

# Interview: Thai dissidents face deadly threats - even abroad

Thursday 26 September 2019, by [CHACHAVALPONGPUN Pavin](#) (Date first published: 24 September 2019).

**Dr Pavin Chachavalpongpun is an associate professor at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University. He has authored several books including *Reinventing Thailand: Thaksin and His Foreign Policy* and the forthcoming *Coup, King, Crisis: Time of a Critical Interregnum in Thailand*. Since 2014 he has been branded an “enemy of the state” by Thai authorities.**



*Thai Red Shirts protest in Bangkok in 2009. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.*

Pavin was forced to seek political asylum in Japan. Yet, even with this protection, he told Green Left Weekly that he is not safe from the Thai regime’s violent persecution of dissidents.

At about 4am on July 8, a man dressed in black broke into Pavin’s apartment in Kyoto and attacked him and his partner with a chemical spray. They confronted the attacker, who then fled.

Pavin believes the attack was ordered by the Thai government because of his criticism of the monarchy.

“This was an act of intimidation. They were letting me know they could do more, so I should shut up,” he said.

Other Thai dissidents have suffered worse.

“The last coup took place in Thailand in 2014 and after that there have been attempts by the Thai state to eliminate those they perceived to be ‘enemies of the state’,” Pavin explained.

“People were forced to run away. They either crossed from Thailand to neighbouring countries, legally or illegally. A lot ended up in Laos or Cambodia.”

Pavin said that a few years ago the Thai state began to cross those borders to abduct or kill people who had fled.

“First, a prominent Red Shirt, DJ Sunho, was abducted in Laos and vanished,” Pavin said.

“A year later another Red Shirt was abducted from Laos. This time, it was documented that he was killed brutally.

“Last Christmas, three dissidents were abducted from Laos. One was a prominent Red Shirt leader, Surachai Sae Dan, who was also a former Communist Party member.

“Two bodies were found in the Mekong River; they were identified as Surachai’s assistants. We don’t yet know what happened to Surachai but we believe he was killed though his body has not been found.

“A few months later, another three Thai dissidents fled from Laos to Vietnam, one of them another prominent Red Shirt, Uncle Sanam Luang.

“The story has it that the Thai authorities contacted the Vietnamese authorities to have them deported to Thailand.

“Neither government admits this to this, but they have disappeared.”

In May, Thai dissident Praphan Pipithnamporn, who had fled to Malaysia, was deported back to Thailand.

“She is an elder female activist, wanted for allegedly being anti-monarchy”, Pavin said. “She fled to Malaysia and was in the process of getting refugee status with the UNHCR. But after an official Thai request, the Malaysian government decided to hand her over.

“We tried to contact her family to find out what happened after she was deported back but they have heard nothing.”

The issue of human rights has always been very contentious in ASEAN, Pavin said.

“As someone who once worked for the Thai foreign service, I know we cannot trust ASEAN to provide protection for dissidents.

“We see a trend towards loose, informal alliances of illiberal regimes in the region.

“Sadly this includes Malaysia. I was disappointed that even after Mohamed Mahathir came back as PM promising a new era of democracy in Malaysia, this government deported this poor lady.”

So what does it take for the Thai government to brand someone an “enemy of the state”?

“I have been very critical of the monarchy and the military in Thailand. I am an academic and I teach South East Asian politics, including Thai politics. To talk about Thai politics and not mention the relevant institutions would be to betray professionalism. As a Thai, I am concerned about the human rights and democratic situation in my country.”

### **‘Attitude adjustment’**

The Thai state used the 2014 coup as an opportunity to undermine its critics, Pavin added. While he was working in Japan, the Thai authorities summonsed him twice for “attitude adjustment”.

“I don’t know when my attitude became so bad that it needed to be adjusted so, of course, I rejected the summons,” Pavin said.

“I have done nothing wrong. But because I rejected the summons they issued a warrant for my arrest. Shortly after that they revoked my passport forcing me to apply for refugee status with the Japanese government.

“They sent the military to harass my mother at least three times.

“I’ve had difficulties travelling overseas because the Thai government has tried to get other countries to stop me.

“A few years ago, the Thai government issued a public warning to Thais not to follow the social media of three dissidents. I was one of them, the second was another Thai academic abroad and the third was a Scottish journalist who wrote about Thai politics.”

Thais were warned not to make any contact with the three on social media; not to share their Facebook posts or “like” their posts. If they did, they were warned, they would “face consequences”.

But this backfired, said Pavin. “The ban gave me even more followers!”

In Thailand, people can be jailed for social media posts. The authorities target any criticism of the monarchy and Thais can be charged with lese majeste — defined by Article 112 of Thailand’s Criminal Code as anyone who criticises the monarchy — and they can be jailed for up to 15 years.

“Now the authorities have moved to laying charges under new ‘computer crime’ laws. From now on, it is not only if you criticise the monarchy but if you criticise the military you could also be charged,” said Pavin.

“This change of tactics is probably because the monarchy has realised that using the lese majeste law excessively might damage the king’s image.

“But the end result is the same: They put people who disagree with them in jail.”

### **Coup leader re-elected**

After many postponements, Thailand held elections in March. While the opposition Pheu Thai party emerged as the largest parliamentary party with 136 seats, the government was reelected in a joint sitting with a Senate of 250 people appointed by the military junta. Not surprisingly, 2014 coup leader General Prayut Chan-o-cha was elected Prime Minister.

“Thailand has got stuck again with a government that has little concern about human rights and democracy,” said Pavin. Behind the current government is the real power: the monarchy,” said Pavin.

“The monarch is supposed to be above politics but, working with the military, it has continued to interfere in politics. And we can’t talk about it.

“We hold the record of having the most military coups in South-East Asia and third in the world for the biggest number of military coups.

“Since the abolition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, the military has strengthened its political dominance by its association with the monarchy. The two institutions have an interdependent relationship.

“Together they defined the political landscape in Thailand, creating a political system in which any elected government is kept weak and vulnerable.

“If an elected government proves to be threatening to the military and/or the monarchy, it will be eliminated through a coup.

“A lot of the middle class in Bangkok also see the military as protecting them from bad or corrupt elected governments. They are happy for the military to press the reset button when they are unhappy with a government.

“This is why we have had 21 or 22 military coups in Thailand.”

**Peter Boyle**

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**P.S.**

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