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The rise and dynamics of the 2020 youth movement in Thailand



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Abstract

Kanokrat Lertchoosakul's "The rise and dynamics of the 2020 youth movement in Thailand" focuses on the recent youth-driven political movements in Thailand. Young advocates for democracy are campaigning against the surveillance state and the internet "gateway" to control inappropriate websites and the flow of information from the rest of the world to Thailand. The election win of the Future Forward Party (FFP) shows how Thailand's active young generation is moving from the Internet to the ballot box. After succeeding in blocking the military government's attempts to restrict their freedom, they have moved to establish a formal political institution. In February 2020, Thailand's Constitutional Court dissolved the FFP over internal party allegations and improper financial sources. Nationwide student and school protests erupted, the largest mass youth movement since the 1970s.

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Abbreviations

CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
FFP	Future Forward Party
NCPO	National Council For Peace and Order
PRED	People’s Revolution for Equality and Democracy
UFTD	United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration

1. Introduction

During the past few years, we have observed countless mass youth protests on the streets campaigning for democracy, environmental protection, equality and social justice in innumerable countries across the globe. At the same time, more and more have put their efforts into participating at the ballot box to elect parties that voice their problems and demands in parliament. In Myanmar, the younger generation stood up with courage against the oppressive military dictatorship. Elsewhere, Greta Thunberg, Luisa Neubauer and many other youngsters have successfully raised environmental awareness among ordinary people and the establishment. The recent victory of the German Green Party also reflects the efforts of younger generations in Germany to transform their anger, ideas and demands into concrete proposals in parliamentary politics.^[1] Against this backdrop, from 2014 onward, there has also been a rise of youth power online, as well as inside parliament and on the streets in Thailand. Not only do the Thai youngsters call for democracy, but also challenge the powerful conservative regime and push forward structural changes.

2. The rise and decline of the 1970s Thai student movement

Although the 1970s student movement in Thailand is a legendary democratic force, from the 1980s onward it gradually declined. During the 1970s, Thai student activists were at the forefront of the democratic movement in toppling the two-decade long authoritarian government, as well as a major force in the leftist movement to mobilise farmers, labourers and ethnic minorities in the revolutionary movement against the Thai conservative elite. However, after the collapse of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the early 1980s, the mass youth movement and amount of radical activists gradually declined.^[2]

Although during the 1990-2000s, the role of young activists in various political transitions and developments was acknowledged, they were merely strategic allies of other political forces. Radical and rebellious elements were a sub-culture among the younger generation. Politically and socially active students were a minority. They were barely able to mobilise mass student protests. In 1992, although a small group of university student activists had been one of the first groups in the democratic campaign to oppose the return of the military in parliamentary politics, the movement was quickly taken over by the middle class and other political groups. In later mass movements, such as the Assembly of the Poor in the late 1990s and the Green Ribbon constitution reform campaign, in spite of appearances, these movements were led and mainly dominated by NGOs, journalists, grassroots activists, academics and the middle class. In the same vein, the more contemporary mass movements, such as the pro-democracy Red Shirt and conservative Yellow Shirt movements, organised their own youth wings and welcomed any support from young activists. But once again,

these youngsters were merely strategic allies rather than a major force in the inner circle of decision-making teams.^[3]

3. The small-scale and scattered student activism after the 2014 coup

Only after the 2014 military coup d'état did a small group of student activists become a major force fighting against the military junta. Due to the strong suppressive measures against the Red Shirt protesters, the major democratic force, the student activists were merely the last remaining opposition. Even under the state of emergency imposed by the military junta after the coup, these students insisted on countless cultural symbolic actions in expressing their disagreement with the coup, calling for a democratic constitution and elections, and appealing for reform of the Section 112 *lèse majesté* law.^[4] Small groups and individual university student activists launched creative activities to attract media attention, like wearing anti-coup shirts, reading George Orwell's 1984 in public and using the three-finger Hunger Games salute.^[5] Along with university students, small but radical groups of high school students campaigned for education reform and against the conservative norms and authoritarianism inside the education system. From time to time, they worked in support of the anti-military government campaign promoted by university students.

In spite of their outstanding actions, between 2014 and 2019, student activists were hardly able to mobilise a mass school student movement, and were unable to popularise their campaign and promote mass support from their generation. Their members were confined to small study groups among radical students, and although their activities were acknowledged by the public, it was only as a sub-culture among radical student activists. Their movements and organisations were rather Bangkok-centric and there was very little development of extensive regional and local school student networks. Their protests were mostly organised as flash mobs of only a few hundred supporters at a time. Many of them were arrested and these actions were subsequently criminalised.^[6] However, their small number would later spread to major universities after high school students became a crucial foundation for the later student movement. Some continued advocating radical activities in the universities and took control of the university student councils. Others became key persons and leaders of the 2020 student movements.^[7]

4. Online campaigns against the *surveillance state*

Not only did a small group of student activists protest on the streets, countless youngsters also promoted successful online protests against government efforts to suppress online freedom. In late 2015, the Thai junta government launched its proposal for “the single gateway” – an internet “gateway” to control inappropriate websites and the inflow of information into Thailand from the rest of the world. As the single gateway could restrict internet flows, it would have allowed the government to monitor and more easily censor internet content. It was planned to be the “Great Firewall of Thailand,” similar to the programme implemented by China.^[8]

Against this effort of the government, young online activists and individuals instigated and joined various forms of electronic civil disobedience, including online petitions, virtual sit-ins and virtual blockades. More than 166,554 people signed an online petition “Oppose Thai government’s use of a Single Internet Gateway” on Change.org.^[9] Many others used Twitter as a platform to push their concerns onto the popular agenda. The Twitter hashtag #SingleGateway and critical comments on this proposal were retweeted and later trended during the cyber protest.

Furthermore, several Facebook groups, such as Citizens against Single Gateway and Gamers taking power back, launched concerted distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks against government homepages and websites to express their disagreement with this policy. The “press F5” campaign, where the protesters visited government websites, overloaded these websites’ capacity to handle internet traffic. In spite of warnings by the government on violations of the Computer Crime Act, hundreds of thousands of users followed suit. The websites of the Royal Thai Armed Forces’ headquarters, the Prime Minister’s Office, the Internal Security Operations Command, the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology and Government House all went dark over the course of a few hours several times. The Ministry of Information and Communication Technology admitted its website was inundated with more than 100,000 users, compared with the daily average of some 6,000.^[10]

After several rounds of online protests, the netizens successfully pressured the government to call off the online *surveillance* proposal. The Minister announced the retreat on the controversial “Single Gateway” plan.^[11]

5. From online to the ballot box

In the following years, the younger generation even proved that they were not just arm-chair cyberwarriors. In spite of the efforts of the junta government to suppress political opposition through the 2017 constitution and election law, the younger generation managed to push the political party they supported to third place in the 2019 general election.

Since the 2014 coup, the junta government and traditional elites have attempted to institutionalise the military's role in parliamentary politics. To do so, they designed the 2017 constitution and electoral system to support a military-backed party to win the election, to ensure the coup leader returned as Prime Minister, and to undercut large rival parties like Pheu Thai and the Democrat Party. However, the result turned out to be a big surprise. Instead, the new electoral system advantaged middle-sized parties such as the Future Forward Party (FFP). This brand-new, underdog pro-youth party came third after both the leading party before the coup (Pheu Thai, with 137 seats, 7,920,630 votes and 21.92% of the popular vote) and the military-backed Palang Pracharat (with 116 seats, 8,433,137 votes and 23.34% of the popular vote). The FFP received 17.34% of the popular vote (6,265,950) and 81 seats in the House of Representatives. It overwhelmed the old establishment Democrat Party (53 seats and 3,927,726 votes).

The immense success of the FFP, of course, partially resulted from both the new electoral system and the dissolution of rival party Thai Raksa Chart. The most decisive factor, however, came from the mass of first-time voters desiring a new political option. From the very beginning of campaigning, the FFP was the only party to present policies targeted at first-time voters, who represented approximately eight million out of 51 million eligible voters. Their policies spoke to the spirit, problems, frustrations and demands of the younger generation and attracted their support. The party explicitly opposed "old politics" and took a clear standpoint against the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) junta, speaking directly to young voters dissatisfied with military rule. It made being anti-establishment cool and modern. It campaigned against authoritarian structures and practices in Thai society, like military conscription. It launched policies and actions to promote equality and to respect cultural and gender diversity, like the promotion of LGBT rights, ethnic minority rights, education reform and decentralisation. It ran against big business monopolies and supported SMEs and young start-up businesses. Furthermore, unlike the old-style political parties, party members across the spectrum, from party list and constituency candidates to regular campaigners, were mostly ordinary young people from diverse backgrounds, including LGBTQ+, members of ethnic minorities, the disabled, young start-ups, educators, environmental activists, etc.^[12]

The victory of the FFP in the election shows how Thailand's active younger generation moved out from online to the ballot box. After their success in blocking the military government's attempts to restrict their freedom, they then moved to build a formal political institution. In addition to turning up at the polling station to vote for the FFP, hundreds of the younger generation took up different functions in the party from the very beginning, as campaigners, financial supporters and candidates, in spite of little prospect of success at the outset.^[13]

6. From the ballot box to the street

At the beginning of their success, the performance of the FFP empowered and promoted political activism among wider groups of the younger generation. The unexpected triumph of the FFP made youngsters aware that their voices and votes could make a difference. The FFP's outstanding performance in parliament made them believe that change through parliamentary politics was possible. More and more youngsters than ever followed the budget and no-confidence debates in the House of Representatives.

Nevertheless, their party struggled to overcome various forms of obstruction. Only a month after the election, party leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit was accused of holding shares in a media company, which would violate election law. In November 2021, he was disqualified as an MP.^[14] In February 2020, the Thai Constitutional Court dissolved the FFP and banned its executives from politics for 10 years for allegedly accepting financial support from an illegitimate source. Student protests erupted, and Thai youngsters marched onto the street. This time, they organised the biggest mass youth movement since the 1970s. As well as campaigning for the return of the FFP, their proposals included radical demands to change the Thai political structure including drafting a new constitution, reducing the power of military and, above all, reforming the monarchy, a previously untouchable conservative institution.

Between February and March 2020, there were more than 86 on-campus flash mobs on 47 university campuses in 27 provinces. In mid-March, campus protests were temporarily suspended owing to the Covid-19 lockdown and resumed in mid-July. And this time, protests moved out of the campuses. On July 18, a group called Free Youth attracted more than 2,500 participants to a flash mob action at the Democracy Monument in support of three demands: an end to intimidation, dissolution of the sitting parliament and a new constitution. On August 10, a group of leading students, who later organised the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration (UFTD), announced a ten-point demand for monarchy reform. On September 19 and October 15, students mobilised Thailand's largest political rallies in years, with attendance at each of these rallies estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000, despite the fact that the major issue highlighted by leaders was monarchy reform.^[15]

In responding to the rise of a new opposition movement, between October 13 and 16, the military-supported government arrested most major protest leaders, broke up gatherings and threatened new control measures, including detention, high-pressure water cannons, tear gas and the declaration of a "severe" state of emergency. Nevertheless, instead of waning and disappearing, protests continued nearly every day in various locations throughout the country. Furthermore, this campaign developed into a hybrid movement of leaderless and long-distance guidance by off-site leaders. Activist leaders encouraged every protester to be a "core" protester and anyone to be a speaker.^[16]

What has emerged since October 17 has been a new form of protest. On the one hand, leaders guide their allies from a distance. Despite not appearing on-site, they use social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Telegram, to communicate protest locations, rough plans and the current situation with protesters. Ignoring an emergency decree banning public gatherings, thousands of protesters have continued to spontaneously gather in multiple locations across Bangkok, following instructions from off-site leaders.^[17]

On the other hand, many protesters have organised small protest stages within rallies, using their own chairs and bullhorns. Others volunteer to provide food and protective gear, or to act as security guards and medical staff. New campaign issues and creative activities have included cover dances, installation art, public opinion polls, open mics, drag queen performances and street fashion shows.^[18]

It is not only university students, as for the first time in Thai political history, huge numbers of school students have also organised mass protests in various localities throughout the country. From February 2020, several schools, both in Bangkok and other provinces, started organizing rallies within their schools. Students from various schools in Bangkok led a unique and popular protest characterised by the use of cartoon characters, like Hamtaro, on July 26. They modified the song from the cartoon to reflect how the government corrupted the use of tax-payers' money. Furthermore, a student group called the "Bad Student (in Very Good Schools)" launched their "White Ribbon" campaign. Pupils from at least 200 schools across the country, including Bangkok, Ratchaburi, Songkhla, Udon Thani, Roi Et, Khon Kaen, Ubon Ratchathani and Nakhon Sawan, joined the campaign. They raised the three-finger salute^[19] and tied white ribbons to their hair, clothes or belongings to stand in solidarity with anti-government protests during daily morning assemblies where the national anthem is sung. Furthermore, they organised many rounds of protest in front of the Ministry of Education, calling for education reforms.^[20] On 1 December 2020, students successfully promoted a nationwide "no-uniform" revolt. Hundreds of students across the country came out against another conservative and authoritarian symbol of the education system by going to school out of uniform.^[21]

Moreover, other students upcountry also built provincial and regional networks. For instance, students in the north established the Coalition of Lanna Students, while students from various schools in the southern province of Songkhla organised the People's Revolution for Equality and Democracy (PRED). Students in the north-eastern provinces of Maha Sarakham and Khon Kaen set up the Maha Sarakham Students Group and the KKC Pakee Students.^[22] These networks have organised rallies focusing not only on national issues but also problems in their localities.

7. From peaceful protest to confrontation

After several months of retreat during the recent wave of Covid-19, a new round of youth movement protest resumed. Between August and October 2021, a major protest site was concentrated on Din Daeng, a major intersection in the middle of Bangkok. This protest was very different from those earlier in the year in various aspects, including background, demands, techniques and degree of reaction from the authorities.^[23]

Those who joined the protest last year were bright young middle-class people from leading schools and universities, whereas in the recent protests, most of the protesters were the promising youth from families with lower incomes. These were poor youth who had managed to survive but were brought back into poverty because of inept government measures to control Covid-19. Because of their underprivileged family background, the majority left school at a very young age, usually 13-15 years old, and have been strongly suppressed by state authority. Furthermore, as young informal labourers under 18 years old, they cannot access any short-term social welfare or security like adult informal workers, even though their work contributes to lowering the cost of living and sustains cheap services for the hospitality sector in urban areas.^[24]

Against the backdrop of deprived family backgrounds, most worked hard to overcome their impoverished conditions. These youths often take several jobs at the same time: a full-time job during the day, plus part-time jobs like food-delivery services, waitresses in restaurants and so on. Thus, some had already saved enough to move out of the slums and into their own rental accommodation, and to buy motorcycles. Others had even started investing in small businesses. But these initial successes evaporated when Covid-19 hit Thailand. As the majority were young informal labourers in the service sector, they were among the very first to face reduced working hours and lay-offs, and the last to get their jobs back. On top of that, being under 18 years old, they were the last group to access Covid-19 vaccines and tests. Therefore, their chances of getting hired are next to none. If the poor are the hardest hit by Covid-19, it follows that the children of the poor are the worst damaged by it.^[25]

Consequently, the demands of youths at Din Daeng were very different from their predecessors. While the middle-class youths held out for structural change, including a democratic constitution, new elections, and education and monarchy reform, the vulnerable working-class youth want immediate change for their survival amidst the Covid-19 crisis. Their ultimatum is the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. From their point of view, their problems are life-or-death issues and change is urgent; they cannot wait for structural reform. Accordingly, a change of administration is the most effective path forward and could bring about some degree of change in policy.^[26]

These two waves of student movements not only differ regarding class and political demands, but also in protest methods. While the earlier groups struggled to get their voices and their reform proposals heard through peaceful and creative symbolic actions, such as sit-in protests and online petition campaigns, the recent protests turned to confrontational

reactions to state violence. Hundreds of protesters insisted on marching to the Prime Minister's residence in the compound of the First Infantry Regiment of the Royal Guards near Din Daeng intersection, a military and royal restricted area, to call for his resignation.^[27]

Unlike the earlier protests, which had tried every means possible to avoid confrontation with state security forces, the August-October protests marched to stand face-to-face with riot police. As the police scaled up the protest management measures to water cannon and tear gas, and batons and rubber bullets, the protesters responded with catapults, small explosives called "ping pong" bombs, firebombs and whatever rudimentary weapons they could get their hands on. They also destroyed property that symbolises state authority. Some burned tires in the road, smashed CCTV cameras and traffic lights, and torched police booths and the electrical panel of a water pump.^[28] These daily evening confrontations and battles between protestors and Crowd Control Police at Din Daeng continued every single evening for nearly two months. After sundown, the smoke of fire from either side began. Pictures of young protesters in motorcycle helmets flitting through the smoke to fire catapults at the riot police, goading them to come closer, became familiar images on television and live social media; this later earned them the name Talugas group.^[29] In response, the authorities arrested and detained more and more protesters. In October, at least 374 protesters had been arrested, and more than 254 were younger than 18 years old.^[30]

The rationale behind the changes to protest methods is, firstly, their disappointment with the earlier peaceful and civil disobedience methods, which had not been able to push through reforms. Furthermore, an abusive environment, either in the family, school or government structure, unavoidably influenced the approach to conflict management among these youngsters. When they had to deal with their urgent demands and suppression by the state, they turned to confrontation, which they are used to using in their daily lives. While the earlier years saw the protest of intellectual middle-class youth, this year saw the rise of lower income youth taking up opposition.^[31]

8. Conclusion

Alongside their contemporaries in other countries, Thai youth have astonished the older generation with their ingenious political tools and dynamic political activities to promote democracy, equality and social justice. While the middle-class youth made the establishment hear their problems and amused Thai adults with their inventive proposals for structural reforms, the working-class youths revealed their anger and urged the government to take immediate action to solve the problems of underprivileged youth.

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