Thailand: The government wavers, how to overthrow it?

Robert Teller, GAM Infomail 1126, 18 November 2020 Sat, 21/11/2020 - 16:31
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There are many countries that do very well, if not better, without a king. And then there is Thailand, where the hashtag #WhyDoWeNeedAKing is considered an insult to the majesty of the monarch. The protest movement of recent months has already reached a point on this issue that would have been unthinkable in earlier years (for example, the red shirt protests).

In Bangkok schools, the royal anthem is sung every morning by order of the military. The monarchy is not a quaint relic of the past in Thailand, it is closely linked to the ruling political and economic system. The royal house is the largest landowner in the country, holds shares in companies worth billions and supported the two military coups in 2006 and 2014 against democratically elected governments. This bulwark of reaction has now become the talk of the town and the subject of mass protests, despite the draconian penal provisions that shield it from criticism.

Trigger
The current wave of protests was triggered by the decision of the Constitutional Court on February 23 to ban the bourgeois-liberal "Future Forward Party", FFP, which received the third most votes in the 2019 parliamentary elections but did not participate in the government. The ban was justified by judges close to the military by an allegedly illegal party donation of 191 million baht (approx. 5.3 million euros) by the entrepreneur and party founder Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit.

Similar accusations have often been made by the military and the state apparatus against oppositional bourgeois parties or those that fall out of favour and are perceived by the military and royal house as a threat to their privileges. The banning of the FFP shows how much the ruling clique fears popular opposition forces - even if they represent a purely bourgeois programme and, based on the current undemocratic, pseudo-democratic system, have little prospect of a government majority.

The first protests were organised in February by students of Thammasat University in Bangkok. Other universities and schools quickly joined in. However, the actions took place under increasingly difficult conditions at the beginning of the pandemic and could not be sustained after a strict lockdown closed universities and schools.

The protests flared up again in July, however, with the largest demonstrations since the coup of 2014 taking place in highly symbolic locations and at well-known universities. Nor were they limited to the capital city, spreading to at least 20 regions of the country. They expressed a rage over dictatorial measures against freedom of expression and other civil liberties, such as those the junta has been applying since 2014 not only against "red shirts" but against all those who openly criticise the country’s transformation under military rule.
One of many such cases is that of a man from Khon Kaen who wore a T-shirt with the slogan, "I have lost faith in the monarchy". He received an uninvited visit from the police, and when he refused to take off the T-shirt, he was forcibly admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Khon Kaen on July 9. The Student Union of Thailand initiated protests and an appeal that was joined by many others.

Claims
Demonstrators demanded the dissolution of the 2019 recomposed parliament, an end to harassment of opponents of the government and a new constitution to replace the one drafted under the 2016 military junta. But the movement is raising more than just certain basic civil democratic rights. Students protest at their schools against corporal punishment and humiliation by their teachers, students at universities against the current haircut and dress code. LGBTQ activists demand the equality of homosexual partnerships, the revision of textbooks and the recognition of their sexual identity in schools and in public. Women demand the legalisation of abortion.

All these issues have been taboo until now. Under military rule, there was not an inch of room for questioning them. The movement has created this space, and so the inviolability of the monarchy no longer seems to be something "sacred". Yet the demonstrators did not originally openly put the elimination of the monarchy on the agenda. It was to a large extent the government's reaction that pushed them in this direction by blanket accusations that the activists who advocated limited democratic reforms are opponents of the monarchy.

Reaction
The government responds with repression, but also with offers to the opposition in parliament to participate in consultations about possible reforms. On October 15, a state of emergency was declared, all gatherings of more than 5 people were banned, bringing back memories of the coup of 2014. Many well-known leaders of the movement were arrested. The following day, a peaceful demonstration of 2,000 demonstrators at the Pathumwan Crossroads near central Siam Square in Bangkok was broken up with water cannons, laced with irritants and blue dye, as shown in videos. The protest movement responded with unannounced, decentralised demonstrations in order to make repression by the cops more difficult.

Despite the state of emergency and the closure of the metro, some 23,000 people took to the streets on October 17. The repression had misfired and its actions only added to the list of demands directed against the government. Now, the demand was for the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. The demonstrations continued, and after a few days Prayut had to lift the state of emergency. This shows that the government is on the defensive and has no plan. No decision has yet been made, and the government has at least some reserves in its drawer, such as the mobilisation of right-wing, royalist forces who stand up for the old "order", create chaos and call on the military to intervene - to "save the monarchy and order".

On November 17, renewed clashes between the protest movement and police occurred in front of the parliament in Bangkok during a debate on the constitution. On the agenda was the proposal that in future the majority of the Senate, that is, the second chamber, should be elected by the people and no longer appointed by the military. In the Chamber of Deputies, the parties close to the military and the monarchy certainly have a clear majority because of the undemocratic electoral law, so the chances of legal reform are practically nil. No wonder, then, that protests broke out and demonstrators tried to reach the parliament, which was protected with barbed wire, barricades and water cannons. At least 40 demonstrators were injured. 5 suffered gunshot wounds, according to statements by human rights organisations. On the fringes of the actions, there were also clashes with supporters of the monarchy, who reject any constitutional amendment.
The last months have shown the staying power of the protest movement and its popularity, but it has not yet managed to develop the confrontation any further. This is necessary, however, if it is not to end like previous movements. Before we look at the perspective of the opposition, however, let us examine the system it is up against and how it is linked to capitalism in the country.

Government, military, monarchy, capital
Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has ruled Thailand since the last coup in May 2014, and since then the military junta has worked to build a bourgeois-democratic façade that cannot limit the regime’s power. Prayut used the first 5 years as head of the military junta, among other things, to "prepare" the elections in March 2019 in such a way that he could form a government again without having a democratic majority, which would have resulted from universal, secret and equal elections. Under the 2016 Constitution, the entire upper house of Parliament is to be appointed by the military, whereas previously at least half of the seats were determined in elections. This means that the armed forces can block any decision of the lower house.

Thailand’s ruling class is divided and unable to express its interests in a "democratic" form. An important section maintains close ties with the state bureaucracy and the military, including the state and military-controlled industrial sector. Other parts have repeatedly distanced themselves from the state-military apparatus and opposed the government in the mass protests of 2009 and 2013/2014. The ruling military-monarchist bloc, on the other hand, has no socially strong base outside the state apparatus and a certain clientelism. The parties associated with it therefore fear even "normal" bourgeois conditions, that is to say, anything that is not controlled and contained by the military and monarchy.

They are unable to present the urban and rural masses with a credible programme that would integrate them and address their social crisis. The military is therefore dependent on the royal family to legitimise its claim to power. Thus, the government depends on the support of the military and the state bureaucracy. The military sees its power linked to the continued existence of the monarchy and it seems impossible to have one without the other.

One component of the political crisis is thus the inability of the ruling class to shape its political rule in such a way that its various wings, as well as the masses, are democratically integrated. While in bourgeois democracy the "democratic will" seems to rise above the classes as if by itself, the ruling faction of the Thai bourgeoisie remains bound to a pre-modern monarchy in alliance with the military bureaucracy, and thus to quite primitive police-state methods of "mediating" rule to the people.

A second component of the crisis is a social dislocation that has plunged millions into poverty, both in the cities and in the countryside. Thailand’s government may congratulate itself for its successful management of the pandemic, but this "success" weighs heavily on the shoulders of the population. Although the government has provided comprehensive wage replacement benefits, surveys show that half of the households have suffered massive income losses and a majority of informally employed workers receive no support. Tourism has shrunk to zero and the gross domestic product will decline by 8 percent in 2020.

Mass movement and bourgeois leadership
When students from Thammasat University formulated their 10-point programme on August 10, it was undoubtedly a very courageous, and for many, a radical step. They called for the abolition of the criminal law paragraph that penalises any insult to the monarchy or disclosure and control of the royal house’s finances, the dissolution of various state institutions of the monarchy and their "depoliticisation", that is, their separation from the military and its parties.

All of these steps go in the right direction, but each of them will meet with strong resistance from the state
and the military. The crucial question is how this resistance can be overcome. Because the most basic democratic demands have a very radical effect in this country, even bourgeois parties that are suppressed or sidelined by the military can take on a popular role in mass movements. But the conflict between, say, the Shinawatras or Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and the military is only a relative one, not one of differing class interests. Both the former, coup d'état Prime Minister Shinawatra and the liberal opposition politician Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit come directly from the circles of Thai big business.

Thanathorn did not mobilise the masses that are now on the streets, nor does he have a strategy for the movement to break the power of the military. Rather, he warns against any escalation and open confrontation with the ruling regime. He appeals to those responsible to approach the movement. This is not a perspective with which the movement can advance, nor one with which it can even consistently push through its democratic demands. In short, the bourgeoisie is not a revolutionary class, and its political parties cannot solve this crisis. At best, they want a redistribution of power and the benefits of the state apparatus within the capitalist class.

The movement, on the other hand, needs a programme to challenge the power of the military by uniting the protests of students and urban youth with the working class and rural masses and organising them into action committees and councils. It should fight for a constituent assembly prepared and controlled not by the bourgeois state but by committees of the masses. To counter the danger of a coup, the workers' movement should promote its aims among the soldiers and urge them to break with the military leadership if the worse comes to the worst. In the event of a coup, an indefinite general strike should be called.

These measures must be prepared now, and, for this, socialists must fight for the leadership of the movement to prevent it from being sacrificed by its bourgeois leaders in a deal with the state-military establishment. For this they also need a political force of their own, a workers' party, to build on a revolutionary programme that combines the struggle for democratic rights, the overthrow of the monarchy, with that for socialist revolution.

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