

# The 2020 youth uprising in Thailand - A backgrounder

Monday 26 October 2020, by [YIMPRASERT Junya Lek](#) (Date first published: 25 October 2020).

**Note: From a pro-democracy stand-point, this article attempts to provide some basic background for people who might not know much about Thai politics and who may be confused or alarmed by the current wave of protest that is confronting the Thai government (junta) and also the Monarchy itself. The aim is thus to increase understanding around the world that, right now, the people's struggle for democracy in Thailand needs the support and solidarity of the International Community and people everywhere.**

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## Thailand in brief

With a population of around 67 million, which includes some 40 ethnic groups and languages, the success of the decades long struggle for fully representative democracy in the Kingdom of Thailand is of vital importance to not only the health and aspirations of the peoples of Thailand itself, but also for the future of the ASEAN.

During the USA-Indochina War of 1950 - 1975 more-or-less the whole of Thailand was used by the USA as a military facility. From 1947 onwards the US military presence in Thailand functioned to bolster the Monarchy and Royal Thai Army, enhancing the ability of both to operate in tandem to successfully block the democratic process, as clearly evidenced by the succession of no less than 12 monarcho-military coups. The current wave of protest across Thailand is attempting to say that the time has come to end this succession.

After the most recent military coup in 2014, the leader of the coup and Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, appointed himself Prime Minister, and continues today (mid-October 2020) as a pathetic royalist dictator attempting to cling to power by refusing to countenance in any meaningful way the reasons why he is being confronted with massive protest.

In October 2016, after the passing of old King Bhumibol (Rama 9, 1946 – 2016), Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn was enthroned as Thailand's new King, as Rama 10, the tenth king of the Chakri Dynasty. The Chakri Dynasty came into existence in 1782, when Rama 1 terminated the Taksin Dynasty by executing King Taksin and most of his relatives and their families.

238 years under the Chakri has meant that Thailand remains one of the very few countries in the world that has been unable to liberate itself from the brutality of feudal monarchism. Today Rama 10, King Maha Vajiralongkorn (68), Thailand's Head of State, the richest monarch in the world, untouchable by law in Thailand, appears to have only one abiding interest: his own interest.

Alongside the fundamental, determined, violent rejection of the concept of equal rights, the survival of the Chakri Dynasty depends in part on ensuring that its diplomatic service is served exclusively by royalists that present, north, south, east and west, to Europe, the USA and China, a sweetly acquiescent impression of the good intentions of the good Kingdom.

### **Thai democracy in Brief**

Stirrings to establish a constitution for Siam began some 120 years ago during the reign of Rama 5. The Palace was successful in suppressing this early attempt and 30 years were to pass before, at the hour of dawn on 24 June 1932, a lightning, bloodless coup d'état brought 150 years of absolute rule under Chakri monarchs to a sudden stop. The coup was led by a group of young scholars and military officers. Calling themselves Khana Ratsadon, the People's Party, they did aim to open the road to democracy for Siam (Thailand), but the journey has been and remains painful.

Khana Ratsadon consisted of a rather elite group of civilians, government officials, aristocrats and military officers who had met and begun planning the coup as students in France in the 1920s. Pridi Phanomyong, a farmer's son, led the political wing and Lieutenant-Colonel Phibunsongkhram the military wing. On that early morning in 1932, completely unknown to the people, within the space of a few hours, Siam was changed from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy.

The new Government of Siam was still dominated by the military but it did at least aim at some kind of democracy: the 1932 Constitution did state that the people of Siam (not yet Thailand) held sovereign power. Nonetheless the continuous, systematic refusal of the Palace, royalists and military elite to accept universal suffrage and the sovereign authority of an elected Parliament has meant that, still today, after 88 years, such a state has yet to be achieved.

### **Monarcho-militarism versus democracy**

The first royalist coup against Thailand's fledgling movement for democracy came in 1933. Despite being fed with money by Rama 7 it failed. The royalist elite made a second attempt in January 1939 against the government of Phibunsongkhram, now Prime Minister and also Field-Marshal. This attempted coup also failed and resulted, by order of Phibun, in the execution of 18 leaders, life imprisonment for several and long sentences for others.

Prince Chainart, the uncle of King Ananda (and Prince Bhumibol), received a life sentence. The Palace placed PM Phibun under enormous pressure to release Chainart, but Phibun stuck to his guns. It was not until after the withdrawal of Japanese troops, when Field-Marshal Phibun was pushed from power, that Prince Chainart was pardoned, in September 1944. As the last remaining son of Rama 5, Prince Chainart returned to being the most influential person in Palace politics.

On 9 June 1946 King Ananda was found in bed with a bullet through his head. Prince Chainart stepped in as Regent on 16 June and took over the Chairmanship of the Supreme Council of State the following year. Prince Bhumibol, Ananda's brother, having recently returned from Switzerland to permanent residence in the Palace, became King Bhumibol, Rama 9. Suspicion that he was somehow involved in his brother's death still hangs in the air. His public coronation took place on 5 May 1950, a date that can be seen as marking the beginning of systematic efforts to re-establish the power of the monarchy.

## **70 years of oppression and suppression**

The roots of Thailand's political chaos, and of the widespread discontent and massive protests of today, are found in the last 70 years of extreme, royalist propaganda. For Thai children born after 1946 "Killing communists for nation, religion and King" was standard fare.

Below are just a few of the horrific happenings that punctuate the history of the Land of Smiles after Bhumibol became king.

- **25-28 April 1948.** Hundreds of Royal Thai police and army in Narathivat Province surrounded the village of Dusongdor and murdered about 400 villagers.
- **28 Feb - 01 March 1949.** By order of Field-Marshal Phibun, chief of the military junta, 5 members of the Pridi Alliance for Democracy were assassinated. After being arrested and handcuffed, four of them, all Members of Parliament, were riddled with bullets in the back of a van, and the fifth, the Chief of Police Intelligence, was shot dead in the street.
- **13 December.** By order of the Chief of the Royal Thai Police, the Leader of the Labour Party, Tieng Sirikhan, a former MP from Sakon Nakhon Province, was brutally murdered in Bangkok together with four friends. Their bodies were taken to be burnt in Kanchanaburi Province, 200 km from the scene of the crime.
- **1971-1973.** During this period of '**killing communists for nation and king**', in Pattalung Province alone around 3,000 villagers were brutally murdered by the Royal Thai Army. Some were burnt alive in drums of oil, some pushed into sacks to be dropped down the side of a mountain or pushed out of helicopters.
- **14-15 October 1973. Monarcho-military crackdown** on students and working-class people protesting on the streets of Bangkok. 77 people were killed, most by military gunfire. 847 were wounded.
- **6 October 1976. Monarcho-military crackdown** on student protest. According to official government records, 41 students were killed by a mixed-force of Royal Thai Army, Royal Thai Border Guard and para-military 'Protect the Monarchy' thugs. 30 bodies were identified, 10 were too damaged to identify. 26 male and 4 female bodies were returned to their families by the Police for cremation. Hundreds were injured. 3,154 students were arrested. Thousands of people went into hiding, most fleeing to the forest. In anger over the brutality of the oppression many did join the Communist Party of Thailand, and remained in hiding until granted immunity after the Communist Party was dissolved in 1980.
- **17 - 19 May 1992. Monarcho-military crackdown.** This 'Bloody May' witnessed about 45 killed on the streets of Bangkok, about 38 by bullets from the Royal Thai Army. Reports indicate that about 70 people 'disappeared'.

• **April-May 2010. Monarcho-military crackdown** under Prime Minister Abhisit ('Democrat Party'), who declared a 'Live firing zone', in other words issued elite troops with license to kill Thai civilians. 99 people were killed on the streets of Bangkok, almost all by military snipers. About 2000 were wounded. 470 were arrested. When official records say 'wounded' or 'died on the spot' they forget to add 'from a military bullet to the back of the head'.

From the few records that are available, the death-toll from political oppression and extrajudicial killings since 1946 adds-up to somewhere over 13,000, but this figure in no way speaks of the actual number of people that have died as a result of political oppression and military crackdowns.

## Coups and Kings

From the beginning, all of the Chakri Ramas have refused to respect or recognise the democratic aspirations of the peoples of Thailand.

Up until the last, King Bhumibol (Rama 9) argued that the people are not ready for democracy. He presented himself as a king god-sent to care for the people, with, naturally, the mercifully god-sent assistance of the commanders of the Royal Thai Army, the US military and 12 military coups.

All of the governments that came from the 28 general elections held during Bhumibol's reign were prevented by one means or another from completing even one 4-year term, all except one, that of Thaksin Shinawatra from 2004 to 2008.

The Thaksin governments were brought to office and power through land-slide elections and twice brought down by monarcho-military coups, in 2006 and 2014.

The 2014 coup was conducted for one purpose alone: to ensure the transition from Rama 9 to Rama 10 be kept under the control and management of a military commander trusted by the Palace, in other words to ensure yet again that the critical concerns and interests of the people could be flattened-out and kept harmless.

## Dictator Prayuth

The leader of the 2014 coup, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Army, disbanded all elements of the elected government, tore-up the Constitution and set-up a military junta calling itself the National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO) and presented the country with a National Legislative Assembly (NLA). Half of the 220 seats of this 'legislative assembly' were filled with people hand-picked by the NCP and half were military officers. The function of the NLA was to rubber-stamp the dictates of the NCPO.

After slipping out of uniform and appointing himself Prime Minister in August 2014 and by heading-up both his NCPO and NLA set-ups, Prayuth, honouring his many predecessors, slid from Royal Army Commander-in-Chief to Thailand's Royal Dictator-in-Chief, and proceeded, as did all his predecessors, to drafting yet another Constitution (Thailand's 20<sup>th</sup> since 1932), and to employing all possible ways and means to delay the demand of the furious majority for a general election, in order to give his junta as much time as possible to consolidate power over the electorate.

After a full year allocated to the official, national mourning for King Bhumibol, Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn was crowned in 2016. His very first move as Head of State was the issuance of orders to amend the junta's 2017 Constitution even further in his favour: to increase his personal freedom,

to greatly increase his personal military power and to massively increase his personal wealth. All of this passed, the public aghast, completely unopposed.

Nonetheless, with the world watching and public demand for a general election growing and EU sanctions causing Thailand humiliation if not pain, Prayuth could not delay a general election forever.

After several bluff start-ups for the purpose of generating further delay, the junta did eventually grant the population a General Election on 24 March 2019, but not without engaging all the tricks in the royalist playbook, all financed by the national budget, to ensure that the opposition could not win. The 2017 Constitution stipulated that it was to be the 250 members of the reconvened Senate, who were all junta-appointed, that voted in a new Prime Minister. Furthermore, the judges of the so-called Constitutional Court, which was a product of the 1997 People's Constitution, were by now (after the coups of 2006 and 2014) all junta-appointed judges quite at ease with disqualifying and dissolving any opposition parties and parliamentary candidatures that they deemed unsuitable. In all ways the 2019 General Election was rigged to make it impossible for the opposition to win.

These royalist game-plays are well-understood and extremely wearisome for the majority of Thai people, because they know simultaneously that they have only two options: to submit or protest.

Protest began gaining momentum after the Constitutional Court had the temerity to dissolve the largest opposition party, the Future Forward Party, that had won 80 of the 220 seats of the NLA in the 2019 election.

## **King Maha Vajiralongkorn**

Old King Bhumibol (1946 – 2019) was surely vaguely aware that his son Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn had an infamous reputation as a sex-addict with a mafia-like life-style, but he did not want to break with royal precedent. When Bhumibol passed away on 13 October 2016, Vajiralongkorn was named king. His 3-day public coronation was staged in May 2019 at a cost of around 32 million USD.

Thailand's new king, now 68, abandoned and humiliated his first wife soon after they were married. In 1996 he banished his second wife and the four sons he had with her. In 2014 he placed his third wife under house arrest and imprisoned her parents, three brothers, a sister, her uncle and several other relatives. He married his fourth wife in 2019.

According to the 2014 Constitution, as amended by Vajiralongkorn himself, the Thai king's status is now closer to that of an absolute monarch than to that of a constitutional monarch.

As noted above, before the people could blink, their new King had taken some major steps to strengthen his position, by increasing his direct personal command, by some tens of thousands, of the 80 000 strong Royal Guard, and by providing himself with direct personal access to the vast wealth of the Crown Property Bureau, to which his father had only limited access. As the wealthiest monarch in the world, with something in the region of 50 – 60 billion Euro at his disposal, he still demands a vast sum from Thai taxpayers, not less than one billion Euro, to finance his personal expenses, many palaces and the so-called 'royal projects'.

The future of this king is already severely haunted by overwhelming evidence that, since 2016, nine democracy activists, who had sought refuge from the military junta outside Thailand, have been hunted-down and murdered by his agents – assassination squads.

In true medieval style, this King is also famous for casting anybody who displeases him into his own dungeons, to be tortured. The stories are many and bad. One place, the Thawee Watthana Prison in the grounds of the Thawee Watthana Palace in western Bangkok has a very dark reputation: those who don't come out alive are reported as having died by suicide and so on.

At the present time Thailand's Head of State has been spending by far the greater part of his time with his harem at the Grand Hotel Sonnenbichl in Bavaria, Germany, supported by 100 or so servants and body guards. There are women and servants in his entourage that exist solely as royal prisoners. It is said that even here those who displease the king are also abused and beaten, and made too afraid to approach the German police, terrified that their families in Thailand will face retribution.

In Thailand the King can do and does as he pleases with complete impunity. Nobody can bring charges against him, he lives completely above the law. Most Thais are to some extent aware that their new king is cruel and somehow criminal, but until now their thoughts and feelings have been silenced by the draconian laws of the military junta, in particular the laws of lès majesté and the so-called computer crime laws, which can cause anybody to find themselves in jail for many years for any indication or accusation of disrespect, true or false, towards His Majesty or his His Majesty's relations, affairs, interests or projects.

Nonetheless, the fact that, as Covid-19 exasperates existing destitution everywhere, this King chooses to live a life of luxury in Germany, abusing women, wasting vast sums of taxpayer's money and sending out agents to kill popular dissidents, has finally stirred-up open expression of disgust in Thailand itself.

Does this King of Thailand also think himself above and beyond the laws of Germany and the European Union? Does he imagine that he is not subject to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that his kingship is beyond the reach of the International Criminal Court? Apparently he does, but increasing numbers of people, including most of the youth of Thailand, are starting to find him guilty on all counts.

## **2020 Youth Uprising**

It was early in 2020 when students first started appearing on the streets of Bangkok in large numbers – to protest the dissolution, by the judges of the Constitutional Court, of the Future Forward Party, the main opposition to the Prayuth junta.

The arrival of Covid-19 gave Prayuth a defensible but also convenient reason to declare a State of Emergency and stifle protest. Nonetheless, by this time the majority of Thai people had become deeply tired of their Dictator and what he said or didn't say or did or didn't do began to feel somewhat irrelevant. Youthful Thailand was coming to a common understanding, a consensus, that it was time to inform General Prayuth that his illegitimate regime was illegal and his modus operandi impossible to tolerate any longer.

On 18 July the youth of Thailand, from secondary schools to universities – from all across Thailand, rose up in protest against the military-enforced status-quo. The broad, red-hot dynamism of the demands of the students, demands that range all the way from removing militant disciplinary codes in schools to radical reform of the Monarchy itself, began to electrify the whole country.



## WHERE is JUSTICE?

Thailand has arrived at a long-predicted, dangerous but inescapable juncture. In facing the potentially ruthless, implacable monarcho-military establishment, youthful Thailand needs, right now, the understanding, support and solidarity of the International Community.

How can the logical, common-sense, standard, decent, normal and natural aims and demands of this youth-led uprising against autocratic rule be supported?

For many years there has been a broad convergence of analysis and common opinion and a gathering of momentum around recognition that there is no way for Thai people, for the population at large, to move from the past to the future, to be able to engage with full hearts, minds and full power with local, regional and global matters, issues and crises, while a patronising, monarcho-military alliance hovers over them, assuming right to own or disown their every thought, hope, wish, desire, invention, movement and action.

King Vajiralongkorn, Head of State, is a well-known abuser of human rights, an abuser of the privileges afforded to him by birth, a pathological abuser of women, a vile executioner, an owner of some 10 000 slaves, some of them trafficked, and, for the youth of Thailand and of the world, the worst possible example of a human-being, let alone Head of State.

Since people in Thailand have zero resort to meaningful justice – or appeal, at the start of 2020 ACT4DEM joined forces with PixelHELPER in Germany to bring the crimes of King Vajiralongkorn directly to courts of justice in Europe.

General Prayuth is a puppet of the Chakri monarchy and powerless without it, thus our work at present is focused on bringing the attention of the Germany Bundestag, European Union, United Nations and all people around the world who love Thailand, to the extreme degrees of corruption and cruelty exhibited by King Vajiralongkorn.

We aim to ensure that King Vajiralongkorn will be forevermore prevented from beating, torturing and murdering any more people, as well as being prevented from throwing any more desperately needed, hard-earned public money down the drain of his own selfish desires.

Together we can end this reign of fear before it gets worse.

Together we will ensure that justice prevails.

**Junya Yimprasert**

*Further reading in* <https://act4dem.net/>

Voter's Uprising (2009), <https://act4dem.net/?p=661>

Why I don't Love the King (2010), <https://act4dem.net/?p=653>

Overcoming fear of Monarchy (2011) <https://act4dem.net/?p=732>

and

Understanding the fog shrouding Thai vision (2015) <https://act4dem.net/?p=677>

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## **P.S.**

- Countercurrents. October 25, 2020:

<https://countercurrents.org/2020/10/the-2020-youth-uprising-in-thailand/>

- Junya Yimprasert is a labour and human rights activist and former director of the Thai Labour Campaign (TLC). After the military crackdown on Thai protesters in April and May 2010 that killed more than 90 people, most shot by soldiers, she made a decision to focus full-time on campaigning against the monarcho-military alliance that has functioned to suppress the democratic aspirations of the Thai people and dominated domestic politics since 1932. Junya is currently the coordinator of ACT4DEM - Action for People's Democracy, an international network that works at present to strengthen support for the struggle for democracy in Thailand, a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) since 1964.