

Thai teenagers tell rulers: ‘You’re dinosaurs’

Monday 23 November 2020, by [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#), [SIRADAPUVADOL Navaon](#) (Date first published: 22 November 2020).

Thousands of students continue to take to streets of Bangkok to demand reform of monarchy, government and education

Outside one of Bangkok’s busy shopping arcades, crowds of young protesters bounce balloons – coloured grey with patches of molten orange – above their heads.

“We will act as a meteorite and hit the outdated ways of the older generations in this country,” the protest organisers explained. “We will talk about all the topics that the dinosaurs don’t want to hear.” Inflatable dinosaurs wobbled in the afternoon heat, representing the Thai government. The symbols are playful, but the message is clear: teenagers want change.

A [student-led protest movement](#) has shaken Thailand over the past five months. Young people have taken to the streets to call for a true democracy, and have risked jail to shatter a taboo that has long prevented frank, public discussion of the monarchy. Their protests, attended by tens of thousands, present one of the boldest challenges that the Thai royal family has faced in living memory.

Demonstrators say they are not calling for the monarchy to be abolished, but for it to be reformed, accountable to the people and not above the law. They have also called for the prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former army general who [came to power in a 2014 coup](#), to stand down, and for changes to the constitution to make the political system more democratic.

Few topics have been left untouched by the movement. At Saturday’s rally, organised by Bad Student, a group that represents school pupils, protesters called not only for monarchy and government reform, but also an overhaul of the education system.

The students want investment in schools, and an end to the military influence and rigid hierarchies that continue to dominate classrooms, stifling freedom of expression. Bad Students has shone a spotlight on abusive behaviour by teachers – from the use of humiliating punishments such as cutting students’ hair if it is considered inappropriate, to the continued use of corporal punishment, despite it being banned. The group has also campaigned for greater protections for female and LGBT students. Yesterday, one student, dressed in school uniform and her mouth taped shut, held a sign that read: “I have been sexually abused by teachers. School is not a safe place.”

“Authoritarianism doesn’t only manifest through the manipulation of elections, it is exercised in everyday life,” said Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, assistant professor of political science at Thammasat University.

Students say they want room for freedom of thought, and a curriculum that allows for different interpretations of Thailand’s past. “History always mentions the good side of [Thailand](#) – changing the story, framing others, admiring someone in the sky,” said a speaker at yesterday’s rally, referring to the king.

The current syllabus glorifies the role of the royal family but includes very little on the more sensitive episodes in Thailand's history - including the massacre of pro-democracy university students in the 1970s.

"The monarchy should be on the curriculum, but it should be the truth," said a 15-year-old, who, like all protesters, asked not to be named. Her parents, she added, didn't know she had come to protest.

On her wrist, she wore a pink band to show she is aged under 18. Amnesty International, and other rights groups at the rally, handed out orange and pink wristbands to indicate whether a protester was aged under 18 or 15. They hoped it would remind the authorities to protect the safety of young demonstrators.

On Tuesday, at a much larger rally organised by university students, water cannon containing chemical irritants were fired at protesters, as well as teargas and pepper spray grenades. Despite a huge police presence, opposing groups of royalist "yellow shirts" and pro-democracy students were allowed to confront one another, leading to violent clashes. By the end of the night, six people had been shot and dozens treated for other injuries.

Students accused the police of unfair treatment and of failing to protect them. [At a rally the next day](#), they pelted police headquarters with paint.

There is the risk of further clashes between royalists and protesters, said Matthew Wheeler, a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, who fears such violence "could be a pretext for a coup d'état to 'restore order'".

"What comes after any future coup is also worrying. If it were to presage a severe clampdown on dissent, it could spark a broader conflict," he added.

Prayuth said last week that "all laws, all articles" would be used to take action against protesters, suggesting that charges could be filed under harsh lèse-majesté law. Authorities have so far stopped short of using the law, which carries a 15-year sentence for anyone who "defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent".

Other charges have been used widely. So far, 175 people have been charged with sedition, which carries a maximum seven-year sentence, or public assembly offences. This includes two of the teenage organisers behind Bad Students - Benjamaporn Nivas, 15, and Lopnaphat Wangsit, 17.

Yet, as the authorities hint at a further a crackdown, protesters have vowed to escalate their rallies.

They are driven not only by renewed anger at the response of the police, but also over parliament's recent decision to refuse one of their key demands - to change the constitution so that the monarchy is accountable, and so that military-appointed senators are replaced with elected officials.

Instead, MPs and senators agreed to set up a committee to draft reforms. Even this will take months, and no changes will be made in relation to the monarchy - an institution that, according to the current charter, must be "enthroned in a position of revered worship".

"In the past, at least you pretended to listen to protesters and there is a pseudo-negotiation round," said Janjira, who added that the authorities may be attempting to push pro-democracy protesters into being aggressive on the streets in order to justify a crackdown. "We are reaching a very dangerous point," she said.

At rallies, protesters hold signs mocking recent comments from King Maha Vajiralongkorn who,

asked about the protests, described Thailand as the “land of compromise”.

“How dare he lie about that. The system is not like that at all,” said a 17-year-old. “They don’t listen to our voices. They didn’t listen to us because it is not to their benefit.”

Rebecca Ratcliffe
Navaon Siradapuvadol

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

The Guardian. Sun 22 Nov 2020 05.30 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/22/thai-teenagers-tell-rulers-youre-dinosaurs>

Support The Guardian

Available for everyone, funded by readers

[Contribute](#)

[Subscribe](#)