neither Thalu Fa nor other groups were holding protests on these days.

The clashes took place from evening until late in the night. The protesters, mostly youth who came by motorcycles, burnt tires and threw marbles, bottles and giant firecrackers and fired slingshots and fireworks at crowd control police who were stationed inside the Royal Thai Army Band Department compound. Police responded with tear gas, water cannons, and rubber bullets. Where the protesters did not retreat, police would advance to disperse and arrest them.

Initially, these protesters were called “independent mobs”. But they emerged from Thalu Fa or “had Thalu Fa as their idol” said a woman whom Thalu Gas protesters called “Mom”,²³ and “fans proposed Thalu Gas, when I asked what these protesters should be named”, said the “People” Facebook page administrator.²⁴ They were then called Thalu Gas for the first time on that Facebook page and have generally been known by that name since then.

BEHIND THE GAS

Thalu Gas is generally perceived as a group of vocational students or youths of lower-class backgrounds often associated with violence and not concerned with politics. However, youths of other classes are also part of Thalu Gas, and the reasons that they have joined the protests are much more complex than their “aggressive behaviour” or “pleasure in crime”, as often alleged by police. “Gun”, for example, obtained an associate’s degree from a vocational college. However, he is not from a low-income family. His father is a police

captain and his mother is from a family of civil servants.²⁵ Likewise, “Fah” is a vocational student, but his father is a police lieutenant and his mother is not from a low-income family.²⁶

These two youths²⁷ are different from “Hom”, who exemplifies a typical Thalu Gas protester. “Hom” was born in Bangkok, but his household registration is in Roi Et in the Northeast; his Bangkok house has no household registration document. His mother divorced his father when he was in grade three, and she raised him with what she earned as a food vendor. He dropped out of school in grade eight and used his grade six primary-school certificate in applying for employment. He became unemployed after the department store where he worked was closed as part of measures to curb the spread of COVID-19.²⁸

Most of these youths began to join the protests after the “no-leader strategy” was employed and marches became a dominant form of demonstrations. “Karn” said he had been interested in politics since he was young because his father was a Red Shirt supporter. He began to join the protests early this year when REDEM took the lead and clashed with police.²⁹ Likewise, “Gun” began to join the protests when Free Youth held a march to the prime minister’s resident and clashed with police.³⁰

The main reason these youths joined the Thalu Gas protests was injustice. They thought that the government had abused power and used laws and weapons against protesters unjustly, so they joined the protesters to help them fight back.³¹ In addition, these protesters link the injustice the protesters faced with the undemocratic way in which the government came into power. They therefore want to “take democracy back.”³² Their reasons reveal that they do not lack “abstract thinking”, as generally perceived. Moreover, judging from government- and monarchy-related statements sprayed around Din Daeng Intersection, it is obvious that they are also concerned about the “structural dimensions” of the problems.

The other main reason for their participation in the Thalu Gas protests is the failure of the government in dealing with COVID-19. Case number and death toll have risen sharply since April 2021, and there have been delays and corruption in the vaccination roll out. The “economic lockdown” only worsened the situation. It was the poor who suffered the most, and it was the reason why many joined the protests. As “Hom” put it, “Someone’s parents died from COVID because of Prayut’s administration. I used to be a product consultant in a department store. But it was closed because of the government’s policy on COVID. I have been unemployed for six months because of the government. So I joined the protests.”³³

It should be noted that although these youths joined the protests for the aforementioned reasons, they were later deeply motivated by the emotions that they experienced during the clashes. It is anger that keeps the Thalu Gas protesters fighting.³⁴

Given the violent police measures that they witnessed and experienced, whether or not the ways that they clashed with police are “non-violent” is not their major concern. For example, on 18 August 2021, Thalu Fa held a “symbolic activity” at the Democracy Monument, and some organizers said on the microphone that the protest happening at Din Daeng Intersection was not “non-violent” and asked the protesters there to stop. However,

a Thalu Gas protester who at the time was at the Democracy Monument did not agree and left for the Din Daeng Intersection once he knew that there was a clash there because “I wanted to strike back at the police because they use violence first. I don’t care whether the strike is non-violent.”³⁵

Thalu Gas protesters demand the resignation of the prime minister because they consider him “the centre of all evils.” One protester said that he was very bad; no word could represent him.³⁶ Another one said he wanted justice and democracy back and would stop when “Prayut resigns.”³⁷ However, yet another Thalu Gas protester said that he would not stop until “I get justice back and the country has equality, not just Prayut’s resignation.”³⁸ It is indeed unlikely that the “battle” will end any time soon.

CONCLUSION

Din Daeng Intersection has seemed to be under control since the night of 7 October 2021. Hundreds of police have been deployed in the area to prevent gatherings and unrest. There have been no youths on motorcycles hanging around, let alone any throwing giant firecrackers at the police. Residents no longer have to put up with tear gas that police fire on the protesters or to deal with night-time searches of their homes. Calm seems to prevail in the area.

However, grievance and wrath have not gone away. Sounds of giant firecrackers are still heard sporadically and tires have been burnt in some nights. Groups of motorcycles pass around, with the riders shouting at the police. All this signals that Thalu Gas will probably come back to Din Daeng Intersection and stage protests as soon as the police have withdrawn.

This is simply because its members are suffering most in the current crisis. It is unlikely that Din Daeng Intersection or Thailand as a whole will find “peace” if the protesters’ demands are not properly accommodated.

¹ Although students were involved in environmental movements in the 1990s, they were supporters, and those involved were a minority. Likewise, although they took part in the “coloured-shirt politics”, the role of students was to give an image of “purity” to the rival movements, and, again, the majority of students remained uninvolved; see Kanokrat Lertchoosakul, “The White Ribbon Movement: High School Children in the 2020 Thai Youth Protests”, *Critical Asian Studies* (2021) (DOI: 10.1080/14672715.2021.1883452), pp. 2-3; Pongsapak Waiwitlikhit, “The Next Generation? A Comparison between Thailand’s 1973 Protests and Thailand’s 2020 Protests”, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* (2020) (DOI: 10.30845/ijhss.v10n12p3), p. 20; and Prajak Kongkirati, “Thailand: The Cultural Politics of Student Resistance”, (pp. 229-258) in Meredith L. W. Weiss, ed., *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

² Kanokrat, p. 8, and Pongsapak, pp. 22-23.

- ³ “Thalu” is a transcription of the Thai word ทะลุ, which means “to penetrate” or “to go through”.
- ⁴ Pongsapak, p. 21.
- ⁵ Kanokrat, p. 5.
- ⁶ Aim Sinpeng, “Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the #FreeYouth Protests in Thailand”, *Critical Asian Studies* (2021) (DOI: 10.1080/14672715.2021.1882866), Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, “Thai 2021 Demonstrations: Losing Traction Online”, *ISEAS Fulcrum*, 26 October 2021 (<https://fulcrum.sg/thai-2021-demonstrations-losing-traction-online/>, downloaded 31 October 2021), and Penchan Phoborisut, “The 2020 Student Uprising in Thailand: A Dynamic Network of Dissent”, *ISEAS Perspective* 2020/129, 10 November 2020 (<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2020-129-the-2020-student-uprising-in-thailand-a-dynamic-network-of-dissent-by-penchan-phoborisut/>, downloaded 28 October 2021), p. 3
- ⁷ Also see Penchan, p. 3, and Pongsapak, p. 21.
- ⁸ “An”, interview with the author, 8 July 2021. Given the sensitivity of the issues discussed, the names of all interviewees cited here are pseudonyms.
- ⁹ These gatherings took place in the evening inside university campuses. Students who organized the gatherings gave speeches, expressed demands, or read communiqués from makeshift stages, while some who joined the gatherings held placards printed with comments. The gatherings always ended with the singing of songs along with the waving of mobile phones with their flashlights turned on. Initially, they were focused on critiques of the Constitutional Court and the military junta, and on demands for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut. Later, they were focused on calls for a new “people’s constitution” to be drafted by an elected constitution drafting assembly.
- ¹⁰ “An”, interview with the author, 8 July 2021.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² This “dream” was to accommodate the ten-point demands on the reform of the monarchy proposed by the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration on 10 August 2020.
- ¹³ “Ben”, interview with the author, 21 October 2021.
- ¹⁴ Duncan McCargo, “Disruptors’ Dilemma? Thailand’s 2020 Gen Z Protests”, *Critical Asian Studies* (2021) (DOI: 10.1080/14672715.2021.1876522), p. 14.
- ¹⁵ Janjira explained why the student-led protest was in decline. In addition to these three reasons, she argued that both a lack of leadership and of a lead organization and the “protest fatigue” caused by the inability to achieve substantive outcomes accounted for the decline of the student-led protest both online and offline.
- ¹⁶ UNME of the Anarchy is a group of university students from the Northeast, and especially from Khon Kaen University. The first part of its name is a Romanization of “อันมี”, a phrase from ระบอบประชาธิปไตยอันมีพระมหากษัตริย์ทรงเป็นประมุข or “democratic regime with the king as head of state”, as Thailand’s system of government is officially characterized.
- ¹⁷ “Cat”, interview with the author, 20 September 2021.
- ¹⁸ “Ef”, interview with the author, 20 September 2021.
- ¹⁹ “Den”, interview with the author, 20 September 2021.
- ²⁰ “Ef”, interview with the author, 20 September 2021.
- ²¹ One protester said, “I was shot by a rubber bullet when clashing with the police at night after they terminated the protest”. “Fah”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021. And another said that this was the first time that he came to observe the protests and when there was a clash, he “joined the protest until the night”. “Gun”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.
- ²² As one protester put it, “One day I joined Thalu Fa’s sports games. But when a younger brother called me and said that he was battling the police at Din Daeng, I immediately left the Democracy Monument for Din Daeng”. “Gun”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.
- ²³ “Ing”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.
- ²⁴ “Jom”, interview with the author, 25 October 2021.
- ²⁵ “Gun”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

²⁶ “Fah”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

²⁷ These two youths exemplify a minority of Thalu Gas protesters. According to a preliminary study of those protesters, only 4 per cent of around 30 informants were from middle-income families; Kanokrat Lertchoosakul and Thanapong Kerngpaiboon, “การก่อตัว พัฒนาการ และพลวัตการชุมนุมบริเวณแยกดินแดงช่วงเดือนสิงหาคม-ตุลาคม 2564” [The Formation, Development and Dynamics of Gatherings at Din Daeng Intersection Between August – October 2021], unpublished preliminary research report, 2021, p. 17.

²⁸ “Hom”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021. According to Kanokrat’s and Thanapong’s study, more than 65 per cent of the informants were from low-income families. Many of them had worked to support themselves and their families since they were 13 years old. More than 60 per cent are in informal sectors and only 13 percent are in formal sectors. (ibid: 23)

²⁹ “Karn”, interview with the author, 20 September 2021. REDEM is a group formed on 24 February 2021 on the basis of the protesters’ “no-leader strategy”. It is focused on marching to strategic places, and its name is an abbreviation of “Restart Democracy”.

³⁰ “Gun”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

³¹ As one of them put it: “I saw police fire bullets on people. It is not in line with the universal standard and it is unjust. So, I joined them to take justice back”. “Gun”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

³² “Fah”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

³³ “Hom”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021. According to Kanokrat and Thanapong, more than 80 per cent of the informants talked about their experiences losing their jobs, taking salary cuts, facing decreases in income, and working harder to earn more income. The poor were more affected by COVID-19 than the middle and upper classes, and this led them to protest against the government; Kanokrat and Thanapong, pp. 11-12, 24, 30-31.

³⁴ All the interviewed Thalu Gas protesters talked about their anger being caused by the measures police deployed to disperse them.

“They [the police] drove a pick-up truck that crashed into me from behind. Then they pressed me down with their feet and knees. I only had a slingshot and marbles, but they had guns. I am not afraid of them when clashing. I only have anger”. “Hom”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

“I was shot during the dispersal of the crowd. Here are scars. I am not afraid. I am angry at the dispersal. We only have slingshots and marbles and crystal balls. But they have guns, shields. They use violence, not universal principles”. “Karn”, interview with the author, 20 September 2021.

“I was beaten with batons. I was angry. The more they did it, the more I struck back. The more I get hurt, the more I fight. They have rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons. I only have a slingshot. But I will fight”. “Fah”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

This emotional aspect of motivation was also found by Kanokrat and Thanapong; Kanokrat and Thanapong, p. 37. The violent and disproportionate measures that police used against the protesters are a key factor that led many informants to join the protests at the Din Daeng Intersection.

³⁵ “Gun”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

³⁶ “Fah”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

³⁷ “Hom”, interview with the author, 16 September 2021.

³⁸ “Karn”, interview with the author, 20 September 2021. This point differs from Kanokrat’s and Thanapong’s argument. They argue that the aim of the “Din Daeng mob” is limited to the resignation of the prime minister, and that it has not escalated to the structural level that the middle-class youths “penetrated” last year. This is due to the urgency of the problems that the Din Daeng protesters face and the limited information and knowledge about state structure that they possess; Kanokrat and Thanapong, pp. 41-2, 73. However, both this interview and government- and monarchy-related statements sprayed around the Din Daeng Intersection make clear that Thalu Gas protesters have, like student protesters, “penetrated the ceiling”; also see Kanokrat, pp. 2, 8.

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