

JAMES OCKEY

Thailand in 2020

Politics, Protests, and a Pandemic

ABSTRACT

In 2020, attention in Thailand focused on the pandemic and on political protest. After some early missteps Thailand managed the pandemic well, eliminating community transmission with a strong curfew, essentially a lockdown, and effective tracking and tracing. Yet the economic impact on Thailand's tourism-dependent economy will continue into 2021. The pandemic interrupted student-led protests against a regime they considered undemocratic, in the wake of the dissolution of the opposition Future Forward Party. After the pandemic was brought under control, the demonstrations resumed, with students demanding constitutional amendments (already under consideration by the parliament), the resignation of the prime minister, and the dissolution of parliament. They added unprecedented calls for reform of Thailand's monarchy. Students argued that reforms designed to fully remove the monarchy from politics would increase respect for the institution. But there were concerns that violence between students and royalists or security forces might ensue.

KEYWORDS: monarchy, constitutional reform, COVID-19, student demonstrations, economy

THAILAND ENTERED 2020 WITH A FRAGILE, but stable, coalition government, led by General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who originally came to power through a coup in 2014. The coalition held a thin majority in parliament, but had the support of a senate appointed by Prayuth, ensuring he could not be removed by elected MPs. Yet the machinations involved in ensuring that Prayuth could not lose in the election undermined any legitimacy the

JAMES OCKEY lectures in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. Email: <james.ockey@canterbury.ac.nz>.

Asian Survey, Vol. 61, Number 1, pp. 115–122. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2021.61.1.115>.

government hoped to gain through a return to parliamentary politics. The fragility, the lack of legitimacy, and the stability of the government would shape Thai politics throughout the year.

POLITICAL TENSIONS

Early in the year, the government faced tensions on two different fronts. In the parliament, the Democrat Party led a committee tasked with recommending amendments to the constitution. As the chair of the committee, Chuan Leek-phai backed a suggestion that a constitutional provision placing six leaders of the military and police in the senate *ex officio* be revoked. Intended or not, questioning this right raised questions concerning the legitimacy of the senate as a whole, since many senators were military or police, and all had been appointed by Prayuth and were loyal to him in the selection of the prime minister. Since the suggestion came from a respected member of a coalition party, Prayuth was left in a difficult position. Struggles over amending the constitution would remain a source of tension throughout the year.

The second source of political tensions was the charges against the Future Forward Party. In the 2019 elections, Future Forward had appealed to young people, relying heavily on social media to campaign, while taking strong positions in favor of greater democracy and in opposition to the Prayuth regime. Thanathorn Jungrungrangkit, the leader of the party, had had his membership in the parliament revoked in a controversial decision based on his ownership of a media company, and several additional investigations were underway that could lead to dissolution of the party.

The first case of 2020 to proceed against Future Forward, alleging that the party had undermined the monarchy, was scheduled for a mid-January decision. In December 2019, Future Forward supporters, many of them young students, had joined together in a “flash mob” for a demonstration, not only focusing on the party but also calling for Prayuth to resign as prime minister. In early January 2020, activists organized a *wing lai lung* (“run to drive out Uncle” [Prayuth]), with Thanathorn and other party leaders joining in. More runs were scheduled for later in the year. Future Forward survived that first case, but a second case, alleging that a loan to the party during the election was illegal, did lead to the dissolution of the party, with party executives, including Thanathorn and former Thammasat University lecturer Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, banned from political office for 10 years. Thanathorn and

Piyabutr re-established Future Forward as a social movement, while a new party, Move Forward, was created for Future Forward members of parliament. The next day, student-led demonstrations began in earnest, with a flash mob at Thammasat University.

The flash-mob-style demonstrations, organized through social media, spread rapidly to campuses throughout the country, with demands for Prayuth to resign, for the dissolution of parliament, and for dictatorship to be replaced by democracy. As the demonstrations spread to secondary schools, demands for educational reform were added to the agenda. These challenges to the Prayuth government from the coalition and demonstrators over democratic reforms were brought to a halt by measures to stem the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE PANDEMIC

On January 13, Thailand became the first country outside China to report a case of COVID-19. With little then known about the virus, the initial response focused on screening visitors from Wuhan. Despite the continued arrival of tourists from China, the spread of the virus was quite limited, perhaps due to the natural social distancing in Thai culture and a willingness to quickly don masks, based on previous experience with SARS and bird flu. The virus began to spread more rapidly on March 6, when army promoters organized boxing matches at the army stadium despite a call from the cabinet to suspend sporting events. Thailand imposed a state of emergency, and then a curfew on March 26. Ten days later, the borders were closed, except for repatriation.

Under emergency rule, the government set up a Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration, made up of medical experts from the public, private, and academic sectors and relevant government officials. For the most part, the center followed best international practices, maintaining a lockdown except for essential services, and holding daily briefings to raise awareness. Thailand did not test extensively, but did establish an effective contact-tracing system. The center was also able to rely on Thailand's well-established universal healthcare system and a network of village-level health-care volunteers to localize the response, both in shaping it to fit local circumstances, and in promoting awareness. By May, the outbreak was largely under control, and gradually businesses were allowed to reopen. Most

restrictions were lifted by June 15, although the borders remained closed. These measures proved effective, as community spread was eliminated, with new cases coming only from new arrivals, who were quarantined at the border. By November, Thailand had confirmed a total of just 3,787 cases, with 59 deaths (Ministry of Public Health, n.d.). In mid-December, a second wave hit Thailand, beginning with a large cluster at a seafood market in Samut Prakan and spreading rapidly through the migrant worker community and beyond. By the end of the year, Thailand reported 6,690 total cases, 2,417 cases undergoing treatment, and 61 deaths (Ministry of Public Health, n.d.). The Thai government took advantage of the new outbreak to ban all political demonstrations in Bangkok, as it sought to ease pressures exerted by student protesters.

POLITICAL PROTESTS

While measures were in place to bring the pandemic under control, political activities were largely sidelined. As the country gradually reopened, the pent-up political tensions resurfaced. In June, 18 of the 34 members of the executive committee of the ruling Phalang Pracharat party resigned, to force a change in the party leadership. Subsequently, General Prawit Wongsuwan, a leading member of the coup group, took over the party leadership, in the hope of easing tensions between party factions.

The government certainly hoped the pandemic had ended the student-led protests begun earlier in the year, but it left the emergency law in place, giving it additional authority to control public gatherings. Yet the students were undeterred, having sustained their movement during the pandemic by using social media, expanding networks, and raising awareness on key issues. On June 24, the anniversary of the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy, student-led demonstrations resumed. Protestors demanded that the democracy promised in 1932 be fully implemented. Later demonstrations would draw on events from that era to promote their cause.

While a link was implied, in this first demonstration, between monarchy and the absence of democracy, the protests focused on amending the constitution. The link between democracy, monarchy, and constitutional reform was clarified by two demonstrations in August. The first, on August 3, was organized as a Harry Potter–themed protest, a clever way to introduce “he who must not be named” (the king) into the discussion. At this protest, activist Anon Nampa called for an open discussion of the role of the

TABLE 1. Protesters' List of Reforms to the Monarchy

1	Remove the provision preventing lawsuits against the King and allow the parliament to investigate him, as in the original constitution of the People's Party.
2	Abrogate the <i>lèse majesté</i> law.
3	Abrogate the law making the Crown Property Bureau the personal property of the King, separate it from his personal assets, and give control to the Ministry of Finance.
4	Cut the budget of the monarchy in line with current economic circumstances.
5	Eliminate the separate royal service and add them to the civil service. Eliminate unnecessary royal institutions such as the privy council.
6	Remove provisions allowing the King to avoid scrutiny of palace expenditures.
7	Abolish the right of the monarch to express political opinions in public.
8	Eliminate all programmes designed to promote royalism.
9	Investigate killings that might be linked to the monarchy.
10	Ban royal assent for coups.

SOURCE: Thammasat lae kanchumnum (Thammasat and Protests) Facebook page.

monarchy. Discussions should consider the *lèse-majesté* law, the excessive power granted to the monarch by the 2017 constitution, and the budget allocated to the monarchy. Anon stated that the goal was to reform and retain the constitutional monarchy (*The Nation* 2020a). Protestors also reiterated their demands for constitutional reform. A week later a larger rally took place at Thammasat University. Here, demonstrators unveiled a list of 10 changes they sought in the monarchy, reading them out at the rally and posting them on Facebook (Table 1). The students clarified that they do not seek to eliminate the monarchy but to preserve it, arguing that the reforms would provide greater stability to the monarchy by placing it above politics.

The student demonstrators have experienced two coups in their young lives, first in 2006 and then again in 2014. Democracy has not been fully restored since the 2014 coup, with the coup leader installed as prime minister by a senate he appointed, so that about a third of their lives have been lived under dictatorship. The military justified both coups as necessary to preserve the monarchy—and the military, and many in the elite more generally, have justified antidemocratic actions on the same basis. Thus when the students demonstrate for reform of the monarchy, it should be seen in the context of breaking what they characterized as collusion between military and monarchy, with both in pursuit of self-interest, at the expense of democracy. For the student movement, breaking that collusion is necessary if democracy is to

thrive. Thus constitutional amendments, reform of the monarchy, and the demand for the coup leader to step down as prime minister are all necessary to create democracy.

The initial response to the protests was restrained: warnings, rebukes, and pressure on universities to stop the protests. Some student leaders were arrested, and in some cases charged with the harsh crime of sedition, but they were later released on bail. The House of Representatives pressed ahead with attempts to amend the constitution; the prime minister announced a forum to discuss demands with the students, and by the end of August expressed willingness to draft a new constitution. But there were also more-ominous signs, as royalists began to foment hate speech on social media and to organize counter-protests to oppose any reform of constitutional provisions related to the monarchy. Army chief Apirat Kongsompong told cadets that COVID-19 was not as frightening as the disease of criticizing one's own nation, for which there was no cure (*The Nation* 2020b). Conspiracy theories circulated, claiming the students were being manipulated by a "third hand," with some claiming a foreign agent was involved, further stirring up nationalism. Yet, the students persevered, organizing frequent flash mobs, punctuated by larger demonstrations.

In October, the demonstrations accelerated, as students commemorated the student uprisings of October 14, 1973, and October 6, 1976. Later that month, during a royal procession, the king praised a royalist protester who at a demonstration had held up a placard supporting the king, calling him brave. Concerns that such praise might embolden royalists were somewhat alleviated when the king, in response to a reporter's question, called Thailand a land of compromise, and declared that he loved all protesters equally, although he continued to meet with and praise royalist demonstrators (*Khao-sod English* 2020). At about the same time, the government brought charges against some student leaders, as well as former Future Forward leader Thanathorn, convinced that pressuring him would undermine the protests. Meanwhile, attempts by the parliament to help resolve tensions failed, as constitutional amendments were delayed, and a special session called to facilitate reconciliation produced no concrete results.

ECONOMY

Entering 2020, the Thai economy was struggling with an over-valued baht and slow economic growth, so when the pandemic arrived, the economy was

already under pressure. The heavy dependence on tourism meant that, despite its success in controlling the virus, the Thai economy suffered more than neighboring countries, with the Bank of Thailand (2020) projecting negative growth of 7.8%. The World Bank (2020) estimated that due to the pandemic the number of economically insecure doubled to 9.7 million in the second quarter, as unemployment rose to a peak of 2.1 million in July before slowly declining. Small businesses were hit particularly hard, shedding 45% of their employees during the period, and nearly a quarter feared they would have to close permanently by the end of the year (Parks et al. 2020: 15, 19). In response, the Thai government crafted a large stimulus package, amounting to about 6% of GDP, that, with a return of at least some tourism, could lead to economic growth in 2021, projected rather optimistically at 3.5% (*Bangkok Post* 2020). While the stimulus will certainly help, the revival of international tourism is unpredictable and will depend on worldwide progress in the battle against COVID-19.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Thailand continued to cautiously calibrate its relationships with the US and China. It had not engaged in the earlier US-supported Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (TPP), nor its successor (CPATPP), both of which excluded China; it was more receptive to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which included China but excluded the US. The RCEP has been largely driven by ASEAN and is less comprehensive than the TPP, focusing on reducing tariffs and excluding regulations on labour, environmental protection, investment, or the opening of service sectors. Thai exports should benefit from the trade agreement, finalized in November, even as it is likely to pull Thailand even more closely into the Chinese economic orbit.

At the same time, tensions were introduced into the Thailand–China relationship over control of the water resources of the Mekong River. Early in the year, through 11 dams in Chinese territory, China held back much of the waters of the Mekong for its own later use, leading to drought in Thailand and further downstream. China denied responsibility for the drought, but American climatologists were able to demonstrate that the upper reaches of the Mekong had experienced an above-average water year (Beech, 2020). In August, China agreed to demands that it share data on Mekong water flows

with downstream nations. The US announced in December that it would provide its own satellite-based assessment of water flows to Mekong nations, essentially asserting a role as a facilitator in ensuring equitable water flows.

CONCLUSION

While the coalition government was able to maintain stability throughout the year, even increasing the size of its coalition after the dissolution of the Future Forward Party, its effectiveness and legitimacy were increasingly called into question, to the point that coup rumors were frequent in the second half of the year. While the government retains all the constitutional advantages that have maintained its stability thus far, challenges to the government are increasing in the streets, putting that stability at greater risk.

REFERENCES

- Bangkok Post*. 2020. “BoT Predicts Growth in Upcoming Q2,” October 1.
- Bank of Thailand. 2020. “Forecast Summary in Monetary Policy Report: September 2020” <<https://www.bot.or.th/English/MonetaryPolicy/MonetPolicyCommittee/MPR/Pages/default.aspx>>.
- Beech, Hannah. 2020. “China Limited the Mekong’s Flow. Other Countries Suffered a Drought.” *New York Times*, April 13.
- Khaosod English*. 2020. “Local Media Puzzled by CNN’s Impromptu King Interview,” November 2.
- Ministry of Public Health. n.d. “Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19).” Department of Disease Control <<https://ddc.moph.go.th/viralpneumonia/eng/>>, accessed November 2, 2020.
- Nation, The*. 2020a. “Landmark Demonstration Calls for Debate on Monarchy,” August 4.
- Nation, The*. 2020b. “No Vaccine against Virus of Nation Hatred, Warns Army Chief,” August 5.
- Parks, Thomas, et al. 2020. “Enduring the Pandemic: Surveys of the Impact of COVID-19 on the Livelihoods of Thai People.” Asia Foundation, Bangkok.
- World Bank. n.d. “World Bank in Thailand: Overview” <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/thailand/overview/>>.