

Feminism and the Pro-Democracy Cause in Thailand

Via [Europe Solidaire](#)

Since early 2020, Thailand has witnessed a remarkable wave of political protests, initially triggered by the dissolution of the progressive Future Forward Party [1] and the kidnapping in Cambodia of pro-democracy activist Wanchalerm Satsaksit. [2] Throughout the past year, demonstrations have taken place in many parts of the country, though primarily in Bangkok.

The demonstrators, often gathered as a coalition calling itself the *Khana Ratsadon* or People's Party in homage to the group that replaced absolute monarchy with constitutional rule in 1932, had made three core demands. These include the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha and his cabinet, the reform of the monarchy, and the amendment of the military-drafted 2017 Constitution. [3] Having the courage to discuss and criticise royalism – one of the most tabu-ed topics in Thai society – has set this group of protestors apart from its predecessors.

Beyond noting its bold demands, observers have often characterised this wave of protests as a youth movement. High school and university students have indeed been the main actors. [4] However, the protests are more complicated than they appear. The new *Khana Ratsadon* is a network of many groups – including feminists, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and environmental activists in addition to students. The conversation among protestors about the state of Thailand thus often goes much beyond democracy and reforming the monarchy. It includes other progressive agendas such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights and environmental concerns. The focus of this paper is on the first of those concerns.

The Feminists

The conspicuous roles of young women in this ongoing wave of protests have put them in the spotlight. [5] Unlike in previous rallies, which were often led by males, women are now taking on leadership roles to call for democracy. Simultaneously, they have shared stories of women's struggles in Thai society, focusing particularly on women's status in politics – which has worsened markedly since the 2014 coup. In 2013, Thailand was ranked among the top 65 per cent in Political Empowerment by the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report. [6] By 2021, it had dropped dramatically to the bottom 14 per cent. [7] While the number of women in Parliament rose from 5.3 per cent to 16.2 per cent after the 2019 national elections, both fellow politicians and public attention often target female representatives' appearances or attire, instead of their performance or capability. [8]

Beyond Parliament, women participating in pro-democracy protests have highlighted policies that are products of patriarchy. They have called for an amendment to the new abortion law, [9] increased accessibility to women's sanitary products and an end to sexual harassment in Thai institutions.

While these issues seem to align with a broader call for democracy, feminists in the pro-democracy protests see themselves fighting a two-front war. On one front they demand democracy and an end to the current authoritarian regime, and on another, they fight for gender equality against fellow pro-democracy protestors who do not support feminist objectives.

This piece seeks to capture the perspectives of feminist protestors from the ground. It draws on interviews with two self-identified feminists who actively attended political rallies throughout the past year [10] and seeks to put their experience and concerns into a broader context. The first interviewee, "Fern", [11] is a 27-year-old graduate of one of the country's most prestigious law faculties. She is currently

a legal officer at a state-owned enterprise in Bangkok. The second interviewee, Sai, [12] is a 25-year-old recent graduate of one of the oldest faculties at a well-known Thai university, where she majored in English Literature. She is now working as the manager of a photography school in Bangkok.

Both interviewees participated in their first political protests in 2020. Resentment of and disappointment with the system, triggered mainly by the dissolution of the Future Forward Party in February 2020, motivated them. Sai, who has long been politically active on her Twitter account, said that the Constitutional Court's decision to disband the party was like pouring oil into what was an already heated discussion on the powerlessness of civil society in the online world. "It made us realise that we needed to be louder and turn something into a more concrete form, more tangible than merely complaining on the Internet," said Sai. [13]

As a former law student, Fern was certain that legal principles did not justify the dissolution of Future Forward. Therefore, she was "very disappointed in the legal processes. As a law student, I know the principles. I knew how the result was supposed to be. Thus, I was very saddened and angry when I saw the actual results". [14]

Fern has not had to think twice before joining the on-street protests since then. Seeing herself as both a Thai and a global citizen, she wants to contribute her time and energy to make Thailand and the world a better place. "I call for democracy and systematic changes not only for myself but also for those who don't have the resources of time, energy and money like me. Thus, I have to be as loud as possible," Fern explained. [15]

Similarly, Sai has become a frequent participant in the pro-democracy movement. She sees herself as a contributor to making the crowds larger and stronger. "I felt that just being there was already a significant contribution," said Sai. [16]

Protests of diversity

While political objectives like democracy were the reasons that Fern and Sai initially joined the street protests, both women quickly realised that people in the movement had diverse backgrounds and were expressing their agendas loudly – whether on the streets, on the stage or in the online world. The movement offered “space where people from different groups could join. They came to speak up about their agendas”, said Sai. [17]

People who stepped up onto the stage to talk to the crowd did not only talk about democracy or critique the monarchy. They also each represented their own social group. At the Sanam Luang protest on 18 September 2020, for example, the pool of speakers was diverse, including LGBTQ+ activist Chumaporn “Waddao” Taengkliang, environmental activist Prasitchai Noonuan, Bad Students Network leader Lapanapat “Min” Wangpaisit, and Chatchai “Champ” Pumpuang of the Designers Labour Union Network. [18]

On the streets, an iconic feature of this wave of protests was an event called “Mob Fest”, where different social groups came together and set up booths to promote certain agendas through presentations, discussion and performances. [19] This arrangement made the demonstrations look like a festival. [20] Protestors could drop by to participate in campaigns and learn more about various social issues at Mob Fest.

One of the most prominent campaigns was the #AnonymousMeetingPoint (#ไม่เปิดเผยชื่อMeetingPoint), organised as a collaboration among several feminist and LGBTQ+ groups. The campaign designated several locations where women, LGBTQ+ people and youths who attended the protest alone could meet up and find company. The locations helped ensure that these protestors would be safe while attending the demonstrations, [21] while simultaneously signalling that

women, LGBTQ+ people and young people did not feel safe when alone.

Other campaigns represented at Mob Fest often focused on collecting signatures to introduce or amend laws, with goals such as legalising prostitution, [22] amending abortion laws, proposing the Clean Air Act, [23] and even legalising craft beer in Thailand. [24]

At a glance, the active participation of feminists and the promotion of many social issues at protest venues seemed almost out of context with protestors' core demands for Prayut's resignation and reform of the monarchy.

To explain this phenomenon, Cornell University Professor Tamara Loos points out that "In effect, the demonstrations have become avenues for young people not just to refuse royalism but also to demand the right to nonconformity". [25]

Loos argues that nonconformity in the context of Thailand and specifically in that of ongoing protests offers "critiques to the status quo hierarchy and refusal to conform to traditions on all levels". [26] In other words, apart from just the military and the monarchy, the demonstrators challenge all institutions they perceive as authoritarian. In her view, "every aspect of these protests is something broader than explicitly political; their message is to refuse to conform to existing cultural norms, which only reinforce the status quo hierarchy". [27]

Fern's and Sai's thinking corroborates Loos's views. The two Thai feminists believe that the protests are not just a fight against individual institutions. Instead, they are a battle against authoritarian, hierarchical traditions that define many institutions in Thailand. Fern notes that, apart from the authoritarian government, she is also fighting against the "gender hierarchy and male supremacy" that have long been part of Thai society. [28]

Despite the vibrant diversity of protestors, participants in the demonstrations have not accepted all agendas equally. Feminists find themselves being challenged – often by their fellow pro-democracy protestors.

“Many protestors support democracy but do not agree with feminists!”

As with any massive social movement, clashes have arisen among pro-democracy protestors. On many occasions, they have pitted feminists against non-feminists.

Fern shared that “sometimes, male leaders on the stage would use words that connote female inferiority... something like ‘a pussy face’, as insulting phrases”. [29] Many of the people in attendance, especially feminists, felt offended and would reply, “do NOT insult a pussy!” She explained that “while it is quite common in our culture to use phrases involving genitalia as insulting or curse words, we have to understand that, in a certain context, it’s oppressing women”. [30]

Speakers at protests have made these concerns explicit. At a protest at Chiang Mai University on 18 October 2020, for example, Kornkanok “Pup” Kamta, a representative of the Feminist Liberation Front, [31] called for a new protest culture by encouraging people to stop using terms such as ‘pussy face’ or ‘prostitute’ as insults. [32] Pup said that “a pussy is not something to insult, and prostitution is a legitimate profession”. [33]

Apart from agendas related to women, feminists also support the campaign for LGBTQ+ rights. That is because, “for feminists, the term feminism is not about ‘women being the best or better than men’. Instead, it means ‘all genders are equal on all matters’,” said Fern. [34]

Thus, when John Winyu Wongsurawat, a popular and charismatic pro-democracy TV host, discussed the legalisation of same-sex marriage on his programme Daily Topics and remarked that “If

the rights of the common people are not here yet, LGBTQ+ rights are unlikely to come”, his comments sparked anger from both LGBTQ+ people and feminists. [35] Many have pointed out that his words suggested a hierarchy of concerns. This stance contradicts his pro-democracy principles.

John Winyu is an example of what feminist pro-democracy protestors call ‘Leftist Thai men’. [36] Emerging from discussions on Twitter, the term refers to men who support democracy but “do not seem to understand and support gender equality”, explains Fern. “And when we raise some points that, to us, are clearly the product of patriarchy, they think that ‘feminists are so annoying and never happy about anything’”. [37]

Sai notes that “feminists are portrayed or painted as the demanding folks. So, many times, people don’t even pay attention to what we have to say”. She goes further to compare the image of feminists to that of ‘sa-lim’, a term referring to people who are against pro-democracy protestors. “If sa-lim are seen as those who would always yell their lungs out for whatever they think was right and not bother to listen, they [leftist Thai men] probably see us [feminists] in that way as well”. [38]

Democracy and gender equality

John Winyu’s opinion is not rare. In fact, some pro-democracy protestors share his thinking. They hold that democracy should be the priority, and gender equality can come later. Fern and Sai disagree and ask in effect, “why can’t we drive for multiple agendas at the same time?”

“Democracy is not about just raising hands and voting, but it comes with rights, freedom, equality, and solidarity,” said Fern, who sees that gender equality clearly falls under the democracy umbrella. [39]

Feminists’ biggest enemy, they argue, is patriarchy, which

exists as the core of many institutions in Thailand – from family, school and the military to the royal institution. [40] It is the invisible element that affects everyone’s lives in one way or another, including those of men. In an interview with a Thai online news media outlet, The MATTER, LGBTQ+ activist Waddao said that “First of all, we have to understand that patriarchy does not, in any way, stand for men”. [41] Men can also be victims of patriarchy through “toxic masculinity”. [42] Thus, Waddao suggested, an end to patriarchy would also benefit men.

Feminist pro-democracy activists often bring up the example of King Vajiralongkorn’s polygamous practice. In July 2019, the monarch officially appointed Sineenat “Koi” Wongvajirapakdi as his “noble consort”. [43] He thus revived a tradition that had not been witnessed in Thailand since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. [44] The king later used his power to demote and then reappoint Koi with just the snap of his fingers. [45] These events exemplified not only the king’s power but also the status of the Thai monarchy as a patriarchal institution.

Examples like this one explain why, to feminists, patriarchy is an unavoidable topic in the fight to reform the monarchy.

Paths forward

Despite the clear link between gender equality and democracy, feminists still feel stuck in relation to their fellow pro-democracy protestors. Fern and Sai share the opinion that democracy seems to be more easily achievable than gender equality because patriarchy and gender inequality are deeply rooted in human history. [46]

The struggle for democracy in Thailand often involves physical confrontations with authorities. They have cost many people their lives or their freedom. Democracy is undoubtedly not an easy thing to attain. Thus, “democracy is more achievable than

gender equality” is indeed a noteworthy message, revealing the multi-layered struggles that feminists are facing.

Nevertheless, Fern and Sai try to remain understanding. Sai admits that the fracture over feminism among protestors is a tough issue but not an unexpected one. “Of course, there must be conflicts. There is no way that everyone, even among those who want democracy, would agree 100 per cent on everything”. [47] Fern adds that “It is impossible to make everyone think the way I do. If I say that I want everyone to think like me, then I’m a dictator. Wouldn’t it be ironic then?” [48]

Fern and Sai also understand that, as patriarchy has long been part of society, the patriarchal mindset can be difficult to alter. Fern says that “the more we [feminists] push back, the more likely changes would happen. I cannot say that they [leftist Thai men] would understand, but at least they would know the consequences of their words and actions”. [49] Revisiting John Winyu’s case, she says that, “after the incident, John Winyu might not immediately understand the complicated gender issues, but, at least, he is now more aware of how his comments on LGBTQ+ people can cause a backlash”. [50]

Sai shares a similar thought. “We just have to keep talking out loud”. She sees democracy in two forms – one in the system and the other one in the mindset. “A democratic system can be achieved through reformation, but that doesn’t mean that everyone will automatically have the true ideas of democracy – equality, listening to one another, and empathy – installed in their mindset. The democratic mindset can happen if we keep educating one another, so we shouldn’t be tired of raising awareness on gender issues and pushing against patriarchy; this is going to be a long journey,” she says. [51]

Feminist and non-feminist protestors in today’s Thailand have a common enemy – the authoritarian regime, which – one

prominent activist scholar contends – has shown “no signs of ...willingness to negotiate with democracy”. [52] Consequently, Tamara Loos notes, maintaining a kind of strategic uniformity from within will help them achieve their common goal. [53] Disagreements are likely to always happen and criticism to be voiced, and the protestors will have to remain empathetic, to keep raising awareness, and to educate one another.