

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 7 January 2022

“Reform, Not Abolition”: The “Thai Youth Movement” and Its Demands for Reform of the Monarchy

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Protesters take part in a demonstration in Bangkok on 14 November 2021, after a Thai court ruled that speeches by protest leaders calling for royal reforms amounted to a bid to overthrow the country’s monarchy. Picture: Jack TAYLOR / AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- While the Thai monarchy is a highly-revered institution, the personal lives of royal family members have long been topics of comment in private settings. This comment was politicised and went public after the 19 September 2006 coup, in which the monarchy was thought to be implicated.
- Comment on the monarchy is strongest among the young. Having grown up during a transitional period for the royal institution, they have been exposed to information about the monarchy outside school curricula and mainstream media.
- Initially, young Thais chose to comment on the monarchy on social media. But after the dissolution of the Future Forward Party in February 2020, they began to make statements concerning the institution in public gatherings. Furthermore, their observations evolved from sarcasm to more direct and straightforward talk before becoming demands for reform of the monarchy.
- The call for reform of the monarchy has gradually been incorporated into the contemporary Thai youth movement. From a dream, it developed into one of the movement's three demands, and eventually into its dominant demand.
- Although the monarchy has made no response to that demand, critics of the institution have been prosecuted. Nevertheless, the demand continues to be made. Given the critical stance on the monarchy adopted by Thai youths in general, and the strong determination of today's youth movement in particular, it is highly likely that the Thai monarchy will sooner or later have to undergo reform, if it is not abolished.

INTRODUCTION

On 10 August 2020, a student organisation called the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD) held a gathering at Thammasat University's Rangsit Centre campus, during which it announced a ten-point demand for reform of the Thai monarchy.¹ The demand generated “shock” across the country.

Although comments on the institution and its members had long been prevalent in everyday conversations among Thais, this was the first time the monarchy had been openly challenged. Reform of the monarchy went on to become one of the three demands of the youth movement that emerged in Thailand in 2020-2021, and eventually its dominant demand.² Harsh suppression, unfair lawsuits, and a Constitutional Court ruling that “reform is abolition” notwithstanding, this demand has unabatedly been put forward.

This article examines the current “Thai youth movement”, focusing on its demand for reform of the monarchy. It considers how Thai youth began to make comments on the monarchy, primarily on social media, and then explores how those sentiments were implicit in the initial stage of students' gatherings last year, before becoming a concrete demand. It concludes that, despite silence from the monarchy and suppression on the part of the state, demand for reform of the monarchy is unlikely to fade away, given the strong determination of the youths.³

ONLINE COMMENTS ON THE MONARCHY

Officially and publicly, the monarchy is regarded as a highly-revered institution in Thailand. Most state ceremonies are royal ceremonies in which participating representatives of state agencies and state-appointed groups express their allegiance. State media and other mass media outlets regularly extol the monarchy. This is true in popular culture as well, with Thais expressing love for the monarchy. These displays of love for and allegiance to the monarchy reached a peak in the reign of late King Bhumibol, and continue in the present reign of King Vajiralongkorn.

Despite such displays of love and allegiance, less than favourable comments on the monarchy are not uncommon in Thailand. The personal lives of royal family members are hot topics for gossip among close friends and relatives. The 19 November 2006 coup deposing Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra politicised this gossip because of the association of that coup with the monarchy. The Red Shirt opponents of that coup gave that association traction with the public when its leaders lamented how the monarchy was biased in favour of the anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts. The tone of Red Shirt rhetoric changed from being hurt to being furious after the violent crackdown on their protests in April and May 2010. The 22 May 2014 coup, dubbed “the royal coup”, further infuriated the dissidents. After King Bhumibol's death in 2016 and the subsequent enthronement of King Vajiralongkorn—a man whose personal life has provided much to criticise—comments on the monarchy increased even further, especially among the young and on social media like Twitter.⁴

What led Thai youth to make comments on the monarchy is information that they had gained from outside school curricula and the mainstream media—in other words, from the Internet. “Fa”, who tweeted about the monarchy, said that when he was in Grade 8, his interest in politics began with questions about the monarchy, especially about the death in 1946 of the young King Ananda Mahidol. This was because, he said, “I read on websites and I realized who the killer was and why the royal pages [held responsible] were executed.”⁵ He added that when he was in Grade 10 an art teacher gave him different history books to read and told him that the story of King Naresuan (r. 1590-1605) was “a novel”. The teacher encouraged him to question official accounts of Thai history, which eventually led him to ask, “Isn’t it all a fictitious tale?”⁶

“Sit”, another tweeter, said that he had heard the stories about the monarchy that Thais exchange in private from his grandmother since he was young. However, it was when he was in Grade 9 and had access to the Internet that “I got to know more about the monarchy.”⁷ His critical stance developed further when he was a university student. His previously scattered thoughts became more systematic after he attended academic seminars, public talks and camps—until he concluded, “I think we need to talk about the monarchy.”⁸

Although Thai youths were critical of the monarchy, until early 2020 their criticism remained largely online. It was not until the Constitutional Court’s dissolution on 21 February that year of the Future Forward Party that was immensely popular among the young that they began to criticise the monarchy offline, too.

OFFLINE SARCASM ABOUT THE MONARCHY

A day after the Constitutional Court’s ruling on Future Forward, the Student Union of Thailand (SUT) held a gathering at Thammasat University. Besides criticising the court and the government, students also commented on the monarchy. As one member put it, “Speeches were primarily about the government’s administration and the dissolution of the Future Forward Party. But we also touched on the monarchy. But we tried to avoid using direct language. For example, if Prayut [the Prime Minister] serves the people, he is human. If he does not serve the people, he is a dog. But I really want to know whose dog he is.”⁹

Comments on the monarchy were more evident during a gathering at Srinakharinwirot University on 26 February 2020. After the organisers gave speeches opposing the Constitutional Court’s ruling, the first participant to speak from the stage criticised the monarchy because, said the organiser, “he feels repressed [อึดอัด] and wants to speak.”¹⁰ Another student held a placard asking, “Is the weather in Germany good?”, while yet another, standing nearby, held one saying, “IO อห.” These placards alluded to King Vajiralongkorn, who at the time lived in Bavaria and to whom dissidents referred with the derogatory name “IO”.¹¹ The picture of these two students holding placards went viral, marking the first time that the monarchy was addressed at the students’ gatherings.

Comments on the monarchy in these “flash mobs”, however, remained implicit and sarcastic. Besides, the gatherings took place over only about a month and ceased with the

spread of COVID-19. It was not until students resumed their gatherings in mid-July 2020 that comments on the monarchy became straightforward.

TALKING ABOUT THE MONARCHY IN A STRAIGHTFORWARD WAY

A gathering was held on 3 August 2020 at Bangkok's Democracy Monument. Called "Chanting Spells to Protect Democracy", it was jointly organised by groups called Mahanakorn for Democracy and the Kased Movement, the latter composed of students from Kasetsart University. It became the first student gathering that address the monarchy in a straightforward way. According to an organiser, this was because "Mahanakorn and Kasetsart students agreed that it is a time when we need to seriously address the issue of the monarchy, because what we saw from the flash mobs was merely sarcasm and we should not fall into such a trap. We should talk about the monarchy in substantive and academic terms".¹² They also agreed that the speaker should be a man called Arnon Nampa, given his expertise as a lawyer and his constant call for student gatherings to address the issue of the monarchy. However, since it was still difficult to address that issue, the gathering adopted a theme from "Harry Potter" movies. Said another organiser, "Entertainment is able to open people's hearts to listen and the stories in those movies match reality in as far as Voldemort is the unspeakable".¹³

Although the atmosphere was as fanciful as in the movies, the way that Arnon addressed the monarchy in his speech was serious. He said that talking about the monarchy implicitly and sarcastically carried no weight, and it was necessary to speak in a serious and straightforward manner. He knew that everyone knew the truth but did not dare to speak it. But it was necessary to talk about the monarchy openly and publicly; otherwise, problems associated with it would not be solved. He said that, no matter what happened to him after his speech, he would have no regrets, as he would have spoken the truth.¹⁴ A representative of the student groups then read out a joint communique calling for the abolition and amendment of laws that expand the power of the monarchy, for amendment of Article 112 of the Criminal Code on *lèse majesté*¹⁵ to bring it in line with principles of democracy and human rights, and for more weight to be given to the students' and to the people's opinions for solving problems in accordance with democratic principles.

The gathering was not prevented, but it was monitored by deployments of police. A police superintendent told reporters that the force would decide what offences Arnon had committed. On 5 August 2020, a lawyer filed a police complaint against Arnon for his speech offending the monarchy. Two days later, Arnon received a warrant for sedition, unlawful assembly, obstructing traffic, and unauthorised use of an amplifier. However, those charges did not prevent Arnon from talking further about the monarchy in public. After reporting to the police on 8 August 2020, he spoke about the monarchy again at a gathering held by the UFTD.

DEMANDS FOR REFORM OF THE MONARCHY

A UFTD member said that after the period of "flash mobs", the monarchy was continually addressed in gatherings such as the protest against the abduction of Wanchalearm

Satsaksit¹⁶ on 6 June 2020 and the commemoration of the 24 June 1932 Revolution 18 days later. However, it was Arnon's speech that "made people increasingly daring enough to talk about the monarchy."¹⁷ As a leading student group, the UFTD then needed to think about its next gathering. As the resignation of the prime minister would not suffice to resolve the issues facing Thailand and since at the very least Article 112 needed to be abolished, the group concluded that "the gathering needed to address the issue of the monarchy."¹⁸

A gathering called "Thammasat will not Tolerate" was held on 10 August 2020 at Thammasat University's Rangsit Centre campus. Besides Arnon's speech arguing that the monarchy's involvement in politics needed to be questioned and Pavin Chachavalpongpun's¹⁹ video call supporting Arnon's proposal to talk about the monarchy in a straightforward way, the gathering's highlight was the reading out of the UFTD's 10-point demand on reform of the monarchy. These points were primarily drawn from "Nitirat's and Somsak's proposals,"²⁰ and were intended "to reform, not to abolish the monarchy."²¹ Be that as it may, their pungency led them to be viewed as "piercing through the ceiling" that had prevented discussion of the monarchy in Thailand.

Other youth groups adopted these demands. On 16 August 2020, the "Free People" group held a gathering at the Democracy Monument to announce three demands, two standpoints, and one dream. That dream was the achievement of democracy with the monarchy under the constitution.²² The UFTD was dissatisfied with this stance because "it is to reduce a main demand into a dream"²³ and, after withdrawing from the "Free People" organising committee, the UFTD held its own activity at the same gathering instead. The tension between the two groups was resolved after the "People's Party" was, with the participation of the UFTD, formed. At a gathering held on 14 October 2020, it announced reform of the monarchy—along with the prime minister's resignation and the drafting of a new constitution—as one of its three demands. The new group also held a gathering focused specifically on the monarchy on 26 October 2020 in front of the German embassy in Bangkok because, said an organiser, "our king often spends time living in Germany, and we want Germany to probe whether the king has the authority to endorse laws while there and whether he needs to pay German inheritance tax [on his late father's estate]."²⁴

After the dissolution of the "People's Party", youth groups were formed according to a "no-leader" strategy. These also pursued the three demands, but placed different degrees of emphasis on reform of the monarchy. A group called "People" put emphasis on the issue, and held a march to submit letters to King Vajiralongkorn on 8 November 2020 as well as a talk on reform of the monarchy on 10 December 2020. Another group, REDEM,²⁵ also gave importance to the issue; it held a march on 20 March 2021 demanding that the monarchy operate under the constitution. In contrast, a third group, Thalu Fa, "gives ousting Prayut 70 [per cent importance], drafting a new constitution 20, and reforming the monarchy 10 because our members in the provinces are not ready for the monarchy issue", said one member.²⁶

Later, however, these groups, including the UFTD, focused on reform of the monarchy and founded the "People's Party to Abolish Article 112" group because, said one founder, "Article 112 has been widely used against the dissidents and the abolition of it is the first

step to reform the monarchy.”²⁷ The new group launched a campaign of signature collection calling for the abolition of Article 112 in a gathering at Ratchaprasong Intersection on 31 October 2021, where a UFTD member Panasaya Sithijirawattanakul read a communique and cut her arm in the figure of “112”. It also opened a website which provides an online form for one to sign his or her name to take part in a petition. Most recently, on 12 December 2021, it held a gathering called “The People Sentence Article 112” to mark the number of signatures that it had collected—more than 230,000, and to urge more people to sign the petition so that the total could reach 1,000,000. It also vowed to vigorously continue the campaign on reform of the monarchy in the provinces next year while not abandoning demands for the prime minister’s resignation and the constitutional amendment.

RESPONSES AND PROSPECTS

The monarchy made no response after the UFTD submitted its demands in a stand-off with the police near Bangkok’s Grand Palace on 20 September 2020. Worse, arrests of critics of the monarchy soon increased,²⁸ and gatherings met with harsher measures. The Constitutional Court ruled on 10 November 2021 that the demands for reform affected the monarchy and warned that they would eventually lead to the abolition of the regime. Royalists also held activities opposing the students.

Besides, protesters in the provinces have not voiced open support for reform of the monarchy. In the Northeast, for example, protesters condemned Prime Minister Prayut in gatherings decrying the many problems that his administration failed to address, but they avoided addressing reform of the monarchy for fear of suffering legal repercussions. Some Northerners may have dared to question the monarchy, but many others have not. They fear being targeted, given the close surveillance on the part of security authorities in the region. And, while many proclaimed their support for the students on social media, they were not ready to address reform of the monarchy in public.²⁹

Nevertheless, demands for reform have an impact on Thai people’s stance towards the monarchy. From being the minority, people not standing up when the royal anthem is played in movie theatres have now become the majority—a development long regarded as unthinkable. It was a significant change that on 11 November 2021 the prime minister felt it necessary to urge students at the National Defence College to be bold and to dare form part of the minority at the movies and stand up for the royal anthem. Particularly, on 5 December 2021, students surveyed the opinions of shoppers at Bangkok’s upscale Siam Paragon mall for their opinions on Article 112 and found that about 90 per cent of them, mostly members of the younger generation, favoured its abolition. It would appear only a matter of time before the Thai monarchy is reformed, if not abolished.³⁰

CONCLUSION

The Thai Monarchy has existed for centuries, but the institution that we see today was only recently created during the reign of King Bhumibol. And, despite official and public displays of love for and allegiance to the monarchy by the Thai people, it has constantly faced criticism. Initially, criticism was primarily about the personal lives of royal family

members and took place in private settings. But, after the political crisis that led to the 19 September 2006 coup, criticism turned to the monarchy's involvement in politics and became more public. King Vajiralongkorn's enthronement exacerbated the criticism, as the monarch's personal life has now converged with his political involvement. It is among Thai youths that such criticism is strongest and fiercest.

The youths are critical of the monarchy because they were born and grew up during the transition between reigns, when the old one was being challenged and the new one had not yet been established. Besides, they have been exposed to information about the monarchy from outside school curricula and mainstream media, which makes it difficult for the system to educate them as committed royalists like members of previous generations. Their perception that the monarchy was behind the dissolution of their favourite political party also led them to criticise it more in public and later to demand its reform.

Although the monarchy has made no response to these demands and the youths have faced prosecution and harsh suppression, the latter have carried on with their demands. Judging from the critical stance taken toward the monarchy by Thai youths in general and the determination of the youth movement in particular, reform of the Thai monarchy appears inevitable.

¹ The demands were as follows:

1. Abolish Article 6 of the 2017 Constitution that does not allow anyone to make any accusation against the king, and add an article to allow parliament to examine the king's wrongdoings, as stipulated in the constitution promulgated by the People's Party.
2. Abolish Article 112 of the Criminal Code and allow people to exercise freedom of expression about the monarchy and give amnesty to those prosecuted for criticizing the monarchy.
3. Abolish the Crown Property Act of 2018 and make a clear division between the assets of the king under the control of the Ministry of Finance on one hand, and his personal assets on the other.
4. Reduce the amount in the national budget allocated to the king to bring it in line with the country's economic conditions.
5. Abolish the Royal Office. Units with clear duties such as the Royal Security Command should be placed under other agencies. Unnecessary units such as the Privy Council should be disbanded.
6. Cease all giving and receiving of donations by royal charity funds so that all assets of the monarchy can be audited.
7. Cease the exercise of royal prerogative over the expression of political opinions in public.
8. Cease all public relations and education that excessively and one-sidedly extol the monarchy.
9. Search for the facts about the murder of those who criticized or had had relationships with the monarchy.

10. The king must not endorse any further coups.

Note that the People's Party toppled Siam's absolute monarchy in 1932.

² This is unprecedented in Thai political history, even when compared to the student movement of the mid-1970s which resorted to appeals to the monarchy in fighting against the military dictatorship; 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), p. 8; 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), pp. 22-23.

³ Data are drawn primarily from a research project, "'Let's Finish It in Our Generation': Thai Youth Movements in Contemporary Socio-political Contexts", supported by the National Research Council of Thailand's Spearhead Strategic Plan on Social Aspects of Thai People 4.0.

⁴ Prior to the 24 March 2019 election, Thai youths used Twitter primarily to discuss entertainment. But since then, Twitter has become their key political forum. Hashtags related to the Future Forward Party such as #ฟ้ารักพ่อ (#FahLovesFather) are one example; see Aim Sinpeng, "Hashtag Activism: Social Media and the #FreeYouth Protests in Thailand", *Critical Asian Studies* (2021) (DOI: 10.1080/14672715.2021.1882866), p. 5. Hashtags criticizing the monarchy have also trended constantly. These include, for example, #ขบวนเสด็จ (#RoyalMotorcade) in October 2019, which referred to a royal motorcade worsening traffic congestion in Bangkok, and #ปิดเกาะ (#CloseIsland) on New Year's Day 2020, which alluded to the closing of certain tourist attractions in the South to provide security for Princess Sirivannavari while she was on vacation; 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/articlescommentaries/iseas-perspective/2020-129-the-2020-student-uprising-in-thailand-a-dynamic-network-of-dissent-by-penchan-phoborisut/>, downloaded 28 October 2021), p. 3.

⁵ "Fa", interview with the author, 20 September 2021. Given the sensitivity of the issues discussed, the names of all interviewees cited here are pseudonyms.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "Sit", interview with the author, 15 October 2021.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Bel", interview with the author, 21 October 2021.

¹⁰ "Khan", interview with the author, 18 June 2021.

¹¹ "IO" can be read as the Romanized version of "ไอ้อีอ", derived from the name "ไอ" which many Thais used for King Vajiralongkorn when he was crown prince, or "โอรสธิราช". That name remains in use today. "อห." is likely an abbreviation for an extremely strong Thai-language term of abuse.

¹² "Min," interview with the author, 22 August 2021.

¹³ "Nate", interview with the author, 14 June 2021.

¹⁴ This excerpt of Arnon's speech gives the flavour of his remarks. "We have the extreme need to talk about the role of monarchy in today's Thai politics. We have swept these problems under the carpet for many years; never really addressed them, which led to wrong solutions to the problems. We need to accept the truth that the reason why students and people gather is that many of them want to pose questions to the monarchy. [...] There were allusions to a person during the gatherings, and it cannot be anyone but the king. But allusions will not carry any weight unless we talk with reason and in a straightforward way. [...] Now we face severe problems as there are processes that move the monarchy away from democracy. [...] The draft constitution expands the [royal] prerogative far beyond democracy. [...] There was an intervention by the king in the proclamation of the constitution for the first time. [...] Everyone knows, but I believe no one dares to speak. [...] Many laws that expand the king's power were secretly passed. [...] This is important, but no one dares to speak. This is the reason why younger brothers and sisters asked me to speak today. [...] Everyone needs to talk about it seriously and publicly. [...] If we don't talk

about it, we will never solve the problem. Talking about this doesn't mean abolishing the monarchy, but it is about rendering the monarchy's existence in Thai society legitimate. [...] Don't make the weak talk about the monarchy and be threatened alone. Don't let political refugees talk about the monarchy and be abducted and killed cruelly. [...] The monarchy knows that someone has used it to hurt us, making us think about what the monarchy really thinks about us. [...] I beg the monarchy to express its impartial political standpoint. Don't let them threaten us. Don't let them hurt us anymore. [...] We need to talk about this problem publicly and openly. [...] No matter what happens to me today [...] I will not feel regret, as I have already spoken the truth. And this truth will haunt the dictators until we obtain real democracy."

¹⁵ Article 112 of the Criminal Code is Thailand's law on the crime of *lèse majesté*. It states, "Whoever defames, insults or threatens the king, the queen, the heir-apparent or the regent, shall be punished with imprisonment of three to fifteen years."

¹⁶ Wanchalearm Satsaksit was a human-rights activist who worked at one time for the Phuea Thai Party. After the 22 May 2014 coup, he was charged with failing to appear in response to a summons issued by the junta, and in 2015 he was accused of violating Article 112. That latter year, he fled Thailand and took refuge in Laos before moving to Cambodia. On 4 June 2020, he was reportedly abducted by armed men in front of his condominium in Phnom Penh. He was speaking on the phone when he was abducted and uttered the words "I can't breathe" before the line was cut. Reports of his abduction and disappearance infuriated many Thais, especially among youths, and led to gatherings to demand that the Thai and Cambodian governments take action to address Wanchalearm's forced disappearance.

¹⁷ "Bee", interview with the author, 21 October 2021.

¹⁸ "Bell", interview with the author, 21 October 2021.

¹⁹ Pavin Chachavalpongpun is a fervent critic of the Thai monarchy. He left Thailand after the 22 May 2014 coup and was summoned to report to the junta. He is currently living in exile in Japan and is Associate Professor at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University.

²⁰ Ibid. Nitirat is a group of five law professors at Thammasat University which was founded after the 19 September 2006 coup. The group made its public debut on 19 September 2010. Besides publishing articles on its website and holding seminars, it proposed an amendment to Article 112, and later collaborated with others in founding a "Campaign Committee on Article 112 Amendment." However, after its website was closed and its member prosecuted in the wake of the 22 May 2014 coup, it faded out and was virtually dissolved. Somsak Jeamteerasakul is a former history professor at Thammasat University who is a fervent critic of the monarchy and Article 112. He left Thailand after the 22 May 2014 coup and is now living in exile in France.

²¹ "Bee", interview with the author, 21 October 2021.

²² The three demands include an end to threats against critics of the government, the dissolution of the current parliament, and a new constitution, and the two standpoints include no future coups and no "national government."

²³ "Bell", interview with the author, 21 October 2021.

²⁴ "Min," interview with the author, 22 August 2021.

²⁵ 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".

²⁶ "Den", interview with the author, 20 September 2021.

²⁷ "Som", interview with the author, 30 October 2021.

²⁸ Since November 2020, the number of persons charged with violation of Article 112 has risen sharply. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, 156 persons were charged with the violation of Article 112, 20 of whom are still denied bail, during this period.

²⁹ This conclusion draws on distinguished Thai socio-linguist and Ubon Ratchathani University lecturer Dr Saowanee Alexander's participant observation of the protests in the Northeast, of

which Red Shirt supporters constituted a large portion; personal communication, 11 December 2021.

³⁰ As one student put it, “It will surely end. We feel that the struggles have been passed from one generation to another generation. From being people who never said the word ‘Vajiralongkorn’, now we can say it in public. We can wear t-shirts criticizing the monarchy openly. Speaking about it and action have escalated. It will not take long if people get to know more and are braver. We may not succeed with all ten demands, but if one day we have an election and get democracy, the parliament may respond to our demands. To finish is to have the monarchy under the constitution. We saw changes because there are technologies, and now we can access information equally in both rural and urban settings. We have the upper hand because information technology is more equally accessible. People have their own judgement. We believe in this”; “Fa”, interview with the author, 20 September 2021.

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