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Thailand's anti-establishment protests

For many young people, these protests are the last chance to fight for a better politics that respects popular sovereignty

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Five episodes of major protests rocked Thailand since virulent conflicts between the royalist nationalist establishment and its democratic challengers had erupted from 2005 onward. Each episode deepened the political divide. The resurging protests, mainly organised by students, signals a new fault-line between the older and younger generations. Remaining immensely polarised, Thai society is now presented with two pathways: the past and the future.

The present protests have evolved from the decades-long contestation between the establishment and its challengers. The former comprises the palace, military elites, conservative bureaucrats and allied business who have defended their ideological hegemony, political power and wealth against forces of change emerging in three waves.

Two Thailands: the establishment and its challengers

The first was the 1932 revolution that had brought down then absolute monarchy and introduced the idea of popular sovereignty. But the revolution was short-lived as the establishment staged a comeback in the 1950s. The second challenge accompanied the 1970s communist surge and the third followed the 1990s democratic opening.

Against these odds, key players within the establishment could effectively preserve their bastions of power. However, the 1990s democratic experiment bolstered new elites and democratic discourses. In parallel, thanks to Thailand's increasing dependence on global economy starting from the 1980s, those previously economically disadvantaged have achieved an extent of social mobility, thus demanding equal rights and recognition.

These political and economic factors converged to foster the popularity of the Thai Rak Thai party (TRT), which was in power from 2000 to 2005. As a result, the establishment faced the third wave of threat which, this time around, was resilient against its suppression and cooptation. A series of confrontations in the form of tit-for-tat protests between those representing the two sides have deepened the country's division, while giving ground to recurrent authoritarianism. The latest chapter of this vicious cycle was when pro-establishment demonstrations set the scene for the 2014 military coup.

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Between 2014 and 2019, military rule replaced whatever was left from the 1990s democratisation with authoritarian institutions and hyper-royal nationalism. Repression of dissent was rampant. Nonetheless, anti-establishment sentiment and activism were not only sustained but growing in public and private spaces. Establishment elites underestimated the extent to which democratic discourses have increasingly gained traction.

The rise of the Future Forward Party (FFP), which is arguably more ideologically uncompromising than the TRT, epitomises this discursive transformation. Within months after its founding, the FFT came to represent the youthful hope for progressive politics, thus attracting 6.3 million votes, out of around 53 million voters in the March 2019 election. In social media, young people espouse ideas that resonate with the FFP's policies, including constitutionalism, welfare state, democratic diversity and equality. Through the constitutional manipulation, the military-backed Palang Pracharat Party (PPP) gained the majority of votes, thus currently leading the ruling coalition. Despite this, the establishment and its supporters feel increasingly threatened by the youthful force the FFP has unleashed.

Youth-led marches toward the future

Against this backdrop, the ongoing student rebellion responded to several incidents of injustice, human rights violation, abuse of power and irresponsive governance. Among others, the Constitutional Court, a pivotal ally of the establishment, disbanded the FFP in February, sparking initial student protests across more than 50 university campuses and schools.

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However, the government's economic mismanagement in the face of the pandemic, resulting in millions unemployed and collapsing businesses – and an ensuing culture of impunity, evident in the recent forced disappearance of an exiled activist – were the last straw that drove students to the streets from mid-July 2020 onward.

Their demands are for the government and authorities to stop harassing citizens, democratically amend the constitution and dissolve the incumbent parliament to pave the way for new elections. Corresponding with these three demands is the three-finger salute protesters have taken from the Hollywood blockbuster, The Hunger Games, as the anti-dictatorship symbol.

How the youngsters mobilised

The key characteristics of youth-led mobilisation are threefold. First, in terms of organisation, these are 'networked protests' based on loose coordination between student associations across different campuses. Such collaboration has lately evolved into the broad-based student movement, 'Free Youth' which represents dozens of student groups. As of early August 2020, 'Free People' movement emerged, consisting of Free Youth movement and a diverse array of allied NGOs, including labour and LGBTQI movements.

While sharing the three goals and co-organising major protest events, members of the 'Free People' movement remain autonomous in holding their own protests and addressing specific grievances. For example, school students have recently organised protests against authoritarian school regulations regarding hair style and uniform, as well as conservative content of school texts. These networked protests allow leadership decentralisation and tactical creativity.

Second, social media has played a vital role in the youth-led mobilisation. Twitter hashtags, in particular, have been created to publicise protest events (e.g. #deadlineForDictatorship being the title for the largest protest so far on 17 August 2020) and galvanise ideas for 'hip' and 'cool' protest activities (e.g. #ideasForMob). Lately, Twitter has provided a major platform for mobilising crowds to the police station or the court in the face of arbitrary arrest of activists (e.g.#savePenguin – Penguin being the nickname of a leading activist) and draw international attention to the protests (e.g. #WhatIsHappeningInThailand). Most viral hashtags usually get more than 30k retweets and would become the 'trending' of the day.

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Lastly, witty sayings and the use of urban pop culture distinguish the style of ongoing protests from previous pro- and anti-establishment demonstrations. Protesters' self-made banners are satirical critiques of ruling elites. Some protest events are draw on absurdist humour. For instance, in July, 2020, the Bangkok metropolitan authorities placed numerous pots of flower around the Democracy Monument to obstruct mass gathering there. Activists wittingly responded by inviting people to visit this urban flower garden and collectively shouted 'such a beautiful garden' ten times. Subsequent events were inspired by, for example, a popular Japanese manga, the fiction-turned film Harry Porter and a Thai comedy movie. The use of humour and pop culture has confused and possibly disarmed the authorities expecting to monitor routinised protest actions. Through these novel protests, many onlookers began to pay attention to protesters' demands.

Three scenarios for the future

Underlying the protesters' three demands are heterogeneous grievances exacerbated by years of military rule. Young protesters consider multiple political ills to have a common cause: the persistence of the feudal, hierarchical political order at the expense of popular sovereignty. With this hierarchy increasingly consolidated by supporters of the establishment, youngsters have become pessimistic about their future in Thai society unless they are heirs of wealthy tycoons and powerful political elites.

For many youngsters, therefore, this is the last chance to fight for their future, for better politics that respects popular sovereignty. Accordingly, protesters are reorienting the notion of the Thai nation based on the 'people' and beyond the orthodox national pillars mainly comprising the monarchy and Buddhism. For supporters of the establishment, this reframing is but an act of treason and should be circumvented. Once again, we are witnessing a contradiction of two political visions, one rooted in the past and another gazing into the future.

Three scenarios are likely to take shape, depending on different decisions made by protesters, the opposition parties and ruling elites.

First, the government may concede to protesters' demands, especially the constitutional reforms. But protesters could view the mere focus on this aspect as a tactic of pacification, thus pushing further for other sensitive issues, including monarchy reforms. Should this happen, we may then arrive at the second, and worst-case scenario in which hawkish factions within the regime find a justification to suppress protesters with forces – as happened before Thailand. However, considering the regime's current legitimacy deficits and rising questions about the palace, military solutions are risky as miscalculation may provoke more people on the streets.

That brings us to the third and most likely scenario: a standoff. Regime figures will play good cops, bad cops. While some may promise to meet protesters' demands, others will continue with discreet forms of repression, including harsh lawsuits, targeted attacks of leading activists and smearing campaigns against entire protest movements. However, this time around protesters are resolute; episodes of intimidation may not effectively hinder them. Therefore, we could be in for a long stalemate. Regardless of what will happen, one thing is for sure: Thailand is at the juncture between the past and the future.



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