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Thailand

# The gap is widening between the Royal Palace and the pro-democracy movement, which is mobilized against the danger of a putsch

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**The situation continues to evolve rapidly in Thailand. After modifying the Constitution in his favour and taking control of the property of the Crown, King Rama X is strengthening his control over a section of the armed forces, attaching to his person two regiments who have a history of fomenting coups d'état. The Royal Palace is reintroducing archaic rites, widening the gap between the youth and a conservative order which is rigidifying and seems more and more to be dreaming of a return to an absolute monarchy. The authorities are resorting anew to the law against the "crime" of lese-majesty against the leading figures of the democratic movement. The latter is targeting the new praetorian guard of the monarch and preparing for the possibility of a putsch.**

The Thai pro-democracy movement is continuing its struggle very systematically. On 25 November it demonstrated in front of the bank where the Crown's assets are located (the Siam Commercial Bank), a public asset managed by the Ministry of Finance that Rama X has privatized for his own benefit. On 27 November it conducted in the heart of Bangkok an anti-coup practice drill and redistributed a resistance manual originally published in 2014. On 29 November it organized a rally in front of the barracks of one of the two regiments that the monarch has attached to his personal protection, placing them under his direct command.

The revolt continues to spread, including in certain sectors, still very much in the minority, of the salaried workforce.

## **The Royal Palace and the army**

Who holds the real power in Thailand - the monarchy or the army? The answer to this question is disputed. Is it the soft power of the King (and his vast fortune) or, what is more visible, the ability of the army to shape the institutions to its advantage? Whichever it is, or was, the balance of powers on which the kingdom's stability depends is today under tension.

In Thailand, the king is the official head of the armed forces, but that does not mean that he exercises real control over them. Rama IX (Bhumibol Adulyadej), the father of Rama X (Maha Vajiralongkorn), influenced, directly or indirectly, the promotion of senior officers. However, it is the army which has ensured essentially the continuity of "physical" power since the 1950s. From all evidence, his son is seeking today to modify in his favour the relationship of forces within the military-monarchical regime.

On his own initiative, Rama X changed, in 2017, the status of three government agencies, removing them from common law. They have since obeyed "the royal pleasure". This includes the Royal Security Command, which is in charge of everything related to the protection and glorification of the royal family and its collaborators. As a former fighter pilot, Maha Vajiralongkorn belongs to the air force, but the latter, poorly equipped, has little weight. It is the infantry that counts. So, as it was royally decided in 2019, the First and Eleventh Regiments of Infantry, based in Bangkok, are now under his direct command. Rama X has, moreover, put his relatives (including Queen Suthida) at the head of the Royal Guard. In so doing, he takes the risk of fracturing the army, which considers itself to be the guarantor of royal security and the established order.

The pro-democracy movement found itself on Sunday 29 November in front of the barracks of the Eleventh Infantry Regiment., whose entrances and perimeter walls had been covered with barbed wire. Buses served as a barricade.

The demonstrators pushed them aside and threw red paint to recall the bloody repression of the Red Shirts in 2010, during an anti-government mobilization. A statement was read, accusing the king of "extending (his) royal prerogatives in every way possible, including (through the military", describing Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former army general, as the monarch's "loyal straw man". Copies of this statement were folded in the shape of paper aeroplanes and sent to the riot police protecting the barracks [1] Humour and irony again!

Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak, one of the principal spokespersons of the movement, declared publicly that the First and Eleventh Infantry Regiments "were involved in the repression of the population in the past. They also played a central role in the coups d'état". [2]

## The indictment for lese-majesty

The government is again using the legal weapon of mass dissuasion that is the "crime" of lese-majesty, the dreaded Section 112 that "protects" the royal family, the regency and its collaborators from any insult. This law can impose sentences of three to fifteen years in prison. Several charges against one defendant may be aggregated, up to the equivalent of a life sentence.

Twelve leading figures in the pro-democracy movement were initially targeted by the charge of lese-majesty in connection with the September 19-20 protests at Thammasat University and Sanam Luang. According to the latest news, their situation is as follows :

On 30 November five of them went with their lawyers Krisadang Nutcharus and Norasate Nanongtoom to the police station to have the charges formally presented against them. Three others were summoned. The others await their summons:

Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak (charge heard)

Panussaya "Rung" Sitthijirawattanakul (charge heard)

Panupong "Mike" Jahnok (charge heard)

Anon Nampa (charge heard)

Patsaravalee "Mind" Tanakitvibulpon (charge heard)

Chanin Wongsri

Jutatip "Ua" Sirikhan (summoned)

Piyarat "Toto" Chongthep

Tattep "Ford" Ruangrapaikitserree (summoned)

Atthapol "Khru Yai" Buapat

Chukiat Saengwong

Sombat Thongyoi

Patiwat Saraiyaem also heard his charge.

It is feared that the charge of lese-majesty (as well as that of endangering national security) will be used against a growing number of demonstrators.

## **Prepare for the possibility of a putsch**

The possibility of a coup d'état is on everyone's mind. The mobilization of far-right paramilitary and ultra-royalist groups is a very worrying sign. Violence against demonstrators turned a corner during the days of 17-18 November which left at least 55 wounded (including 6 by bullets). [3] On 25 November again, the rally was marked by incidents: shots were fired into the crowd by unidentified attackers, causing two minor injuries at the time of the dispersal. The means deployed by the forces of repression are more and more extensive. In response, the pro-democracy movement shows its commitment to non-violent initiatives and turns derision into a political weapon, under the protection of inflatable yellow ducks (yellow is the colour of the monarchy!) which serve both as a rallying sign and as defensive walls in the face of the police water cannons.

Already anticipating the next move, the democratic movement is preparing for the eventuality of a putsch. In an emergency, it calls for the immediate launching of strikes and student strikes ; for blocking main roads with empty vehicles and demonstrating ; expressing thus its readiness to denounce any attack on the Constitution and democracy. During the rally on November 25, speakers (dressed as yellow ducks, obviously) went to the podium one after another, calling in particular to transform resistance into rebellion. "In 2014, a coup took place. If the population had mobilized en masse, Prayut (general and prime minister) could not have remained (in power)." [4]

The manual of resistance to a coup d'etat, published in 2014 and reissued today proposes also to organize a week-long general strike; to refuse any form of cooperation with the junta; to invite the soldiers to side with the people; to refuse to pay taxes ; to withdraw money from banks...

At present, workers participate in the mobilizations, but probably on a marginal basis. Certain trade unionists have a real tradition of opposition to the army, to the ultra-royalists, to the Yellow Shirts. Individually, or in the form of union contingents, they are present during demonstrations, particularly from the private sector (automotive, textiles, etc.). Precarious workers (street vendors, etc.) also express their sympathy.

## **A growing gap between the Royal Palace and the youth**

The movement is extending its challenge to the moral order. Thai society is steeped in outdated hierarchical rules that control the daily behaviour of the population, shaping language and individual relations, imposing codes and submissions. Challenging them takes many forms, such as the massive refusal to appear in uniform in schools and

universities, or to respect the dress codes of "decorum" during graduation ceremonies. The groups Bad Student and KKC Pakee Students have called for this fight to continue to regain in this way "control of (our) own bodies". [5] Uniforms are required for many occasions and their cost can easily become prohibitive for poorer families. Faced with the depth of rejection, the school and university authorities come to terms with it.

The great generational revolts typically involve this rejection of a stifling moral order which has lost its oppressive force. Each one of them has also combined this revolt over "everyday life" with a questioning of the political system which bases its authority on this the moral order which has become both unbearable and unsustainable. For reasons already discussed in previous articles [6], the "front of refusal" of the conservative forces to any prospect of compromise and substantial reform is particularly rigid. What seems increasingly clear today is that Rama X is actually today promoting regressive reforms, whose horizon is the restoration of an absolute monarchy.

In terms of symbols and behaviour, he has made generals crawl at his feet (in the literal sense) before his throne. He has restored the official system of royal concubines (and rehabilitated through this one of his previous wives, who had been disowned and who has joined the harem as the monarch's "consort" (spouse) not to be confused with the queen). His father, Rama IX, who died in 2016, had never respected the constitutional status of the monarchy. Rama X today is doing much more: he behaves as an absolutist sovereign (the royal good pleasure). He is building a personal power piece by piece and he has the means, including financial ones, to do it.

Depending on the perimeter of the assets taken into account, the assets of the Royal Thai family are estimated at around 30 to 60 billion dollars (25 to 50 billion euros), which makes it the richest royal family in the world. Rama X decided in 2018, of his own royal will, to personally take control of the assets of the Office of the Crown, a public fund managed previously by the Ministry of Finance, erasing the border between his personal fortune and that of the Crown, which was not the case during his father's reign. According to the *Prachatai* website, the budget allocated by the state to the Crown in 2020 amounted to about 30 billion baht, or about 830 million euros, an estimate higher than the previous ones.

He now has under his own command a reinforced Royal Guard and the two infantry regiments which have played a key role in the recent putsches. In so doing, he took away from the army one of its main prerogatives : to be the guarantor of the security of the royal family, which, beyond the importance of the symbol (which legitimizes its authority among the population), allowed it to keep the Palace "in line".

By seizing power as he is doing, Rama X is not only taking the opposite path to what the democratic movement is demanding (the recognition of the constitutional character of the monarchy), he is going back in a number of aspects on the spirit of modernization of royalty that King Chulalongkorn had initiated at the end of his reign - Chulalongkorn (Rama V of the Chakri dynasty) was king of Siam (former name of Thailand) from 1868 to 1910. He is considered to be the one who brought the kingdom into the modern world.

Rama X can change the face and multiply the powers of the royal family. However, he cannot change society. The crisis arose in Thailand from the yawning divide between conservative institutions and youth. Maha Vajiralongkorn is doing all he can to widen this divide and make it even more yawning!

The crisis of the regime has deepened as a result. However, a regime crisis cannot be played out as a game for two : the government (authoritarian) and its opponents (democratic). It sharpens all the tensions at work within the elites and the bourgeoisie, within the armed forces, in class relations, between regions... It creates spaces for the deployment of counter-cultures and protest ideologies, for the renewal of social movements...

One can look for many precedents, old and recent, where an ossified regime has been overthrown by an unlikely,

unexpected and temporary bloc of forces. It is futile to speculate from afar about what may happen in Thailand, whose history has not been written in advance. One thing is certain, however: the pro-democracy movement, by its capacity to endure and to innovate, has opened a gaping breach in the domination of the military-monarchical order. It has never ceased to amaze with its resilience and inventiveness. We can only salute it for what it has already accomplished and support it as much as we can for what it can still accomplish.

2 December 2020

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[1] Rebecca Ratcliffe in Bangkok, *The Guardian*, 29 November 2020 "[Thai protesters march to royal guard barracks in Bangkok](#)".

[2] Cited by AFP, September 29, 2020.

[3] Pierre Rousset, "[Towards a test of strength](#)".

[4] *Prachatai*, 28 November 2020 "[People occupy major intersection to perform anti-coup drill](#)".

[5] *Prachatai* 2 December 2020 "[Students stir up controversy by going to school out of uniform](#)".

[6] See in particular Pierre Rousset "[Democratic movement attacks the established order in Thailand](#)". See also Giles Ji Ungpakorn, *Jacobin*, 26 November 2020 "[The Return of Thailand's Democracy Movement](#)".