

# Thailand protesters 'cross the Rubicon' and risk all to criticise the monarchy

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**Anger has been building since 2014 coup in which prime minister Prayuth Chan-ocha seized power, with students now holding rallies almost daily**

Thai protesters have broken a long-standing taboo, risking lengthy jail terms to criticise the king, after weeks of student-led pro-democracy rallies that have swept across the country.

Over recent weeks, high school and university students have targeted the government of prime minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, calling for its dissolution and for democratic reforms. Now, some protesters have begun openly criticising the country's wealthy and powerful monarchy.

Such public comments are highly unusual, and have left the government in a bind. Allowing criticism to pass would undermine the status quo that keeps them in power, say analysts, while cracking down hard on the students could foment further protests and intensify scrutiny of the monarchy.

[Thailand](#) has some of the strictest *lèse-majesté* (wounded majesty) laws in the world, and anyone who "defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent" can face up to 15 years on each charge.

Protests, which are organised by different groups, are broadly united around three demands: dissolve the government, end the intimidation of activists and rewrite the constitution, which was written under military rule and has cemented the army's power.

On Monday night, at a rally attended by thousands, a protest group went further, issuing a 10-point list for reform of the monarchy. Criticism of the monarchy should be allowed, the king's budget should be cut, and the monarchy should not interfere with politics, the Thammasat University Pro-Democracy Group said.

Calls for reform were also made at a smaller rally last week, where [protesters dressed as Harry Potter](#) and displayed an image of Lord Voldemort. Thai protesters have a long history of using cultural references to make at times coded political statements.

The king, who spends most of his time living in Germany, succeeded his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, in 2016 and has since strengthened his authority.

Prayuth – who first came to power in the 2014 coup, and became prime minister last year following a disputed election – said he was uncomfortable with the comments made by protesters. He has previously stated the king had requested no prosecutions under the *lèse-majesté* law. Two speakers have been charged with sedition and violating an emergency decree by attending a public gathering.

Matthew Wheeler, a senior analyst for the International Crisis Group, said the protest movement had now "crossed the Rubicon".

The government is in a difficult position, he added, because any move to quash protests could lead to “a backlash that intensifies debate about the role of the monarchy and erodes the legitimacy of the government”.

There was also a risk of vigilantism and violence against activists, added Wheeler.

The recent wave of pro-democracy protests are a resumption of rallies held earlier in the year, which were prompted by a [court decision to ban Future Forward](#), an opposition party popular among young people.

The coronavirus outbreak halted the protests, but only temporarily. Since then, anger has grown, fanned by frustration at the country’s yawning inequality, the lack of support for vulnerable groups during lockdown and the perceived special treatment afforded to elites.

In June, discontent flared further when it was reported that pro-democracy activist Wanchalearm Satsaksi had been abducted in Cambodia. Rights groups say he is the ninth exiled activist to disappear in recent years. The government and military have denied involvement. At protests, students have carried posters with Wanchalearm’s image.

“I think we are frustrated with all the cumulative problems since the coup – mismanagement, misusing the law and social injustice issues,” said Jutatip Sirikhan, president of the Student Union of Thailand, who is calling for democracy. “We have seen all of these problems for a long time and we don’t see our future in this country any more.”

The economy was already stagnating even before the pandemic. Now it is expected to contract of 8.1% this year, according to the Bank of Thailand. “We are going nowhere and that’s why these young men and women are going out there – because they have a direct stake in the future,” said Thitinan Pongsudhirak, an associate professor at Chulalongkorn University.

Prayuth has said he would listen to the concerns in relation to the constitution. Yet, legal action and intimidation of pro-democracy protesters “is getting more and more aggressive”, said Sunai Phasuk, senior researcher on Thailand in Human Rights Watch’s Asia division. Students say they have been harassed by the authorities with some reporting that they have been held for hours, and pressured into no longer taking part in protests, according to HRW.

Thailand’s army chief, General Apirat Kongsompong, last week described the protesters as nation-haters.

On Sunday, students plan to hold another protest in Bangkok, which they believe will be the biggest yet. Tattep Ruangprapaikitseree, secretary general of the Free People Movement, which has organised rallies, said he already faces multiple charges, including for violating the emergency decree by taking part in a public gathering.

He will continue fighting for democracy, he added: “There is a simple feeling among the young generation that we can’t stand the government, or the broken political and economic structure. That’s why we come out.”

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The Guardian

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