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Thailand: 2020 Student Protests and U.S.-Thai Relations

Protesters have taken to the streets in Thailand, challenging the country's military-led government and, notably, the role of the country's powerful monarchy. Protesters are demanding constitutional reform, the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, and limitations on the powers of the monarchy—a deeply sensitive issue in Thailand. Previous periods of mass protests in Thailand have challenged the country's political institutions, and on numerous instances have resulted in violent clashes between competing factions as well as with the Thai military. Since becoming a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand has experienced over 22 attempted coups (13 successful), the most recent in 2014.

The current protests, which have largely been described as peaceful, began in February, after the Constitutional Court of Thailand (CCT) dissolved the widely popular Future Forward Party (FFP) over claims that it broke election finance laws. Protest leaders are mostly younger Thais, who have expressed disillusionment in speeches and interviews with more than a decade of political turmoil and what they see as a weakening of the country's democratic institutions. The FFP's strong showing in the March 2019 election was largely attributed to the party's popularity among millions of first-time voters, which propelled the FFP to third place among several dozen parties

The controversial ruling to dissolve the FFP came several months after the United States walked back restrictions on military aid that it imposed in 2014 following Thailand's second coup in eight years. The State Department certified the 2019 election as having been conducted democratically; however, critics argued that the reinstatement of U.S. aid risked legitimizing an election that was skewed to favor the military's political party. The new wave of unrest has renewed concerns of democratic backsliding in Thailand among democracy advocates, and raises questions about how the United States can strike a balance between protecting its strategic interests with a military ally, promoting democratic reform, and countering China's growing influence in Thailand.

The Protests

Since 2006, anti-government protests have largely been viewed as a struggle between the rural, low-income populists ("Red Shirts") and the urban, pro-military bureaucracy ("Yellow Shirts"). However, the current pro-democracy movement has galvanized the support of youth from across the political spectrum. Many of the protesters are children of the traditional, military-aligned royalists.

Thousands of student activists have taken to the streets in protest of the monarchy, contravening long-standing laws against criticizing the monarchy. Thailand's King is the head of state; the royal palace retains widespread prerogatives and recently expanded its control over billions of dollars of assets through the Crown Property Bureau. The Thai army has close links with the palace, and both have retained deep influence despite the development of civil political institutions. King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who succeeded his widely revered father in 2019, is deeply unpopular with the public for his lifestyle and behavior, which critics describe as lavish, brazen, and irreverent.

The internet and social media have also played a role in the 2020 protests. Taking the example of similar democratic activism in Hong Kong, Thai activists have leveraged various media outlets to publicize the movement to a global audience. Thai "netizens" have joined activists from similar movements in Hong Kong and Taiwan to form the Milk Tea Alliance, an online pro-democracy coalition. Protest logistics and operations have been largely streamlined and effective. Plans are communicated via social media (Facebook) and secure messaging apps (WhatsApp and Telegram). The movement has a decentralized leadership rather than a small group of highly visible leaders who could easily be targeted.

Protesters' Demands

On August 10, 2020, student activists staged a large pro-democracy rally at Thammasat University in Bangkok, where protest leaders issued the Thammasat Manifesto, a 10-point declaration of demands to reform the monarchy and the 2017 military-backed constitution. The organizing group—The United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration—disseminated the official declaration via Facebook and other popular social media platforms.

The Thammasat Manifesto

1. Strip the monarch of legal immunity.
2. Revoke Thailand's lèse-majesté (defamation of the monarchy) law and pardon all accused/jailed for the crime.
3. Disclose the extent of the king's royal assets.
4. Reduce tax money that supports the crown.
5. Abolish all royal offices in government.
6. Open all money given to royal charities to public scrutiny.
7. Forbid the monarch (a figurehead) from exercising royal prerogative to express political opinions to sway politics.
8. Cease all propaganda and education that excessively and one-sidedly glorify the monarchy.
9. Investigate the disappearances and murders of anti-establishment critics, including activists and journalists.
10. Prohibit the king from endorsing future coups to overthrow democratically-elected governments.

Sources: CRS, New Mandala, and media outlets.

Protesters also demanded the resignation of current Prime Minister—former army general Prayuth Chan-ocha—and an overhaul of the current military-drafted constitution, which was enacted in 2017. The manifesto thus represents a direct challenge to the power of both the monarchy and the military, the most powerful institutions in Thailand.

Government Response

Prime Minister Prayuth's administration responded to the current protests by declaring an Extreme State of Emergency for Bangkok on October 15 (coronavirus restrictions had been enacted after the first wave of protests broke out in February). His administration's Ministry of Digital Economy and Society (MDES), a regulatory body to enforce internet and media censorship, reportedly moved to suspend the use of the Telegram app. The government also issued a warning that it would jail social media users who publicize protest activities on their online platforms.

Some members of parliament have expressed concerns that what they view as extreme activism could potentially trigger a repeat of the 1976 Thammasat Massacre, a violent military crackdown at Thammasat University in which dozens of student activists were killed.

> "Restricting people's access to information could prompt more people to join the protests and make the political situation more delicate and susceptible to violence." - Joint statement from Thai media groups

The king has signaled his support for cracking down on the movement by publicly praising royalist counter-protesters and supporters. Thai riot police have employed aggressive tactics, such as using water cannon mixed with chemical irritants to disperse protesters. Dozens of activists have so far been arrested. If charged with sedition and/or lèse-majesté, critics can face lengthy prison sentences (7, 15, and 35 years) under Thailand's strict anti-defamation laws.

The Constitutional Court's Ruling

On February 21, 2020, the CCT ruled that the FFP had received an "illegal donation" to finance its 2019 election campaign, and ordered the party to disband. The ruling also banned 16 FFP executives, including the charismatic leader and founder—Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit—from participating in politics for 10 years.

Founded in 2018, the FFP advocated curbing the military's power in Thai politics and promoting social and economic equity, which resonated with millions of first-time voters, many of whom came of age during the five-year period of military rule following the 2014 coup. In the 2019 elections, the votes of over six million new voters propelled the FFP to its third-place standing. U.S. and international diplomats warned that the court's verdict would disenfranchise millions by robbing them of their representation in government, thus undermining core aspects of the democratic process.

Challenges Facing U.S.-Thai Relations

Thailand has long been considered a key security ally of the United States in Asia, and served as a democratic model and diplomatic leader in Southeast Asia for some time following the Cold War. Military-to-military cooperation has traditionally been the strongest pillar of the U.S.-Thai relationship. Since 1982, Cobra Gold, hosted by Thailand, has been the largest multilateral exercise in Asia.

However, the bilateral relationship has been tense in recent years, since the United States curbed military assistance to Thailand following the 2014 coup, as required under U.S. law. Cobra Gold was initially scaled back, and primarily focused on noncombat operations, such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Although the U.S. military has restored its participation to pre-coup levels, there are some concerning signs about the future of the exercises, as a number of Thai military officials have reportedly questioned the utility of the exercises in recent years.

Renewed Security Cooperation

The State Department's July 2019 certification of the Thai election allowed for the full restoration of diplomatic and military ties that had been proscribed following the 2014 coup, and was welcomed by Thai and U.S. military officials. However, critics of the announcement, including a number of foreign policy experts, stated that the approval legitimized an election that was skewed to favor the junta.

U.S. and Thai security officials have engaged in a number of high-level meetings since the reinstatement of U.S. military ties. In November 2019, the two countries signed the Thai-U.S. Joint Vision Statement 2020, which outlines five points of collaboration for security and defense. Several months later, U.S. and Thai military officials signed another Strategic Vision Statement designed to (1) recalibrate and enhance the bilateral army-to-army relationship, and (2) reaffirm the United States' commitment to allies in the Indo-Pacific.

The China Factor

China is Thailand's largest trading partner, and its links to the Thai military have grown rapidly in recent years. Since the 2014 coup and the U.S. imposition of restrictions on military ties, Thailand has counterbalanced its bilateral relationship with the United States by seeking closer ties with China. Thailand has increasingly sought to acquire Chinese military equipment, which carries a lower price tag and no human rights and democracy-related conditions. The two countries have signed 10 major arms deals, including a $1 billion deal for diesel-electric submarines and tanks, Thailand's largest defense purchase to date according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

Considerations for Congress

The protests present Congress and other U.S. policymakers with challenges in balancing U.S. advocacy for democracy and human rights with the desire to maintain the U.S.-Thailand alliance amid challenges from a more assertive China. Decisions about whether and how to support protesters, and about how to conduct military-military and other relations, may be guided by developments including whether the military ultimately responds with a violent crackdown, whether the military-led government finds some sort of compromise that resolves the tension, and whether the palace's ultimate role in Thai politics and society changes in response to the public's criticism.

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