

New Step: Thai protesters call for reform of monarchy and general strike

Saturday 17 October 2020, by [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#) (Date first published: 20 September 2020).

Thousands march to demand curbs on the power and budget of the royal family.

Thousands of Thai protesters marched near the official residence of the king on Sunday to hand-deliver a letter demanding curbs on the power and budget of the royal family, in one of the boldest challenges to the institution in living memory.

Thailand's monarchy has long been considered beyond direct public criticism, but over recent months a student-led pro-democracy movement has broken deeply ingrained taboos to call for reforms.

On Sunday morning, demonstrators laid a plaque in cement at Sanam Luang, an area near to the Grand Palace, which read: "This country belongs to the people and is not the property of the monarch as they have deceived us."

Later, protesters marched to deliver their demands for reform to the king's privy council, but were stopped by police in front of the supreme court. One of the student leaders, Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, was allowed to walk past a line of officers and hand an envelope containing their demands to a police commissioner.

"The biggest victory of all is that ordinary people like us can submit a letter to the monarchy," Parit Chiwarak, a protest leader, told crowds, before announcing further action to step up pressure on the establishment.

He called for a general strike on 14 October, the anniversary of the 1973 student uprising, and for people to withdraw their money from Siam Commercial Bank (SCB), of which King Maha Vajiralongkorn is the largest shareholder. "Get all your money out and burn your bank book," he said.

Crowds were also urged to continue to wear white ribbons, a symbol of the pro-democracy movement, and to show a three-finger salute, an act of defiance borrowed from the Hunger Games. The gesture has been displayed by protesters, especially school students, during the national anthem, which is played twice a day in public spaces such as train stations.

"I want to see people do it at ... every train station, every shop, even police stations or civil service offices," Parit said. "Our bravery will spread to those who agree with us."

Thailand's royal family is shielded from criticism by a strict lèse majesté law that carries a sentence of up to 15 years, though the prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, has said the king requested that nobody be prosecuted under the law for now.

Dozens of protesters, including Parit and Panusaya, have been charged with other offences, such as

sedition, which carries a seven-year sentence.

Prayuth, who first came to power in the 2014 military coup, has said he will consider some protester demands, including calls for reform to the constitution, which was written under army rule. On Sunday, a government spokesperson said the prime minister thanked both police and protesters for the peaceful nature of the demonstration, according to the public broadcasting service Thai PBS.

Students are also calling for the dissolution of parliament and Prayuth's resignation. The prime minister has previously told protesters to leave the monarchy out of their discussions.

Despite this, throughout the weekend, protest leaders again addressed the role and wealth of the royal family. "While you live abroad, back at home the elderly have their allowances delayed [by the government]," Anon Nampa, a human rights lawyer, said. Officials have previously said delays to older people's payments were caused by administrative problems, not a lack of funds.

King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who assumed the throne following the death of his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, in 2016, has been criticised for spending most of his time in Germany. Since assuming the throne he has strengthened his authority, bringing the wealth of the crown and key army units under his direct control.

"I'm one of the people, who you might see as mere dust under your feet," said Panusaya, who addressed the king directly in a speech on Saturday night. "I'd like to tell you that dust like us have our rights and voices too."

Protesters camped out on Saturday night at Sanam Luang, which translates roughly as "royal ground", but which organisers said they would instead call "people's ground". The plaque they placed there is a reference to another brass plate that previously featured at Bangkok's Royal Plaza, where it commemorated the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. In 2017, the plate disappeared.

Over the weekend, students were joined by older demonstrators, including "redshirt" protesters - supporters of the former populist prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in a military coup in 2006.

"What the students are saying today, if it was 10 years ago they would all be put in jail. Today they don't dare do it," said a man attending Saturday's gathering, who asked not to be named. "It's not about abolishing the monarchy, it's about having monarchy under the constitution and stopping people from using it for their political benefit."

Dr Paul Chambers, a special adviser on international affairs at Naresuan University, in northern Thailand, said the wave of protests was unprecedented in the country, and that the rallies were "shifting the rules regarding what can be discussed in public".

"The demonstrations could easily lead to the fall of the Prayuth government, though they could also produce a brutally repressive reaction from the army. The overall strategy of the authorities is to wait out the demonstrators," he said, adding that authorities would continue to pursue legal charges against protest leaders, and to pressure universities and the parents of student activists.

Rebecca Ratcliffe in Bangkok

P.S.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/20/thai-protesters-demand-removal-of-pm-call-for-general-strike-after-march-blocked>

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