

Thailand protests

After emergency decree, arrests, Thai democracy protesters defy ban for 4th day

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BANGKOK, Thailand - The crackdown has emboldened the movement's mostly young supporters who have turned up in large numbers to daily guerrilla protests around Bangkok.

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Thousands of pro-democracy protestors took over a major Bangkok intersection on Sunday, October 18, with posters bearing the faces of arrested activists, defying a ban on gatherings and stern warnings from authorities who have escalated a crackdown in recent days.

The youth-led movement has suffered several blows this week, with scores arrested after demonstrators surrounded a royal motorcade and flashed a pro-democracy salute to Queen Suthida during a Wednesday protest.

The government reacted by imposing “serious” emergency measures banning gatherings of more than 4 and allowing for the arrest of protest leaders, many of whom are calling for the removal of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha, a former military chief first brought to power in a 2014 coup.

Police also deployed water cannon against unarmed demonstrators on Friday in Bangkok’s central shopping district in an escalation of tactics that drew outrage across Thai society.

But the crackdown has emboldened the movement’s mostly young supporters who have turned up in large numbers to daily guerrilla protests around Bangkok.

The locations are announced an hour before to outwit authorities, who shut down much of the city’s Skytrain and underground rail services to discourage people from joining in.

“I cannot let the students fight alone,” said 24-year-old Phat, a first-time rallygoer who arrived at Sunday’s protest venue at Bangkok’s Victory Monument.

“I want true democracy,” he told Agence France-Presse.

Thousands descended on the major traffic thoroughfare from 4:00 pm (0900 GMT) shouting “Free our friends” while carrying posters of arrested activists.

They include human rights lawyer Anon Nump, Parit “Penguin” Chiwarak, and Panusaya “Rung”

Sithijirawattanakul – 3 of the most recognizable faces in the leaderless movement who have consistently called for reforms to the monarchy.

Among their demands is the abolition of a draconian royal defamation law – which shields King Maha Vajiralongkorn from criticism – and a call for the monarch to stay out of the country's turbulent politics.

Once-taboo in Thailand, the issue of royal reform demanded by protesters is one of the biggest challenges facing the kingdom's conservative military-aligned government.

The social media-savvy protesters have also harnessed unorthodox ways of spreading their messages, sending alerts through newly formed groups on Telegram – a secure messaging app – and taken tips from Hong Kong's pro-democracy protests.

Across town in Asok, a popular shopping and restaurant district, a smaller group of protesters gathered and practiced hand signals to warn each other if authorities were to issue another severe crackdown.

"I think the government used too severe of measures against students on Friday, they were just kids with empty hands," said 65-year-old Suk. "All they had were their mobile phones."

National Police spokesman Yingyos Thepjunong warned protesters earlier Sunday that no rallies "causing unrest and disorder" would be allowed.

"If they defy it, police will do whatever is necessary to enforce the law," he said.

Agence France-Presse

• *Rappler.com*:. Oct 18, 2020 7:29 PM PHT

<https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-democracy-protesters-defy-ban-october-18-2020>

'I had to do it': The student leader defying Thailand's royal taboo

Bangkok, Thailand - The university student Rung is one of the best-known faces of Thailand's swelling pro-democracy movement, now targeted by a forceful government crackdown

Thai activist Rung jabbed at the establishment when she demanded reform of the all-powerful monarchy last month – a stand that saw her bundled into a car and arrested on Thursday.

The university student, whose real name is Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul, has become one of the best-known faces of Thailand's swelling pro-democracy movement, now targeted by a forceful government crackdown.

She was the first to read out 10 demands to reform the kingdom's monarchy before thousands of protesters at a rally on August 10, leading the defiance against the country's biggest political taboo.

They included more transparency for the royal family's fortune and the abolition of the royal

defamation law, which carries a sentence of up to 15 years in jail per charge.

“When I left the stage, I felt like I had expanded the boundaries... raised the limits on how people can talk about the monarchy,” the bespectacled sociology and anthropology student, now 22, told AFP late August.

Calls challenging the previously unassailable royal family have grown louder since, culminating in the unprecedented challenge by some protesters Wednesday, October 14, who raised 3 fingers as the motorcade ferrying Queen Suthida and Prince Dipangkorn drove by.

By early Thursday, “serious” emergency measures were imposed in Bangkok to put a stop to what the government described as unconstitutional demonstrations.

As fellow activists were arrested, Rung criticized the emergency measures on a live feed.

“The crackdown is illegitimate, because in a democracy, we should be able to rally,” she said.

Hours later, police arrested Rung in her hotel room, with the scene broadcast to tens of thousands of people on Facebook Live.

She is one of 22 detained for Wednesday’s protest and a government spokesman has warned legal procedures will be pursued against those who had “acted in a way that defames the monarchy”.

‘Time to adapt’

Born 1998 in Nonthaburi to a middle-class family running an auto workshop, Rung said she was just 10 years old when she first questioned the reverence with which the country was expected to treat the royals.

Her entire neighborhood was ushered out onto the streets to pay respects to a royal motorcade.

“I remember thinking: ‘Why did I have to go? Why did they have to force me and other people to kneel down?’”

Shielded by draconian defamation laws, the super-rich monarchy wields enormous influence in nearly every sphere of Thai society – and is buttressed by an arch-royalist military.

Rung said she became “radicalized” as she saw the 2014 coup unfold when she was 15.

“Soldiers don’t have the authority to rule the country and everything broadcast then was propaganda,” she told AFP.

Partly inspired by the Hong Kong democracy protests, Thai activists are calling for a complete overhaul of the government of Premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha, the former army chief who led the 2014 coup.

The current protesters see Prayut’s administration as only serving the elite.

At the apex of power sits King Maha Vajiralongkorn, who has made unprecedented changes to the institution since ascending the throne in 2016.

He has taken personal control of the palace’s fortune, worth an estimated \$60 billion, and also moved two army units under his direct command.

The burgeoning youth-led movement wants changes “meant to sustain the monarchy in a way that is adapted” to the modern world, said Rung.

“No one should be more important or higher than anyone else.”

‘My life would change forever’

But speaking out comes at a cost.

At least 9 pro-democracy activists who fled Thailand since the 2014 coup have disappeared in the past two years, according to Human Rights Watch.

Even before their latest arrest Thursday, Rung and other student leaders had been hit with multiple charges, including sedition, carrying a maximum sentence of seven years in jail.

Some analysts – and even student leaders themselves – have recalled the events of 1976, when students protesting the return of a military dictator were shot, beaten to death and lynched by state forces and royalist mobs.

But Rung continued to travel to rallies outside Bangkok to make speeches and helped organize gatherings in encrypted message groups that attracted thousands.

“I knew that after I read out the 10 demands, my life would change forever,” the softly-spoken activist said as she played with her kitten.

“I still had to do it.” – Rappler.com

Agence France-Presse

• *Rappler.com. Oct 16, 2020 3:15 PM PHT*

<https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/the-student-leader-defying-thailand-royal-taboo>

Thai police use water cannon against Bangkok protesters

BANGKOK, Thailand - (UPDATED) Several hundred riot police advance towards pro-democracy demonstrators in formation, calling on the protesters to go home or face the water cannon

Thai police used water cannon against protesters Friday night, October 16, in central Bangkok, as the pro-democracy activists defied an emergency decree banning gatherings for a second night running.

Around 2,000 pro-democracy demonstrators had been chanting for the release of arrested activists and hurled obscenities at Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha in the city’s main shopping mall district.

Several hundred riot police advanced towards them in formation, calling on the protesters to go home or face the water cannon.

A few meters away, hundreds of activists blocked the road behind a makeshift barrier, calling for the riot police to “get out!” and singing the Thai national anthem.

Police fired chemical-laced water from the cannon, pushing back the protesters who used umbrellas against the blue liquid.

“The younger generation will not stand for the status quo any longer,” design student Pim, 20, told Agence France-Presse (AFP) earlier, as the protesters raised their arms to display a three-fingered salute adopted from the “Hunger Games” movies.

“The poor are becoming poorer and the rich are becoming richer. The gap is growing.”

The kingdom’s political elite has been jolted by the youth-led movement that is demanding the government’s resignation and issuing a once-taboo call for reforms to Thailand’s powerful monarchy.

On Thursday, October 15, Prayut had imposed an emergency decree banning gatherings of more than 4 people, but some 10,000 ignored the measure, demonstrating late into the night.

The premier warned protesters Friday “not to violate the law” and police shut down the planned rally site – but activists changed location to the shopping mall district of Pathumwan.

‘I am innocent’

Friday’s rally came after the arrests of around two dozen of the most prominent activists, including two under a rarely-used law banning violence against the queen.

Ekachai Hongkangwan and Bunkueanun Paothong were among activists who crowded around a royal motorcade carrying Queen Suthida on Wednesday, October 14, during a large demonstration near the capital’s government house.

In a Facebook broadcast Friday morning, Bunkueanun denied trying to harm the queen, insisting: “I am innocent. That was not my intention.”

Both men could face life in prison under a law that has not been used for decades and punishes any “act of violence against the queen or her liberty.”

It is not clear why the pair were singled out.

This is the first time such a serious charge has been leveled against pro-democracy activists, many of whom have already been hit with lesser charges, including sedition and breaking coronavirus rules on gatherings.

‘Keep on fighting!’

Their movement’s demands include the abolition of a strict royal defamation law – which shields the monarchy from criticism – and for the royal family to stay out of politics.

Among the other top activists arrested Thursday was Panusaya “Rung” Sithijirawattanakul, whose detention was live-streamed on Facebook.

Anon Numpa, another leading activist, said he was forcibly taken by helicopter to Chiang Mai in northern Thailand.

His lawyer Krisadang Nutcharut told AFP that Anon had been refused bail and was being held in

Chiang Mai prison.

"Keep on fighting! My freedom is a very small issue compared to the entire struggle for democracy," Anon posted on Facebook late Thursday.

The opposition Pheu Thai party also called on the government to lift emergency measures, stop the harassment of protesters and free those detained.

Thailand's modern political history is dotted with periods of violent civil unrest and more than a dozen military coups, the most recent of which brought Prayut to power in 2014.

Bangkok-based analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak said the protest movement could heighten the chances of Thailand facing yet another military takeover.

"This endgame for Thailand's future has been building up for years, and it is finally here and now," he said.

"A brutal dispersal of the protest may take place."

Agence France-Presse

• *Rappler.com. Oct 16, 2020 7:55 PM PHT*

<https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/protesters-defy-bangkok-decree-october-16-2020>

Thousands defy Thai crackdown after emergency decree, arrests

BANGKOK, Thailand - (UPDATED) Protesters chant 'Prayut get out!' and 'Free our friends!' as they confront police at Ratchaprasong, a busy junction in central Bangkok

Thousands of Thai protesters gathered Thursday, October 15, in defiance of a sweeping crackdown after authorities moved to crush months of pro-democracy demonstrations by imposing emergency powers and rounding up leading activists.

Protesters chanted "Prayut get out!" and "Free our friends!" as they confronted police at Ratchaprasong, a busy junction in central Bangkok, despite a new decree that bans gatherings of more than 4 people - aimed at quelling student-led demonstrations.

The government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha, a former army chief who initially took power in a 2014 coup, has been the target of the protesters, but they have also taken aim at Thailand's unassailable monarchy.

"You push us into the corner like a dog," one of the few prominent activist leaders not in custody, Panupong "Mike" Jadnok, told the crowd Thursday. "And with our backs against the wall we'll bite back with nothing to lose," he said.

As night fell, protesters waved their lit-up mobile phones in the air.

Thousands sat on plastic sheets on the road snacking on street food while scores more watched from

overhead walkways. Many said they would return Friday evening, October 16.

Two water cannon trucks retreated near the rally and students chased a police van away from the crowd.

After the emergency measures were announced early Thursday, riot police dispersed hundreds of protesters who camped overnight outside the prime minister's office.

Later, student leaders took to social media to urge supporters to take to the streets.

Among those who turned out were high school students, who covered the ID tags on their uniforms with duct tape.

"I want democracy for my country," said Katherine, a 13-year-old attending her first protest. "I want to be a part of big change."

Three top activists were among nearly two dozen arrested earlier Thursday, including Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak and Panusaya "Rung" Sithijirawattanakul, whose own detention was live-streamed on Facebook.

Unprecedented scenes

Anon Numpa, another leading activist, said he was forcibly taken by helicopter to Chiang Mai in northern Thailand "without my lawyer."

"This is a violation of my rights and is extremely dangerous to me," he wrote on Facebook.

It was not immediately clear how those arrested were accessing their social media accounts. By evening, Anon and Rung's Facebook profiles appeared to no longer be online.

On Wednesday, October 14, there were unprecedented scenes as protesters crowded around the royal motorcade carrying Queen Suthida and Prince Dipangkorn Rasmijoti, raising the three-fingered gesture of defiance adopted from "The Hunger Games" books and films.

The emergency measures announced Thursday also allow the seizure of "electronic communications equipment, data, and weapons suspected to cause the emergency situation," a government spokesman said in a statement.

"These are orders banning gatherings of 5 or more people... and banning distributing of news through electronic media that can affect national security," the spokesman said.

Overt challenges to the monarchy are unheard-of in Thailand, where the royal family's influence permeates every aspect of society.

The king spends much of his time in Europe, but has been in Thailand in recent days for an annual Buddhist ceremony and the anniversary of his father's death.

Enormously wealthy, he is supported by the powerful military - which has long positioned itself as the defender of the monarchy - as well as the establishment elite.

Adapt to modern times

Leading opposition figure Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit warned the situation was critical and called on those arrested to be freed.

"The government must quickly find a way to respond to protesters' demands, otherwise the situation will fan out nationwide," he said.

There have been several popular uprisings in the turbulent modern history of Thailand, which has endured long stretches of political unrest and more than a dozen military coups since 1932.

In the latest protests, leaders have repeatedly said they wish only for the monarchy to adapt to modern times.

Their demands include the abolition of a strict royal defamation law – which shields the king from criticism – and for the monarch to stay out of politics.

Since these protests started, dozens of activists have been arrested, charged with sedition, and released on bail.

Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri said the premier had ordered police to press charges against protesters who obstructed the royal motorcade, and "those who had acted in a way that defames the monarchy."

"They must face legal procedures without exception."

Meanwhile, a Change.org petition concerning the king has registered about 120,000 signatories in 24 hours, despite the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society suspending the weblink in Thailand.

Agence France-Presse

• *Rappler.com. Oct 15, 2020 6:01 PM PHT*

<https://www.rappler.com/world/asia-pacific/thailand-protests-october-15-2020>
