

Towards a test of strength

The Thai government is threatening severe repression

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The government is threatening severe repression. The democracy movement is calling for increased mobilization. The first key date announced is 25 November.

The militaro-monarchist oligarchy that controls Thai institutions would like to put a definitive end to the pro-democracy mobilizations that have been going on for months. [1] The days of 17-18 November showed that it is not so easy to do so. The confrontation in Bangkok between police and activists lasted almost 6 hours. [2] In spite of powerful water cannons (with coloured water sometimes containing irritating chemicals), riot tanks, tear gas, barbed wire, the presence of armed ultra-monarchists and at the cost of at least 55 wounded (including 6 shot), the demonstrators broke through the roadblocks and were able to gather in front of the parliament (with the security forces retreating behind its gates).

The live-ammunition shootings against the activists of the democratic movement represent a very worrying escalation of violence. It is notably provoked by the intervention, encouraged by the government, of ultra-royalist armed groups, often paramilitaries, such as the loyal Thais (Loyal Thais, Thai Phakdi group) or the Yellow Shirts (the colour of royalty in Thailand) who already 10 years ago targeted the Red Shirts, supporters of the elected government of Thaksin Shinawara. [3]

As a sign of the times, young monks have formed the “New Religion Reform Group” which demands the separation of church and state and an end to the involvement of religion in profit-making economic activities. It thus challenges the official authority of the Buddhist clergy, the Sangha Supreme Council, which forms the third pillar of the conservative order in Thailand, along with the royal family and the army. [4]

In the face of these developments and the scandal caused in Germany by his action, the absentee king Rama X and the queen left their residence in Bavaria to return permanently this time, at least it seems, to Bangkok - which the royal couple had refused to do when the Covid epidemic hit the kingdom and the economy collapsed (an indifference that shocked many).

The dreaded “crime” of *lèse-majesté* had not been used for some time. [5] Prime Minister General Prayuth announced on 19 November that he would use it again. This announcement sounds like a declaration of war when he states that “all existing laws” can be used against the pro-democracy movement.

The regime is trying to divide the front line of rejection it faces by, for example, talking about reforms to secondary school students who are now standing up against the archaism of the education system - unsuccessfully, for the time being.

More and more students are speaking out against the moral corset to which they are subject, the

rigid hierarchy and authoritarianism of the teaching profession, the lack of freedom of expression and the stifling conservatism of the curriculum. One group, calling itself the Bad Student, adds to the core demands of the democratic movement the demand for a fundamental overhaul of the education system. It denounces abusive and humiliating teacher behaviour (such as cutting hair as punishment) or the continuation of corporal punishment despite its official prohibition. It calls for better protection of LGBT women and students. One student, wearing a school uniform, demonstrated, with her mouth taped shut, holding up a sign: "I was sexually abused by teachers. School is not a safe place." [6]

Thailand's growing democracy movement has clarified its legal claims. It is now presenting 10 amendments to the Constitution (with the support of more than one hundred thousand people) in order to guarantee the constitutional character of the monarchy and the depoliticization of the armed forces. It calls for the convocation of a Constituent Assembly. In response, Parliament envisages a constitutional process under its own control, but rejects the amendments.

One of the great qualities of the Thai movement is to allow many "skills" to contribute to the construction of the edifice of the struggle. For example, the amendments to the Constitution were written with the help of the Internet Dialogue on Law Reform (iLaw), which has been working for years on drafting a democratic constitution, and now sponsors it.

The pro-democracy movement has joined the #MilkTeatAlliance, which was launched on Twitter by activists in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand committed to the democratic struggle. [7] In all three countries, tea is drunk with milk - but not in China. Links are being forged throughout the region to resist the backward-looking logic of the Cold War and the risk of (in this case Chinese) dependence. A new pan-Asiaticism is emerging, a development that may prove to be very important. It also affirms, beyond its regional identity, its community of struggle with the Chilean people and the struggles, throughout the world, for democracy and pluralism.

Against all odds, the pro-democracy movement has kept its humour. The seat of the Parliament is on the bank of the Chao Phraya River that runs through Bangkok. To symbolise its "attack", the activists have brought giant inflatable ducks, in the image of a child's toy, which have become their "Military Fleet". More practically, they acted as a barrage in front of the police water cannons (like the "turtles" formed by rows of umbrellas inherited from the demonstrations in Hong Kong). Here are the police forces, all dressed in black, challenged by walls of yellow ducks! Similarly, as a symbolic game, militants dressed as tyrannosaurs have been expelled from a shopping centre: in tyrannosaurs, there is "tyrant"...



In mockery of the government, students brought inflatable rubber ducks to the Kiat Kai intersection barricade. Later these were used against the water cannon. Prachatai

The pro-democracy movement thus keeps its liveliness, its inventiveness, its joy. The threats it has to face are no less, as shown by the remarks made on 30 October by a member of the Senate, close to the Prime Minister, who did not hesitate to mention, against him, the assassination of Samuel Paty: "I do not know if the situation will lead to something like decapitation in France. But there could be

a madman, a third party, or a planned attack.”

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P.S.

• International Viewpoint. Pulished Tuesday 24 November 2020:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6918>

Footnotes

[1] See Pierre Rousset, ESSF (article 55512), [Democratic movement attacks the established order in Thailand](#).

[2] For a report with many photos see [Prachatai](#).

[3] See Pierre Rousset, Danielle Sabai, ESSF (article 18951), [Thailand: What is at stake in the crisis?](#).

[4] *Mandala*, 16 November 2020 [“The pro-democracy monks joining Thailand’s protests”](#)
Available on ESSF (article 55657), [The pro-democracy monks joining Thailand’s protests](#).

[5] On the other hand, a provocation had been organised by the authorities in order to (falsely) accuse the demonstrators of undermining the security of the Queen and Crown Prince.

[6] *The Guardian*, 22 November 2020 [“Thai teenagers tell rulers: ‘You’re dinosaurs’”](#)
Available on ESSF (article 55748), [Thai teenagers tell rulers: ‘You’re dinosaurs’](#).

[7] *Mediapart*, 2 November 2020 [“En Thaïlande, l’impossible réforme de la monarchie mène à la violence”](#).