

Thai protesters demand the resignation of the prime minister

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Students and youth in Thailand continue to press for the government to meet their demands amid a highly volatile situation. After attempting to use police force last week to shut down large-scale demonstrations, the administration of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha is now working to shut down the protest movement via parliament. The danger of a violent crackdown remains.

During another mass demonstration and march to Government House on Wednesday, Prayuth delivered a television address, stating, “I will make the first move to deescalate this situation. I am currently preparing to lift the state of severe emergency in Bangkok and will do so promptly if there are no violent incidents.” He called on the protesters to resolve the political issues through parliament—in other words for students and youth to place their faith in opposition parties.

The government lifted the state of emergency yesterday. It had banned public gatherings of five people or more and enabled the government to carry out broad censorship of anything deemed to “affect national security” or “spread fear.” Under the decree, Bangkok targeted four media outlets: VoiceTV, *Prachatai.com*, “The Reporters,” and the *Standard*.

VoiceTV was ordered to close on Tuesday, but a court reversed the decision the next day. It is partly owned by the family of former prime ministers Thaksin Shinawatra and his sister Yingluck. Both were ousted in military coups, with the latter removed in 2014 and replaced by a military junta led by Prayuth.

Protest leaders, however, are continuing to demand the resignation of Prayuth and his government and the release of protesters who have been arrested over the past two weeks. “He’s still seeking to stay in power while ignoring all the people’s demands. The emergency decree shouldn’t have been issued in the first place,” said protest leader Sirawith Seritiwat.

Thursday was the first day since October 14 without major demonstrations but protest organisers warned that the rallies will continue on Sunday if their demands are not met.

In July, the protest movement put forward three core demands: Prayuth’s resignation, the writing of a new constitution, and the end to persecution of government critics. In August, protesters also put forward ten demands to reform the monarchy, which include the abolition of the draconian *lèse-majesté* law, transparency regarding the king’s finances, and an end to government propaganda involving the king.

Prayuth recalled parliament on Monday from a recess and will discuss the protests during sessions next week. The prime minister clearly hopes that the main opposition parties—Pheu Thai and the Move Forward Party (MFP), which have some support among students and youth—will be able to use their influence to put an end to the demonstrations.

Students, youth, and workers genuinely motivated by democratic rights should place no faith in these parties. The Pheu Thai party is connected to former Prime Minister Thaksin and is the successor of his Thai Rak Thai party. Thaksin, a billionaire, was ousted in a 2006 coup after his policies cut across the business interests of the Bangkok elite including by opening the economy to increased foreign investment.

Pheu Thai has attempted to divert the protests behind the courts—another wing of the government—by filing a lawsuit in the Bangkok Civil Court against the state of emergency. Pheu Thai legislator Cholanan Srikaew criticized Prayuth for lifting the state of emergency at this point: “He’s really doing it to protect himself. Why? Because if he didn’t lift the emergency decree today, and the court ordered the temporary protection of the protesters, it would mean all his orders and

announcement relating to this were illegal.”

The smaller Move Forward Party (MFP) is oriented to middle class layers in Thailand dissatisfied with the role of the military and the monarchy in business. While issuing mild, left-sounding criticisms of the current system, the MFP and its de facto predecessor the Future Forward Party (FFP) are pro-capitalist. The MFP was founded in 2014, undergoing a number of name changes since then. When the FFP was dissolved in February, the majority of its members of parliament moved to the MFP.

The leader of the defunct FFP, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, has criticized monopoly capitalism in Thailand from the standpoint that only a small layer of the ruling elite controls the economy. He stated at the FFP’s launch in 2018 that he wanted to open the economy to other layers of business. He has added vague promises about making the economy work for the benefit of the majority. He is not an opponent of capitalism but represents a segment of the ruling class demanding greater access to wealth.

Before being disqualified as a member of parliament earlier this year, Thanathorn was the wealthiest person in the legislature, reporting assets last year worth 5.6 billion baht (\$US180 million). From 2002 to 2018, he served in a leading role in the Thai Summit Group, which was founded by his father and is the largest auto parts manufacturer in the country.

Thanathorn has remained an influential figure despite being barred from politics after the government accused him of violating election laws. He has appealed to Washington for support and offered his party as a more reliable ally against China than the current Prayuth government.

Current MFP leader and wealthy businessman, Pita Limjaroenrat, has also criticized Prayuth’s government. While with the FFP in February, he stated, “Only one percent has enjoyed stability, prosperity and sustainability. This is the economy of the capitalists, by the capitalists, for the capitalists.” While the latter statement is true, Pita’s reference to the “one percent” is in fact a call for a greater dispersal of wealth within the bourgeoisie. His uncle served as a close aide to former Prime Minister Thaksin.

The attacks on democratic rights in Thailand are not solely the result of the Prayuth government or the monarchy. They ultimately stem from capitalism,

which Pheu Thai and the MFP support. While in power, Thaksin sought to intimidate and silence critics and waged a ruthless “war on drugs” involving thousands of extra-judicial murders of alleged drug runners.

The fight for democratic rights is completely bound up with the struggle against capitalism and all factions of the ruling class. Students and youth should turn to the working class in Thailand and throughout the region by raising demands for improvements to social and economic conditions as part of the fight for socialism internationally.



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