

The Bangkok student demonstrations over the past few weeks represent another of the manifestations of discontent about Thai governance, which, over the past couple of generations, have burst through the fault lines of the Thai polity.

The reasons for these fault lines are deep rooted. They derive from the weakness of key Thai institutions including most of the political parties and the judiciary; the fact that unlike in most countries of Asia, the military has not accepted that its political role should recede; and the deep economic gulf between Bangkok and the South on the one hand and the poorer North and North East on the other.

These factors allowed the rise of the populist leader Thaksin Shinawatra whose political machine has struggled for political supremacy with the Bangkok Establishment and the military from 2001 to this day. Effectively, the Military has been in control of the country since the judiciary annulled an election won by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck, but boycotted by the pro-Establishment Democrat Party, in 2014.

All this has meant that the educated Thai youth who are leading the current demonstrations have lived through the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, a populist Prime minister, two coups, sweeping reactionary constitutional change, and a wave of authoritarianism since the military took power in 2014.

The decline in the economy, which achieved 2.5% GDP growth in 2019 and has since been hit hard by Covid19, has led to heavy youth unemployment, including amongst university graduates – but the focus of complaint is political, not economic, and derives particularly from the current political landscape.

In 2018, a wealthy young businessman, Thanatorn Juangroongruangkit, founded a new progressive political party, Future Forward. To the surprise of the government led by former General Prayuth Chan-ocha, Future Forward won the third largest share of seats in the 2019 elections. The party was dissolved by order of the Constitutional Court in February this year and Thanatorn and his close colleagues were banned from politics for a decade.

The party has since been rebranded the Move Forward Party and as an activist organization called the Progressive Movement. Its leaders are in touch with the student leadership.

And while the military have sought to counter “unpatriotic tendencies” through the usual mechanisms of an authoritarian state, Thai youth have effectively countered with the political tool of their generation, social media.

A new – and important - aspect in this recent round of protests has been the call not only for the departure of Prayuth and constitutional change, but for the reform of the Monarchy.

Even at the height of the demonstrations by the pro Thaksin Redshirts, public criticism of the highly respected King Bhumipol was off limits.

However now, with an unpopular, vengeful and venal king, the protesters are calling for the Monarchy to fall more in line with constitutional monarchies such as the Japanese. This request has been resisted by the Government. Indeed, the latest (unsuccessful) prohibition of

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demonstrations and detention of student leaders have been partly premised on demonstrators' hailing a motorcade carrying the Queen, Suthida with the movement's three finger salute borrowed from the "Hunger Games".

An aspect of the current demonstrations has been the disinclination thus far of some of the other main forces in Thai politics to be involved. The Bangkok Establishment, some of whom are sympathetic to the demands of the students but who are averse to the challenge of revolutionary change, have largely remained on the sidelines.

The Redshirts have also been quiet, although Yingluck Shinawatra has tweeted pointedly to remind Prayuth that he had once suggested to her that she dissolve her government and hold a new election.

The strongly pro-Monarchy, pro-establishment anti-Thaksin group, the Yellowshirts, has mounted one counterdemonstration against the students. Many of the Yellowshirts appeared to be policemen.

At the time of writing, the protestors are in large numbers outwitting the Government by having multiple demonstrations with limited warning as to venues. While leaders have been detained, Prayuth seems thus far disinclined to use excessive force. He is no doubt mindful of the reputational damage to Thailand occasioned by the killing of students at Thammasat University in 1976, of pro-democracy demonstrators in Bangkok and elsewhere in 1992, and of the some 80 civilians in the Redshirt disturbances of 2010.

What then comes next? Thailand's history is full of governments of doubtful quality interspersed with coups and protests. It has for the most part coped economically because of a competent civil service and an intelligent business elite. And in the past the late King Bhumipol acted as a referee, preventing political turmoil from becoming anarchy.

A question often posed in the nineties was whether Thailand would be able to develop its institutions effectively enough for the military to stay out of politics, and for the country to cope, after its umpire, King Bhumipol had died. It was clear even then that the son could in no way emulate the father.

A generation later, this scenario has not come to pass. Thailand has not evolved politically as its more visionary thinkers, and its friends, had hoped. The jury will be out for some time as to whether these latest events are just another unsuccessful attempt to change Thailand's governance or the beginning of one of those rolling processes which lead to a radical shift in the political character of a country. What would happen, for example, if the rural poor who supported Thaksin, found common cause with the students, but for economic reasons.

Sometime, somewhere, in Thailand something has to give.



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