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Disruptors' dilemma? Thailand's 2020 Gen Z protests

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a preliminary analysis of the hundreds of youth-inspired mass protests staged in Thailand during 2020. It argues that while calling for reforms and flirting with revolutionary rhetoric, the protestors lacked a clear programmatic agenda and were primarily engaged in disrupting dominant narratives about the country's politics, especially in relation to the previously taboo question of the political role of the monarchy. Despite the ad hoc and sometimes incoherent nature of the protests, the students mounted a dramatic challenge to Thailand's ruling elite. Ultimately, the conflict exemplified a generational divide: people from Generation Z, aged under 25, have radically different understandings of power, deference and legitimacy from older population groups. Whatever happens to the protest movement in the short term, the demonstrators have made a decisive break with the old social consensus that existed during the long reign of the late King Bhumibol (1946–2016).

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Introduction

If those in power think this is to put out the fire at the beginning (ดับไฟแต่ต้นลม), I insist that they are wrong because this is [going to be] catching fire (ไฟลามทุ่ง)! ... This is not the end but this is the beginning, because we are the ghost that time has created to haunt those in the old world, [those with] old thinking. [We] caused them to be paranoid, to be fearful, and there is nothing that can soothe them as much as there is nothing that can stop the progress of time that will keep on creating many more of these ghosts.¹

Piyabutr Saengkanokkul's statement on the night of February 21, 2020, right after Thailand's Constitutional Court arbitrarily banned the fledgling progressive Future Forward Party, soon proved prophetic. By the end of the year, the Thai elite, the military, and indeed the monarchy itself had been badly shaken by months of youth-led demonstrations that signaled a major disruption of national narratives about deference, power, and legitimacy. Yet to disrupt a nation's politics is one thing; to reshape it is another. Here was the dilemma for the young people who organized anti-government protests in Thailand during much of 2020.

Thailand's politics have been extremely contentious since then-premier Thaksin Shinawatra fell from royal favor in late 2005.² Bones of contention included the legitimacy of

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¹Matichon TV, February 21, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1-qP6MnVXQ>.

²On this conflict, see Apichat 2017.

elected politicians, the political role of the coup-happy military, and tensions between provincial voters and the urban middle class. Over time, these cleavages evolved into a standoff between two colored-coded sides: “yellow shirt” pro-establishment, royalist conservatives, concentrated in Bangkok and the upper south; and anti-military “red shirt” Thaksin supporters, especially from the populous north and northeast, who wanted to upend the status quo. The yellow-red divide was never as simple as it seemed: both sides comprised diverse, improvised alliances of groups encompassing wide-ranging views. But for nearly a decade, colored t-shirtology provided a shorthand for Thailand’s polarized politics.

Since the 1970s, Thai politics has oscillated between two modes: party mode and rally mode. Party mode is politics as usual, conducted in parliament and through a range of different institutions. Rally mode is the politics of the streets, when mass movements organize demonstrations to challenge those in power.³ Not only has Thailand seen record-breaking numbers of coups and constitutions over the past ninety years, it has also experienced a remarkable number of street protests, a culture first evident in the 1950s, and firmly institutionalized from 1973 onwards. Each major wave of Thai anti-government protests has been associated with a different group of actors: university students during the two Octobers of 1973 and 1976;⁴ an ad hoc alliance of politicians, social activists, and citizens, many but not all middle class, in May 1992;⁵ groups of farmers, especially from the Northeast, during the 1990s;⁶ middle-class Bangkokians and lower-class upper southerners during the post-2005 yellow protests;⁷ and finally “urbanized villagers,” the lower middle-class northerners and northeasterners who formed the core of the pro-Thaksin redshirt protests from 2009.⁸

Rally mode is a standard operating procedure in Thailand. As Chai-Anan Samudavanija’s widely cited “vicious cycle of Thai politics” depicts, new constitutions are issued regularly in order to revise the rules of the game.⁹ Following the promulgation of a constitution, an election is then held, and business-as-usual follows, before politics again descends into crisis – always accompanied by mass protests. The military then stages another coup, so as to restore order, and the cycle begins again. Drawing on the example of the French far right, Catherine Fieschi argues for the existence of “a third type of power,” one that arises out of a dialectical tension between party mode and rally mode.¹⁰ For the French, the attraction of the rally mode of power resides in its purity: street protests should not be tainted by association with mainstream party politics. Similar ideas may be found in the Thai context: in order to be seen as legitimate, mass protests are supposed to be organic, and not orchestrated by politicians for partisan ends or to serve personal ambitions. The Thai protests of 2020 exemplified a comparable third type of power: the power of narrative disruption, in this case by idealistic and “pure” youth.

³See Graham 1993, 84; McCargo 2012, 90–98.

⁴See Thongchai 2020.

⁵See Callahan 1998.

⁶See Somchai 2006.

⁷See Kanokrat 2020.

⁸See Naruemon and McCargo 2011.

⁹Samudavanija 1982, 2.

¹⁰Fieschi 2000, 87.

Context

The 2020 youth protests in Thailand arose from a specific political context: the military coup of May 2014, the subsequent suppression of political activity by the ruling National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), and the flawed election of March 24, 2019, which conservative forces “won” by manipulating the voting system and suppressing opposition parties.¹¹ The reappointment of coup-maker and junta-era prime minister General Prayuth Chan-o-cha to the premiership in June 2020 marked a depressing juncture for democrats. In a legal travesty, the Thai Raksa Chart Party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court in the middle of the election, after King Vajiralongkorn criticized the party for inappropriately nominating one of his sisters as a prime ministerial candidate. When the election still produced the “wrong” result, the backroom boffins of the Election Commission concocted a new formula for allocating party list seats, one that allowed the pro-military losers to form a nineteen-party coalition, and so to “win” after all.

Prayuth himself did not deign to run for election: he was nominated for the position of prime minister by the flat-pack Palang Pracharat Party, which had been hastily created to perpetuate the NCPO’s political dominance in the post-election period. He re-secured the premiership thanks largely to the votes of 250 senators he had appointed himself. Still flanked by his long-time sidekicks, deputy premiers and fellow ex-army chiefs Generals Prawit Wongsuwan and Anupong Paochinda, the new “democratic” Prayuth appeared barely distinguishable from the old military dictator Prayuth – except that he was now notionally accountable to a parliament he openly disdained.

The most surprising outcome of the March 2019 elections was the remarkable success of the newly established Future Forward Party, which became the third largest party in parliament with eighty-one seats.¹² Led by charismatic forty-year-old auto parts tycoon Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the progressively oriented Future Forward won 6.3 million votes. Future Forward’s signature orange color symbolized its positionality, moving beyond the wearying color-coded contestations of recent years. Thanathorn appealed to both former yellows and former reds – and anyone else eager for a fresh start. With a slate of largely unknown local candidates, Future Forward fought mainly on a national platform, deploying social media to popularize the party leadership. Thanathorn and his co-leaders Piyabutr Saengkanokkul and Pannika Wanich threw down a bold challenge to the NCPO, calling for cuts in the military budget, an end to conscription, and the creation of a more equitable society.

By 2019, no Thai under the age of twenty-six had ever voted in a completed general election.¹³ Future Forward appealed strongly to a new generation of first-time Thai voters. From the outset, the party established a New Gen Network, initially led by a brilliant maverick designer, twenty-five-year-old “Nana” Wipaphan Wongsawang. Nana argued that “digital natives” – roughly corresponding to Generation Z – who had grown up accessing information online had a completely differently relationship to power and authority than did people aged over twenty-five. Nana – who soon quit the party – claimed that Future Forward had been established to “oppose seniority-ism” – a radical

¹¹On the 2019 election, see Ricks 2019.

¹²McCargo and Anyarat 2020.

¹³On the aborted 2014 election, see McCargo and Desatova 2016.

concept in Thailand, where both verbal and non-verbal communication is deeply encoded with references to age and gender.

Future Forward was far too outspoken and too critical to be tolerated for long by the Thai establishment, which used a strategy of “lawfare” to attack the party and its leaders. Thanathorn was suspended from parliament before he had made a single speech, and later stripped of his MP status. The coup de grace was delivered in February 2020, when the Future Forward Party was dissolved by the Constitutional Court, ostensibly over receiving “illegal” loans from Thanathorn (the law in question made no reference to loans). Thanathorn and other leading figures in the party were banned from holding political office for the next decade. In the beginning, Future Forward’s leaders were torn between launching a party and starting a movement: eventually, the Constitutional Court made the decision for them. But had Future Forward ever seriously expected to work within the Thai system? Arguably, Thanathorn’s real goal was to disrupt the narrative of Thai politics and prepare the ground for more radical change in the future.¹⁴

First wave: February–March 2020

Following the dissolution of Future Forward, the baton of disruption was taken up by students across Thailand. Beginning on February 22 at Thammasat, Chiang Mai, and Naresuan universities, campus protests spread to universities, colleges, and prestigious high schools in Bangkok and around the country. Over the next three weeks, eighty-six flash mobs were staged.¹⁵ While initially the dissolution of Future Forward was among the issues flagged by protestors, it soon faded from the agenda, displaced by a range of other complaints and demands. The campus protests lacked any obvious ring-leaders: they were organically organized and spontaneous, gaining inspiration from social media postings on Twitter and other platforms.¹⁶ By challenging the junta and the status quo, Future Forward had helped mobilize and crystallize a new generation of politically engaged voters, but the now-dissolved party and its legacy outfits were no longer central to the business of disrupting Thailand’s status quo.

These apparently spontaneous flash mobs were associated with particular hashtags. Student protestors quickly moved on from protesting against the dissolution of Future Forward, to a range of human rights and democracy themes – including calling for the resignation of the prime minister. Anti-monarchy motifs were evident from an early stage of the flash mobs, cleverly encoded in hidden messages and cartoon images. No prominent figures or older political activists showed up at any of the protests. Instead, new young faces appeared on improvised stages. Songs were sung, poems were read, candles were lit, and mobile phones were illuminated. The demonstrations were full of creativity, featuring political speeches but also dance routines, group singing, chanting, mock funerals, and other impromptu performances. Most of the activity was locally inspired: each campus had its own local identity and hashtags.¹⁷ The government tried to extinguish the flames of protest by threatening the students with legal action. On

¹⁴Author interview with Thanathorn, June 10, 2020.

¹⁵*BBC Thai* 2020a.

¹⁶On the role of Twitter in the protests, see Aim 2021, this issue.

¹⁷Janjira 2020.

March 25, the authorities had the perfect excuse to suppress the demonstrations when an emergency decree was issued to clamp down on the spread of Covid-19 – though in fact the flash mobs had already petered out after March 14. But by late April, the students had started an online campaign with the hashtag #MobFromHome, urging the government and the appointed senate to resign.¹⁸

The authorities were unable to cope with the rapid mobilization of the protests through social media: the creativity and energy of the students took them by surprise. The government struggled to respond, torn between dismissing the protestors as misguided “kids” and worrying that they had the potential to become a serious problem. While initially the codewords used by the flash-mobbing students were baffling to most adults,¹⁹ before long the authorities realized that the protestors were criticizing the monarchy and began hinting that they might be charged under Thailand’s draconian *lèse-majesté* laws.²⁰

Demands

Protests resumed in earnest on July 18, when up to 5,000 demonstrators gathered at Bangkok’s Democracy Monument under the banner of the Free Youth²¹ – despite the fact that large gatherings were still officially banned due to the Covid-related emergency decree. Two prime movers behind Free Youth, LGBTQ activists Tattep Ruangprapaikitseree and Panumas Singprom, better known as Ford and James, had been involved with the Future Forward Party’s New Gen Network.²² The demonstrators issued three core demands that became a mantra for the anti-government movement: (1) dissolve parliament, (2) rewrite the constitution, and (3) stop harassing people for protesting peacefully. During the month that followed, demonstrations along similar lines were staged in twenty-seven provinces around the country, as well as a huge follow-up event in Bangkok on August 16 that drew a crowd of around 30,000. This phase of the protests was reformist in orientation, advocating working within the system – and attracted considerable sympathy from many Thais who were unhappy with the 2017 constitution, especially the role of the appointed Senate and the undemocratic electoral system. The early protests had a carnivalesque atmosphere, as seen in the witty appropriation of icons from popular culture including Hamtaro, a Japanese cartoon hamster who briefly became an unlikely symbol of Thai democracy.

At a Harry Potter-themed rally on August 3, the vexed question of the monarchy was directly raised for the first time. Protestors from the Mahanakorn for Democracy group and Kasetart University gathered at the Democracy Monument, where outspoken thirty-five-year-old human rights lawyer Anon Nampa made a number of demands, still framed within a reformist lens:²³ Anon called upon the government to repeal laws that expanded the power of the monarchy, amend the *lèse-majesté* law, and listen to the voices of the

¹⁸Matichon, May 4, 2020.

¹⁹BBC Thai 2020b.

²⁰Naew Na, February 27, 2020.

²¹เยาวชนปลดแอก yaowachon plot aek. The Free Youth Instagram account had 183,000 followers on January 7, 2021. See <https://www.instagram.com/freeyouth.ig/>.

²²Jiraporn 2020.

²³Anon speech August 4, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Bxd5q32oZY>.

students and fellow-protestors.²⁴ Nevertheless, Anon twice mentioned his great respect for the monarchy and insisted that his proposals were concerned with restoring the legitimacy of the institution, which should not be monopolized by one group in Thai society: the monarchy belonged to everyone.

The movement took another more serious turn on August 10, during a mass gathering at Thammasat University's Rangsit campus.²⁵ This protest was organized by the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, associated with the radical "Revolutionary Dome" group, and marked a major turning point in the demonstrations. Panusaya "Rung" Sithijirawattanakul, a twenty-one-year-old Thammasat sociology student, made a passionate speech in which she declared that everyone was equal: nobody was born with purple blood in their veins.²⁶ Everyone was born under the same sky and nobody was superior to anyone else. The most radical moment in her speech was when she declared that in a democracy, people should have the right to express any view they wished, including questioning the need to have a monarchy.

At the very end of the evening, Rung returned to the stage to read ten demands concerning the monarchy, in an unprecedented public proclamation. The first three points elaborated on Anon's Harry Potter rally speech, while others included ending one-sided royalist PR campaigns and barring the monarch from expressing political opinions or endorsing coups.²⁷ The Thammasat declaration – ten points issued on the tenth of the month, in a pointed rebuke to King Vajiralongkorn, also known as Rama 10 – upped the ante considerably. The ten demands formed part of a statement declaring that the students were not advocating abolition of the monarchy. But the uncompromising tone of the protest, the utter lack of deference shown by the speakers, and the calls for de-sacralization of a royal institution that had long been considered beyond public reproach were all shocking.

One hashtag for the protest, #WeDon'tWantReformWeWantRevolution, a slogan projected onto the Thammasat stage and repeatedly engulfed in virtual flames, did nothing to dispel the radicalism of the demands. Many mainstream media outlets did not report the statement in full, and the Thammasat University authorities were extremely uneasy. From August 10 onwards, the student protests were inexorably tinged with anti-monarchism in the eyes of many Thais. When the same students tried to hold a rally at Thammasat's Tha Prachan campus on September 19, they were denied permission by the university authorities, forced to use bolt-croppers to break through the gates, and quickly moved to the nearby Sanam Luang instead.

Perhaps surprisingly, prominent conservative commentator and former *Bangkok Post* editor Veera Prateepchaikul wrote: "after reading the students' 10-point manifesto carefully with an open mind, I personally found several of them to be reasonable."²⁸ Veera's commentary reflected the sentiments of the old royalist elite. Figures such as former prime minister Anand Panyarachun also issued coded, conditional, and carefully

²⁴Prachatai 2020a.

²⁵Hashtags associated with the August 10 protest were #ธรรมศาสตร์จะไม่ทน, #ฟังเป็นอยู่เพื่อมหาชนมิใช่เพื่อเผด็จการ and #เราไม่ต้องการปฏิรูปเราต้องการปฏิวัติ.

²⁶First part of the August 10, 2020 event. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCSbePCw6gM>.

²⁷Second part of the August 10, 2020 protest. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QOLJkhKMS1k> (Rung's speech starts at 2.25.55). For an English translation of the text, see Prachatai 2020b.

²⁸See Veera 2020.

calibrated statements of support for the protestors.²⁹ A central irony here was that many Thais have little fondness for Rama 10. Their attachment to the monarchy is essentially nostalgic, based on their longstanding emotional bond with his father, the late King Bhumibol, who passed away in 2016. Speaking on September 19, Thammasat political science student “Penguin” Parit Chiwarak claimed that the current king had done a great deal to undermine his own image in the eyes of royalists, arguing that insofar as the student protestors were critical of Rama 10, they had much in common with the majority of royalists, who were themselves privately gossiping and complaining about the antics of the new king.³⁰ But while the Thammasat ten points primarily targeted the present king, references to the “excessive glorification” of the throne and to royal endorsement of military coups clearly implicated the Ninth Reign as well.

Ideology and strategy

The student movement has an ideological problem: revolution, or reform? Thiti Jamkajornkeiat offers a compelling exegesis of Rung’s August 10 statement, which culminated in her calling out, “down with feudalism, long live the people.”³¹ As Thiti notes, this was an adaptation of leftist Isan MP Khrong Chandawong’s famous cry, “Down with Dictatorship, Long Live Democracy,” while the ten-point declaration self-consciously echoes the original 1932 manifesto of the People’s Party. While it is certainly possible to read the protests through the lens of a revolutionary struggle between the people and feudalism, this interpretation glosses over all the reformist caveats inserted by Rung and other prominent protestors into their narratives.

Rung’s proclamation of “down with feudalism, long live the people” could be regarded as the authentic voice of the movement. In this reading, the statement’s call to preserve popular faith in the Thai monarchy by subordinating the crown to the constitution is just a cover: the students performed reformism whilst inciting revolution. A slightly different conclusion could also be drawn: despite Rung’s final flurry, hurling the pages of her script into the air and so literally throwing away her carefully crafted reformism, she was performing rather than enacting a revolution. Rung made an extremely passionate speech at Sanam Luang on September 19, this time directly addressing the ten points to King Vajiralongkorn himself – but never calling for the royal institution to be overthrown. It is difficult to listen to her long November 2020 interview with Thapanee Eadsricha of *The Reporters* and view Rung as a fully fledged Marxist revolutionary.³² During the interview, Rung talked about wanting to become an MP and forming her own political party, appearing quite committed to working within the system. It is certainly possible to view the students’ rhetoric through a liberal nationalist lens of constitutional patriotism.³³

Speaking at the large September 19 rally at Sanam Luang, Anon Nampa suggested that the authorities should listen to people like him – who were calling for reforms – or face more extreme revolutionary demands in the future.³⁴ Penguin went the furthest, insisting

²⁹See, for example, Rattaphol 2020.

³⁰Penguin September 19, 2020 speech. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdFpfXGmd9>.

³¹Thiti 2020.

³²Rung interview, November 12, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCv94xof1Jk>.

³³I am indebted to Michael Connors for this point. For a related argument see Connors 2008.

³⁴For Anon’s speech, September 19, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDGBHpl16tM>.

that the protestors were not just fighting the military dictators, but were also fighting dictatorial institutions. They did not simply want to oust Prayuth, but to kick out the entire ruling clique and send them all to join their boss in Munich.³⁵ His bold rhetoric went down very well with the crowd, but stopped short of a call to overthrow the monarchy. In the end, it is much easier to see what the protestors were against than what they stood for. There is no coherent ideological agenda evident behind the protest movement.

One compelling interpretation is that the students were having their cake and eating it, flirting with revolution while pressing and hoping for some kind of reform. Both Anon and Penguin were soon insisting that their fight was in fact already substantially won. Simply by saying the unsayable and by making possible an open discussion of the political role of the monarchy, they had achieved a massive victory. From this perspective, Thai politics can never again be conducted as before. In Nana's terms, hierarchy and seniority-ism had now been upended, in a bold, dramatic fashion that was irreversible. This had been Anon's approach to the freedom of expression cases he had fought (and invariably lost) as a lawyer: he apparently cared less about winning these cases than about using them as a means of opening up critical discussions about sensitive issues such as the monarchy.³⁶

Several prominent 2020 protest leaders publicly have expressed their willingness to be jailed or even lose their lives in order to advance their cause, an extraordinary testament to their fearlessness. Nevertheless, this "losing means winning" strategy has severe limitations: many movement supporters, especially young people, do not want to wait months, let alone years or even decades to advance their causes. As Penguin himself declared on September 19, to fight with those in power, the students needed more than fifty percent of the population on their side.³⁷ By implication, sticking to a radical agenda was no way to build alliances and create a broad coalition for change. Nor was making overt common cause with the redshirt movement, a major theme of the September 19 rally: for royalists, the pro-Thaksin redshirts were anathema, while many moderate Thais dreaded a return of the color-coded divisions that had polarized national life before the May 2014 military coup. Loud calls for monarchical reform made mainstreaming the protests much more difficult.

Ultimately, a central lesson of 1932 and of the very *khana rassadorn* endlessly lionized by the protestors is that the monarchy will only change if forced to do so by the military. At the same time, the military would only act against the throne if it faces massive popular opprobrium, and its own legitimacy and standing are fatally weakened. Building a genuine mass movement will be essential to force the hand of the Army. These were powerful arguments for a politics of alliance-building, but student leaders were largely deaf to such calls.³⁸

State responses

The August 10 protest marked a turning point in the movement. Sensing a sea-change in public life, and inspired by the shaky condition of the Prayuth administration, political

³⁵Penguin speech, September 19, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdFpFXGmd9l>.

³⁶See McCargo 2019, 140–153.

³⁷Penguin speech, September 19, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KdFpFXGmd9l>.

³⁸See comments by political scientists Kanokrat Lertchoosakul and Prajak Kongkirati, *Matichon TV*, January 2, 2021. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAJGDrQqhDI&t=168s>.

parties scrambled to engage with the new reform agenda advanced by the student protests. Of the many demands issued by the students, their second demand – a constitutional rewrite – was ironically among the easiest to address. While the Move Forward Party supported amending the sections of the constitution dealing with the monarchy, all other political parties disagreed with this proposal and either advocated reforming specific articles of the 2017 Constitution, or else establishing a constitutional drafting assembly to produce a completely new charter.

But for the more radical Thammasat leadership, Thailand's national obsession with constitution-drafting is a chronic disease, unrelated to the country's core political problem: a failure to curb extra-constitutional interventions by both the military and the monarchy. Simply put, no amount of tinkering with the formal rules of the game will make the slightest difference, if Thailand's two main political actors persist in following alternative rules of their own devising. Many in the protest movement are reluctant to engage with an empty process of political reform: one that might produce an impressive-looking new constitution but leave all real power firmly in the hands of unelected and unaccountable forces.

While seven different bills to amend the Constitution were submitted to parliament – including a progressive proposal endorsed by more than 100,000 petitioners – all but two were rejected on November 17.³⁹ The military-appointed Senate had little incentive to vote for its own abolition, while the lower house was controlled by the government. The two remaining bills were very conservative, and set the stage for the Prayuth administration to go through the motions of charter reform, while playing for time in the hope that the protest movement would peter out. The students wanted to avoid being co-opted into a protracted and pointless bureaucratic process. But how could they achieve their demands otherwise? For all the rhetorical invocation of revolution, the protestors lacked the necessary alliances with the security forces or elements of the elite to upend Thailand's prevailing hierarchies or structures of power. Nor did they have a strategy of creating such alliances.

One immediate effect of the student protests was a dramatic change in royal behavior. King Vajiralongkorn left Germany on October 12 and remained in Thailand for the rest of 2020, his longest stay in many years. He also began traveling around the country, holding meet-and-greet events, and even posing for selfies, which he had never done previously. Ambushed into an impromptu “interview” by Channel 4 News Reporter Jonathan Miller at a pro-monarchy rally on November 1, King Vajiralongkorn insisted that he loved all the Thai people and that Thailand was a “land of compromise.”⁴⁰ While this belated royal image-building campaign certainly did not impress everyone, it seemed calculated to counter points made by the protestors and to win over sceptical royalists. Following critical debates in the German parliament and a demonstration outside Thailand's German Embassy, there was media speculation that the king might never return to live again in Bavaria. If so, this would be a remarkable achievement of the youth movement.

Not all state responses were conciliatory. Starting in August, the government began engaging in relentless “lawfare,” concocting endless essentially bogus and politically

³⁹See Khemthong 2020.

⁴⁰Jonathan Miller royal interview. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R6s-HOgk4rE>.

motivated legal charges against protest leaders. The courts, however, seemed initially reluctant to play along, and generally bailed out the demonstrators at the earliest opportunity. While prominent figures such as Anon, Rung, and Penguin did end up behind bars for brief periods, they were soon released in what appeared to be a deliberate policy. Previously, General Prayuth had publicly declared that the king no longer wanted to see *lèse-majesté* charges brought,⁴¹ but this example of royal benevolence quickly lapsed when a number of cases were filed against protest leaders. The bringing of *lèse-majesté* and even sedition charges led to widespread international criticism and significantly undermined the standing and legitimacy of the Prayuth government. The same applied to the heavy-handed police responses to the protests, including the use of dye-loaded water cannon and tear gas against unarmed and peaceful protestors on two separate occasions.⁴²

Another worrying development was the counter-demonstrations organized against the students by conservative groups such as Thai Phakdi. One counter-demonstrator was arrested after firing several pistol rounds at the protestors, causing some injuries.⁴³ Political scientist Prajak Kongkirati expressed concern that the state might try to orchestrate resistance to the protestors by “third hands” which could result in serious violence.⁴⁴ The protestors in turn established a group known as We Volunteer to ensure their security – though there were all kinds of internal tensions between different elements of the movement over the use of guards.

Protests

Detailed data about the protests has been compiled by the Mob Data project, a collaboration between Amnesty International Thailand and a Thai non-governmental organization (NGO) called NGO iLaw.⁴⁵ Using a team of volunteers, project leaders logged details of every major protest held in Thailand during 2020. As my visualization illustrates (Figure 1), anti-government protests in Thailand were extremely widespread: student-inspired protests took place in sixty-two of the country’s seventy-seven provinces. Bangkok topped the charts with 130 demonstrations, distantly trailed by a series of provinces that were home to major universities, including Chiang Mai (twenty), Khon Kaen (nineteen), Ubon Ratchathani (thirteen) and Songhkla (ten).⁴⁶ There were eighty-four protests in central Thailand, concentrated in provinces adjacent to Bangkok such as Nakhon Pathom (ten), Nonthaburi (ten), and Pathum Thani (thirteen). The northeast also saw eighty-four protests, while the north was the site of fifty-one protests and the south thirty-six.⁴⁷ The total number of 2020 protests organized or inspired by the pro-democracy youth movement logged by MobData as of January 2021 was 385, combining the eighty-six protests in February and March with the 299 demonstrations between mid-July and December. For a variety of reasons, these figures remain incomplete, and are likely to be revised upwards.

⁴¹Macan-Markar 2020.

⁴²See Human Rights Watch 2020.

⁴³See Ratcliffe and Thitipol 2020.

⁴⁴Matichon TV, January 2, 2021. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAJGDrQqhDI&t=168s>

⁴⁵See <https://www.mobdatathailand.org/>. Accessed February 7, 2021.

⁴⁶While the most comprehensive source available on the protests, mobdatathailand often understates the numbers of protests, since it relies on volunteers to provide information.

⁴⁷On Isan protests, see Saowanee 2021, this issue.



Figure 1. Visualization of 2020 protests by province. Credit: Calculated from data compiled by the Mob Data project (<https://www.mobdata-thailand.org/>).

While the content of these demonstrations was extremely serious, rallies also featured plenty of entertainment. The large September 19 rally featured transgender hosts wearing outrageous parodies of military uniforms. The music group “Rap against Dictatorship” issued a protest-themed song that was astonishingly critical of the palace.⁴⁸ Musicians frequently took to the stage, as well as actors performing elaborate parodies. Cosplay themes and fancy-dress outfits from Harry Potter to Hamtaro and giant yellow ducks enlivened the protests, and allowed students to act out their claims of innocence and idealism. At times, the protestors seemed to be colluding with their own infantilization: throughout one full-length TV show, both prominent leader Passarawalee “Mind” Thanakitvibulphol and her interviewer clutched large duck-shaped soft toys on their laps.⁴⁹ More edgily, some protestors even dressed up as the queen and the royal consort: social media was full of satirical clips and memes making fun of the authorities – and indeed of the monarchy. While most of the core leaders of the movement were male, female and transgender activists played significant roles in the youth protests. Many demonstrations went beyond mainstream politics to engage with issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage.⁵⁰

Groups

At the core of the 2020 protests was the Bangkok-based Free Youth movement, originally led by two LGBTQ activists, Tattap “Ford” Ruangprapaikitseree and Panumas “James”

⁴⁸Rap Against Dictatorship, “Reform,” November, 13, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjufERGv9Sk>.

⁴⁹Mind TV interview, November 19, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Wwm_o6BgaU&t=2162s.

⁵⁰See for example Beech and Muktita 2020.

Singprom. Both were pushed out of Future Forward after a controversial incident during which they kissed one another in public, at a parliamentary event promoting same-sex marriage.⁵¹ Neither of them was a natural front man for a protest movement: they were thrust into the limelight almost accidentally, when their July 18 demonstration caught fire. Over the weeks that followed, numerous other groups emerged around the country, taking inspiration from the Bangkok group and using the word “free” in their names.⁵² Eager to broaden their support beyond young people and students, Free Youth launched another umbrella group known as Free People, which established links with non-students in provinces across Thailand.

Meanwhile, however, Free Youth faced a serious challenge for leadership of the movement from the more radical United Front for Thammasat and Demonstrations (UFTD), which used the hashtag “Thammasat Can’t Stand It.” UFTD, led by two Thammasat University students, “Penguin” Parit Chawirak, a political science major, and sociology student “Rung” Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, had its origins in a university political party. Penguin had been centrally involved in creating the Future Forward Party, but rapidly fell out with Thanathorn and Piyabutr because his ideas were too radical. He later became one of the leaders of the Student Union of Thailand. A superb public speaker with a deep knowledge of Thai politics and history, Penguin was not a natural organizer. Nor was Rung, for all her passionate sincerity. The UFTD soon came to rely upon two figures who were not students and had never attended Thammasat: outspoken freedom of expression lawyer Anon Nampa, and “Pai Dao Din” (Jatupat Boonpattaraksa), a former Khon Kaen University student, environmental activist, and *lèse-majesté* prisoner. The Thammasat group took a hardline approach to the movement, insisting that reform of the monarchy needed to be a central part of the conversation. The high watermark of the Thammasat movement came on September 19, with the large Sanam Luang rally and laying of a commemorative plaque to replace a People’s Party plaque that had been removed from the Royal Plaza in 2017.

While the authorities had initially adopted a relatively restrained approach towards the protests, everything changed between October 13 and 16, immediately after the king’s return from Germany. In rapid succession, tear gas and water cannon were used against demonstrators, most of the main leaders were rounded up and arrested, and several of them spent a couple of weeks in jail. At this point, the Free Youth and Thammasat groups formed an alliance in the name of the people, or *rassadorn* – appropriating the name of the People’s Party, which had ended the absolute monarchy in 1932. While this bold rebranding was an attempt to celebrate a leaderless model of protest, in practice this was less a strategic decision than a matter of necessity.

After the leaders were released from jail in November, a new power struggle broke out over the future direction of the protest movement. Free Youth began to move in an overtly leftist and radical direction, which left the original core leaders marginalized, and relations with the Thammasat group deteriorated. The United Front for Thammasat and Demonstrations then turned to Khana Chula, a Chulalongkorn University group that had focused mainly on LGBTQ and identity issues, as a core ally. Khana Chula

⁵¹See McCargo and Anyarat 2020, 131–132.

⁵²In Thai, ปล่อยตามใจ tfnl.

staged a spectacular event called MobFest on November 14, 2020, during which they covered the Democracy Monument in white fabric bearing critical messages.⁵³

But following a heavy-handed police response to a demonstration near the parliament on November 17, including more use of tear gas and water cannon, large-scale protests began to decline. By the second half of December, the movement's leaders announced they were taking a pause to rethink their strategy. By the time of the large September 19 protest at the Sanam Luang, speakers had begun referring to a modified list of three demands: resignation of the prime minister, constitutional revision, and monarchical reform. The ten-point UFTD August 10 declaration effectively was merged with the original three Free Youth demands to form a composite manifesto, although Free Youth established a new group, Free People,⁵⁴ in an attempt to broaden the appeal of the movements – and Ford stuck to the original three-point formulation.⁵⁵ Without naming names, Anon claimed in a year-end interview that those movement leaders with more moderate demands – focusing on ousting Prayuth, and leaving out calls for reform of the monarchy – had been sidelined: ordinary protestors had insisted that the monarchy issue must remain on the agenda.⁵⁶ Any protest that ignored the monarchy question would attract only a small crowd.

As Figure 2 shows, there was a dramatic peaking of protest numbers during the main July–December phase of the demonstrations at 127 in October, compared with sixty-five in August and fifty-four in November. In other months, far fewer demonstrations took place.

Around 112 different groups were involved in organizing the 299 protests held between mid-July and December (see Figure 3).⁵⁷ Of these groups, nineteen were associated with Free Youth or Free People, and eight with the Rassadorn network. There were also ten Thammasat-inspired groups, consisting of eight using the phrase, “Can’t Stand It” in their names, and five groups calling themselves a “United Front.” There were six provincial student coalitions, which typically included high school students, and nine additional university student groups. Other groups apparently predated 2020: ten groups used the phrase, “No Dictatorship,” referencing the 2014–2019 coup regime era, while seven “For Democracy” groups and three “Liberal” groups used names that suggest redshirt sympathies. Most high school protests were not organized by named groups, however. “Bad Student” was a tiny outfit that did not play a major coordinating role, though it was very influential online.⁵⁸

Mapping the structure of an organic and unstructured movement comprising a loosely improvised alliance is extremely challenging. Many of the 2020 protests did not even have a specific named organization behind them – or were co-sponsored by multiple groups. While it is possible to identify prominent figures associated with the various wings of the movement, no specific individual or group has been able to exercise anything resembling command and control over the protests, while the authority and strength of different elements has waxed and waned over time.

⁵³The *Thaiger*, November 15, 2020.

⁵⁴As of early January 2021, Free People had just 38,000 Instagram followers, compared to 183,000 for Free Youth. See <https://www.instagram.com/freepeopleth/>, <https://www.instagram.com/freeyouth.ig/>.

⁵⁵Manushya Foundation 2020.

⁵⁶Anonymous interview, Matichon TV, January 2, 2021. Accessed January 7, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAJGDrQqhDI>.

⁵⁷This data omits pro-government protests and others unrelated to the student-inspired movement.

⁵⁸On high school protests, see Kanokrat 2021, this issue.

NUMBER OF STUDENT-INSPIRED PROTESTS, 2020

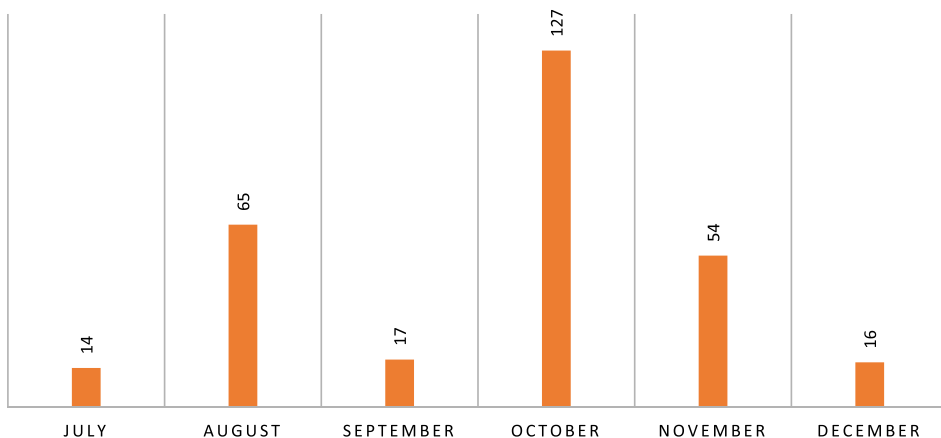


Figure 2. Numbers of protests between July and December 2020. Credit: Calculated from data compiled by the Mob Data project (<https://www.mobdatathailand.org/>).

Groups Behind Thai Protests, July 18 – December 31, 2020

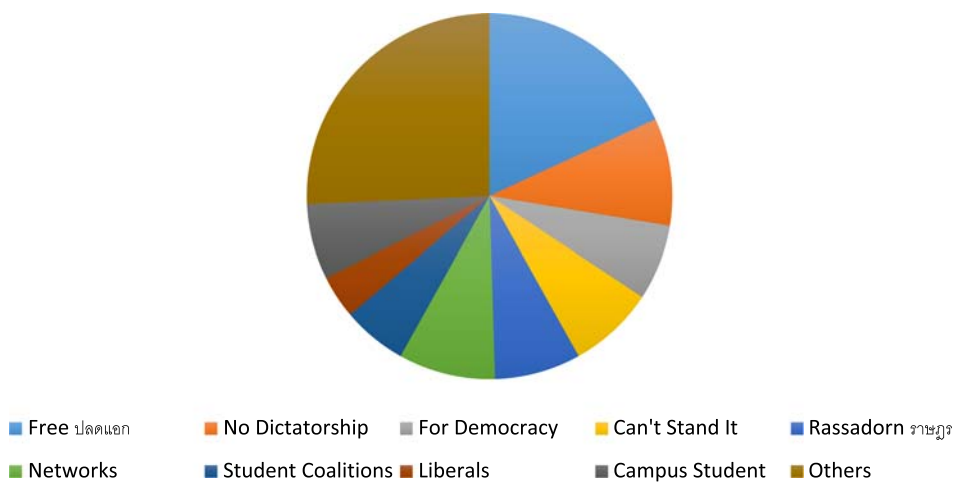


Figure 3. Protest groups, July 18–December 31, 2020 Credit: Calculated from data compiled by the Mob Data project (<https://www.mobdatathailand.org/>).

Conclusion

The 2020 youth-led protests in Thailand marked a dramatic shift in the country's political landscape. The sheer scale and number of protests – close to 400 demonstrations in less than six months, staged by 112 different groups in sixty-two provinces all over the country – was remarkable and completely unprecedented in Thai political history. The

bottom-up movement they established was adhococratic to the point of virtual incoherence, and by year's end, several months into the protests, they had failed to achieve any of their formal demands. Here was the central paradox of the 2020 movement. The successes achieved by the students and their allies cannot be measured in terms of conventional goals. Indeed, the protestors never articulated a clear agenda for either reform or revolutionary change, beyond demanding a new constitution and curbs on the powers of the palace.

Yet previously taboo discussions of the role and standing of the monarchy became commonplace. Existing narratives and paternalistic explanations were brilliantly and creatively upended. High school and university students berated their teachers, their elders, and their national leaders. Doing so, the protestors exercised a third form of power: the power of national narrative disruption. The king himself was disciplined by the movement, pressured to change his ways. Though not truly leaderless, the protests were extremely organic and could not readily be squashed by the authorities. As Piyabutr had predicted on February 21, the suppression of Future Forward set the country's politics on fire, unleashing red hot inter-generational conflict: there could be no simple return to a hierarchical politics where venal and incompetent old men could demand deference from the population as a matter of right. Without that deference, the discredited *ancien régime* has been fatally wounded, and looks destined to die a lingering death. Today's young people want to disrupt old ways of thinking and introduce new narratives of Thai political participation and citizenship. The question is simply how long that process of disruption will take.

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