

# Thailand: Warning signs for the democracy movement

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**The fantastic mass movement against the Thai junta is at a junction. Organising flash mobs over and over again risks tiring out protesters and these actions are not enough to make the country ungovernable; a necessary condition for victory.**

There are ominous signs that the junta is seeking to pressure the movement into a shoddy compromise with the help of the political parties. The aim is to merely amend some parts of the constitution via a parliamentary process. This will fall well short of the three demands of the movement: the resignation of Prayut, a complete re-write of the constitution by ordinary people, and the reform of the scandal-ridden monarchy.

The government has also been trying to divide the protesters by holding talks with some secondary school students about conditions in schools. The aim would be to get the school students to drop out of the movement.

Let us remember how far the movement has come. Since August 2020 large youth-led pro-democracy protests of up to 100,000 people have targeted the Thai military junta and even dared to criticise the monarchy. These protests have been organised up and down the country and have inspired millions of people in Thailand and other countries who are desperate for change. The energy and bravery of young people has been breath-taking.

Prayut and his gang of military thugs are not about to go easily. They have spent the years since their coup in 2014 putting in place measures to maintain their power, including writing a constitution, appointing the senate, designing the National Strategy and fixing last year's elections.

The reasons why students have managed to enliven and expand the pro-democracy protests, which have occurred sporadically since the last military coup in 2014, is that this new generation have seen that pushing for reforms within the military controlled parliamentary system has not worked. They are fed up with the entrenched conservatism in society, especially in the education system. The economy is a mess due to the Covid crisis and youth see little to be hopeful for the future. In fact they share all these feelings of anger and frustration with over half the adult population who voted against the military party in 2019. A recent poll, conducted by Bangkok University, found that more than 40% of the population are struggling to make ends meet.

As with all mass protests, the demands of the movement have expanded. LGBT and pro-abortion rights activists have joined in, along with activists campaigning for self-determination in the Muslim Malay region of Patani.

Hopes have been raised.

A miserable compromise with the military junta, only agreeing to amend certain sections of the constitution, would do nothing to solve the issues which have led to the protests in the first place.

Therefore there is an urgency to add new tactics in order to increase pressure on the junta.

The movement's emphasis on devolved leadership, without clear organisational structures, contains both a strength and a weakness. The strength can be seen in the way the protests have continued despite the ongoing arrests of key activists, many of whom face multiple charges. But the weakness is that, in practice, strategy is determined by a group of non-elected key activists without the possibility of much face to face debate on the ground within the wider movement. This is something we saw in Spain with Podemos.

What is needed is an urgent and open debate about the way forward.

Either the protest movement pushes forward to organise more militant and powerful action such as strikes, or the momentum will be lost. Given the level of public support for the protests, it is important to seize the moment and try to build for workplace stoppages which would add power to the movement.

Many active Thai trade unionists have turned up to support the youth-led pro-democracy demonstrations as individuals and also in trade union groups. The Thai working class is much more than factory workers in the textiles and auto industries. There are white collar workers in offices, banks, schools, universities and hospitals. To build for strike action against the junta, youth activists need to link up with worker activists and visit workplaces to discuss how to get rid of the dictatorship. The lack of a significant organisation of the Left will make the task of mobilising workers more difficult, but it is hoped that militants will step forward to try and achieve this.

The key role of the working class is due to its economic power. This is an issue for all the present day movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Climate Strikes, and the struggles in Nigeria or Latin America. The important role of the working class has been well described in a recent book about the Hong Kong youth-led uprising (Au Loong-Yu, "Hong Kong in Revolt").

It is a shame that some commentators who have influence on the movement seem to have been content with merely criticising the monarchy while not discussing the way forward for the movement. Perhaps this is no coincidence. If people believe that the idiot king Wachiralongkorn, who finds it hard to string a complete sentence together, is the real power in Thai society, rather than the military, it may lead to pessimism about the chance of victory because of the king's "invisible power". But the real enemy of democracy is the military junta.

The real people with power prostrate themselves on the ground and pay homage to this king. Yet, this is an ideological play, acted out for the benefit of fooling the public and creating fear. The fact that it is in any way believable by many is a great example of what Marx called "alienation". It is when we are feeling powerless that we are more likely to believe the nonsense fed to us by the ruling class. What all modern monarchies throughout the world have in common is their ideological role in supporting the status quo. Thailand is no exception.

We must criticise the monarchy and call for a democratic republic, but in order to achieve that, the military need to be overthrown and there needs to be a serious discussion about how to achieve this aim.

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• Uglytruth-Thailand. November 16, 2020:

<https://uglytruththailand.wordpress.com/2020/11/16/warning-signs-for-the-democracy-movement/>