

Call for reforms: Thai pro-democracy protesters confront royal visit to Bangkok

Saturday 17 October 2020, by [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#), [THOOPKRAJAE Veena](#) (Date first published: 14 October 2020).

People call for reforms to monarchy and resignation of prime minister during king's visit.

Thai pro-democracy protesters chanted “my taxes” and raised a symbolic three-finger salute at a passing royal motorcade in a historic show of defiance against the country’s monarchy.

Thousands of people took to the streets of Bangkok on Wednesday to call for democratic reforms, including curbs on the power and wealth of the monarchy. Royalist supporters mounted counterprotests, saying they had assembled to welcome King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who is attending a ceremony in Bangkok to mark the end of Buddhist Lent.

The anti-government protesters first gathered at Democracy Monument, before walking to Government House to call for the resignation of the prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, who first came to power during the 2014 coup.

“We won’t leave until Prayuth resigns,” the protest leader, Arnon Nampa, told crowds at Government House, where police estimated about 8,000 people had gathered.

A government spokesman said Prayuth had ordered the police to ensure those involved in confronting the royal motorcade would be prosecuted “to the fullest extent of the law”.

They are also demanding a new constitution, which they believe unfairly allowed Prayuth to retain power during last year’s elections, and changes to the monarchy – an institution protected by harsh lese-majesty laws and which has long been considered untouchable.

Their protest route, along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, was lined with people wearing yellow, which is associated with devotion to the monarchy and conservative politics. Those who wore yellow appeared to be a mix of police, government employees and supporters of the monarchy.

Some scuffles broke out, but the protests were largely peaceful.

“I’m not afraid of violence. What I’m scared of more is to stay like this for good – the rampant corruptions and poor economy,” said Supatra, an 18-year-old student.

For months, students have led pro-democracy rallies across the country. Wednesday’s demonstration was particularly tense as it coincided with a visit by the king to Thailand. The king, who was attending a royal ceremony, has been criticised for spending most of his time in Germany.

“I think we have to reform monarchy and get the institution to be under the constitution. Or we can go [to the] France model,” said one of the protesters, a 19-year-old student who asked not to be named. “The monarchy spends a huge amount of tax money, too. I think politics and the monarchy are closely linked. Even if we amend the charter, the king can still intervene. So I think [reform of]

the monarchy and politics should be done concurrently.”

Police said nearly 15,000 officers had been deployed to keep order. Despite this, social media footage showed pro-democracy protesters near to Government House confronting a royal motorcade, shouting “Nation, religion, the people” – an adaptation of the trinity of “Nation, religion, monarchy”. Queen Suthida was reportedly inside one of the passing limousines.

Protesters also raised their hands in a three-fingered salute, a gesture adapted from the Hunger Games movies that symbolises opposition to the military government and, for some, represents the French Revolution’s values of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Metres away, crowds wearing yellow had earlier waved flags and cheered as a royal motorcade passed. Darunee Sudara, 40, from Chon Buri province, who turned out in support of the king, said she travelled to Bangkok because she wanted to show young protesters that many people still remain loyal to the monarchy.

“They [student protesters] may think we are stupid but we – stupid people – are the ones who send them to study and become very smart,” she said.

She said she understood that reform and changes were necessary in politics, but added: “I don’t want them to touch the institution – our beloved monarch.”

Some of those who wore yellow were photographed giving a three-fingered salute, prompting questions over whether they had chosen to turn out of their own accord. Some groups had arrived at the protest site on municipal trucks.

“The establishment in Thailand plays a very dangerous game, mobilising state security forces and ultra-royalist groups to confront with the pro-democracy demonstrators,” Prajak Kongkirati, a professor at Thammasat University, told Reuters.

A government spokesman, Anucha Burapachaisri, said police had been told to avoid needless confrontation. Earlier in the day, police had not intervened as protesters removed plants and barricades that had blocked off access to Democracy Monument, which was built to commemorate the end of absolute monarchy in Thailand in 1932, and which protesters said they had reclaimed during the rally.

On Tuesday afternoon, according to Human Rights Watch, police “kicked, punched, and threw some protesters to the ground” as they gathered to prepare for Wednesday’s rally. Police also arrested 19 protesters, who were denied bail.

The royal palace has not responded to any requests for comment on the protests or protesters’ demands.

Rebecca Ratcliffe and Veena Thoopakrajae in Bangkok

P.S.

• The Guardian. Wed 14 Oct 2020 18.13 BST. First published on Wed 14 Oct 2020 15.36 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/14/thai-pro-democracy-protesters-confront-royal-visit-t>

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