

Thai protesters march to royal guard barracks in Bangkok - Thai activists face charges of insulting king

Monday 30 November 2020, by [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#) (Date first published: 29 November 2020).

Pro-democracy rallies have raised pressure on Thailand's royalty and army in past week.

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Thousands of protesters marched to a barracks belonging to Thailand's royal guards in Bangkok on Sunday, demanding that King Maha Vajiralongkorn give up control of some army regiments, the latest show of defiance against the country's powerful monarchy and the military.

The protest came after days of rallies in the Thai capital, where a student-led pro-democracy movement that emerged in July has intensified pressure on the establishment.

Over recent months, demonstrators have shaken the country by criticising the monarchy, an institution protected by a harsh defamation law, and demanding the king relinquish some of his vast power and wealth.

On Sunday evening, protesters marched to the 11th Infantry Regiment, one of two army units that the king brought under his direct command in 2019.

In a statement, protesters accused the king of having "expanded his royal prerogative in every way possible including [through] the military" and referred to the prime minister, Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former army general, as the king's "royal puppet".

Copies of the statement were folded into paper planes and flown in the direction of riot police who stood guard outside the barracks.

Protesters later splashed red paint on the ground in front of officers, referencing the deadly army crackdown on anti-government redshirt demonstrators in 2010.

The army base was barricaded with buses, which were removed by protesters, as well as loops of barbed wire. Many on the frontline wore gas masks and hats for protection, though the evening passed peacefully.

Above their heads, protesters carried a flock of giant inflatable ducks, which have emerged as an icon of the movement after they were used by demonstrators to shield themselves from water cannon.

Yellow ducks can be seen everywhere at recent rallies: fixed on the top of protesters' protective hard

hats, sold on souvenir stalls and worn on hair slides. At one protest last week, protesters even gave out coupons that featured a duck wearing a crown, which could be exchanged for street food.

The authorities have responded to the recent protest movement by reviving the country's strict lese-majesty law, reportedly summoning as many as 15 protesters to answer charges in the last week alone. Under the law, anyone who "defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent" can face up to 15 years on each charge.

Among those facing charges is Parit Chiwarak, known also as Penguin, who has been accused over comments made at previous rallies. On Sunday, he challenged the king's military power. "An army should belong to the people, not the king," he said. "In a democratic system, the king is not responsible for directing command of the military."

Vajiralongkorn succeeded his father, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, in 2016, and has since asserted his authority, including by taking direct control of a palace fortune worth tens of billions of pounds. Last year, the 1st and 11th Infantry regiments were brought under his direct control, allowing him to sidestep the usual military chain of command.

Protesters said they had also decided to target the regiment over its role in previous coups, and in the suppression of anti-establishment protests 10 years ago.

About 90 people were killed in 2010 after the army launched a crackdown on protesters who had demonstrated on the streets for months. The military denies having used excessive force.

The recent pro-democracy movement argues that the royal family – and the military, with which it is closely aligned – must be transparent and accountable to the people if Thailand is to have a true democracy.

They have made three demands: reform of the monarchy, a new constitution, and the removal of Prayuth, who first came to power in the 2014 coup. Prayuth has refused to step down.

The palace has not commented on the protests, though the king said that he loves demonstrators "all the same".

In a recent statement, the foreign ministry said protesters were able to exercise their rights to peaceful assembly last week "without any hindrance".

The statement added that protesters must exercise their rights "in accordance with the relevant laws".

Rebecca Ratcliffe in Bangkok

• The Guardian. Sun 29 Nov 2020 16.46 GMT. Last modified on Sun 29 Nov 2020 20.31 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/29/thailand-protesters-march-to-royal-guard-barracks-in-bangkok>

Thousands protest in Bangkok as Thai activists face charges of insulting king

Summons for pro-democracy leaders are the first under lese-majesty rules for two years

Thousands of people have gathered in Bangkok to demand the king relinquish control of royal funds worth tens of billions of dollars, despite the Thai authorities escalating their crackdown on protesters by reviving the kingdom's fierce lese-majesty law.

Police summoned 15 prominent activists to face charges under the law, which shields Thailand's powerful and ultra-rich royal family from criticism. It has one of the strictest defamation criteria in the world, stating that anyone who "defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent" can face up to 15 years on each charge.

On Wednesday evening, Parit Chiwarak, also known as Penguin, who is among those facing lese-majesty charges, said protesters would not back down. "We will not lower the ceiling," he said, referring to how protesters have broken the taboo that has long prevented open discussion of the royal family.

Protesters have made bold calls for reforms of Thailand's monarchy, an institution once considered beyond public criticism, arguing it should be accountable and transparent. They have also demanded wider democratic reforms, including a new constitution.

Parit said protesters must refrain from violence: "We will not give [the authorities] an excuse to use aggression ... We will not fall into their trap even though they are provoking us." He addressed crowds wearing a duck suit - a reference to the inflatable ducks used by protesters to shield them from water cannon last week.

While Wednesday's protest was peaceful, later in the evening loud bangs were heard, and a volunteer protest guard was reportedly injured. At a protest last week, six people were treated for gunshot wounds.

Thousands of protesters had gathered outside the head office of Siam Commercial Bank (SCB), Thailand's oldest bank, in which the king owns a stake of more than 23%, to call for greater oversight of royal funds. They had originally planned to gather outside the crown property bureau, the office that manages royal assets, but said they would move to avoid confrontation with royalists who had announced a counter rally.

After ascending the throne, King Maha Vajiralongkorn took direct control of the crown property bureau, which is worth tens of billions of dollars. Previously, the fund - including prime real estate in Bangkok, shares in SCB and stakes in the country's largest industrial conglomerate, Siam Cement Group - was under the supervision of the finance ministry. Its exact value is not known, though some estimates suggest it is worth \$40bn (£30bn).

"At least people should have the space to investigate [how money is spent] and check the institution - not only the monarchy but also other institutions. We will not accept military power any more," said Nik, 31, who attended Wednesday's protest. *majesté laws?*

Protesters have accused the king of wasting taxpayers' money, and have criticised him for spending most of his time in Germany while Thailand faces economic devastation caused by coronavirus. They believe such assets should be returned, and that the king's private wealth should be separated from the crown funds.

In a statement released ahead of Wednesday's demonstration, the protest group Free Youth said: "Transferring the crown property to the king's property is equivalent to a robbery of the nation's wealth." It also criticised the police response to their protests, saying that "being near the police does not make you feel safe".

Images of shipping containers, stacked together by police to form barricades across the roads leading to the bureau, were shared widely on social media – prompting the Danish shipping company Maersk to dissociate itself from such measures.

A group of 13 international NGOs issued a joint statement condemning the Thai authorities' use of teargas and water cannon at previous protests, while the human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, co-president of the Clooney Foundation for Justice, criticised the recent charges brought under lese majesty. "No one should be arrested or imprisoned merely for criticising public officials or a system of government," she said. "Thailand should not respond to peaceful protests by cracking down on protesters through prosecutions that muzzle speech."

A police source told Reuters that 15 protest leaders had been summoned to acknowledge charges in relation to comments made about the king. At a press conference on Wednesday morning police did not confirm details.

Though other charges have been used against demonstrators – including, in some cases, teenagers – the authorities had not previously resorted to lese-majesty.

"This is a signal that the authorities are going to start using increasingly harsh measures to crack down – it's hard not to read it that way," said Tamara Loos, a professor at Cornell University in the US. However, such arrests were unlikely to silence young people, she said. "I think the genie is out of the bottle. I don't think we will see a return to the kinds of self-censorship in public that we saw before."

Responding to the criticism, a government spokeswoman, Rachada Dhnadirek, said: "The government has been open-minded to rights and freedoms despite many imprudent expressions which offend the majority. The government must use its authorised powers."

Rebecca Ratcliffe in Bangkok

- The Guardian. Wed 25 Nov 2020 17.11 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/25/seven-thai-activists-face-charges-of-insulting-king-on-eve-of-mass-protest>

Giant rubber ducks become symbol of Thai pro-democracy rallies

Inflatables taken on marches to mock authorities protect protesters from police violence

On the frontline of Thailand's pro-democracy protests a new and unlikely mascot has emerged: a giant, inflatable duck.

When demonstrators tried to get past concrete barricades and gather outside parliament on

Tuesday, they faced a police response that rights groups have described as unnecessary and excessive. The protesters, who are calling for democratic reforms including curbs on the power of the monarchy, were repeatedly fired at with teargas and water cannon. Some of the water blasts contained chemical irritants.

Amid the chaos, a collection of giant ducks, initially brought to the protest as a joke, were promptly repurposed as shields. They have since been celebrated as heroes of the movement.

Images of the standoff were shared widely on social media. So too were photos taken later of battered looking ducks, saggy and coated in purple dye fired from the water cannon.

A pro-democracy protester with a somewhat deflated duck

A pro-democracy protester with a somewhat deflated duck. Photograph: Jack Taylor/AFP/Getty Images

At a further rally on Wednesday, protesters held signs praising the ducks' bravery, and demonstrators carried a flock of them above their heads as they marched on the Thai police headquarters. "Stop harassing the people and inflatable ducks," read one sign. Protest artwork has emerged online, portraying the ducks as muscular fighters protecting students and as a superhero figure.

Young activists in Thailand have regularly used humour and creativity, said Tracy Beattie, a researcher at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute who specialises in Thai politics. "This time, yellow inflatable rubber ducks have become a new symbol for the pro-democracy movement, not just because they are cute but also because they highlight the sheer absurdity and disproportionality of the situation," she said.

Human Rights Watch has expressed concern about the police response, and said it had observed the use of water cannon jets laced with purple dye and an apparent teargas chemical, teargas grenades and pepper spray grenades on Tuesday.

At least 55 people were injured, most from inhaling teargas, according to Bangkok's emergency medical service. Clashes also broke out between the pro-democracy activists and royalists. Six pro-democracy demonstrators were treated for gunshot wounds.

The police denied using live ammunition or rubber bullets, and say they were investigating. Water cannon were used on Tuesday because protesters were attempting to break into a restricted area near parliament, a spokesperson said.

The ducks were initially brought to Tuesday's rally to mock the authorities, who had blocked access to the parliament building. Protesters joked that the only way to reach parliament, where possible changes to the constitution were under discussion, would be to send rubber ducks along the river. They wanted MPs and senators to approve a proposal that would undo changes that were made to the charter under military rule, but this was rejected.

Joshua Wong, a prominent Hong Kong activist who has supported the Thai pro-democracy movement, praised the protesters' inventiveness. "Creativity wins," he said on Twitter. "Long live rubber ducks."

Rebecca Ratcliffe in Bangkok

• The Guardian. Fri 20 Nov 2020 03.00 GMT. Last modified on Fri 20 Nov 2020 14.40 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/20/giant-rubber-ducks-become-symbol-of-thai-pro-democracy-rallies>

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