

International

# Thailand protesters challenge monarchy as protests escalate

## Protesters install symbolic plaque near Grand Palace

**BANGKOK:** Openly challenging the monarchy of Thai King Maha Vajiralongkorn, thousands of protesters marched in Bangkok yesterday to present demands that include a call for reforms to curb his powers. Protesters have grown ever bolder during two months of demonstrations against Thailand's palace and military-dominated establishment, breaking a longstanding taboo on criticising the monarchy - which is illegal under lese majeste laws.

The Royal Palace was not immediately available for comment. The king, who spends much of his time in Europe, is not in Thailand now. The marchers were blocked by hundreds of unarmed police manning crowd control barriers. Protest leaders declared victory after handing police a letter detailing their demands. Phakphong Phongphetra, head of the Metropolitan Police Bureau, said on a video broadcast from the scene that the letter would be handed to police headquarters to decide how to proceed.

"Our greatest victory in the two days is showing that ordinary people like us can send a letter to royals," Parit "Penguin" Chiwarak, told the crowd before it dispersed. At the biggest demonstration in years, tens of thousands of protesters on Saturday cheered calls for reform of the monarchy as well as for the removal of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, a former junta leader, and a new constitution and elections.



### Thousands march to hand over demands

cemented a plaque near the Grand Palace in Bangkok in the area known as Sanam Luang, or Royal Field. It reads, "At this place the people have expressed their will: that this country belongs to the people and is not the property of the monarch as they have deceived us."

Government spokesman Anucha Burapachaisri said police would not use violence against protesters and it was up to the police to determine and prosecute any illegal speech. Bangkok authorities would need to determine whether the plaque is illegal and if it is it would need to be removed.

Bangkok's deputy police chief Piya Tawichai told reporters. Far from all Thais support the new plaque, which resembles one that had commemorated the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 and which was removed from outside a royal palace in 2017, after Vajiralongkorn took the throne.

Prominent right-wing politician Warong Dechgitvigrom said the actions of the protesters were inappropriate and that the king was above politics. "It didn't achieve anything," he told Reuters. "These actions are symbolically against the king, but the king is not an opponent." Thai authorities have said criticizing the monarchy is unacceptable in a country where the king is constitutionally "enthroned in a position of revered worship".

Protests that began on university campuses have drawn increasing numbers of older people. That includes red shirt followers of ousted populist prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra who had clashed for



**BANGKOK:** Anti-government protesters take part in a pro-democracy rally in Bangkok yesterday. —AFP

years with pro-establishment yellow shirts before Prayuth seized power in 2014. "The new generation is achieving what their parents and grandparents didn't dare. I'm very proud of that," said Somporn Outsa, 50, a red shirt veteran. "We still respect the monarchy, but it should be under the constitution."

Protesters say the constitution gives the king too much power and that it was engineered to allow

Prayuth to keep power after elections last year. He says that vote was fair. The next protest is scheduled for Thursday. Protest leaders called on Thais to take Oct 14 off work to show their support for change. "Radical change is hard in Thailand, but the movement has at least kept the momentum going," said Titipol Phakdeewanich, dean of political science at Ubon Ratchathani University. —Reuters

### Symbolic plaque

Shortly after sunrise yesterday, protesters

## Iran victims of Iraq gas attack say horrors are a warning

**SARDASHT:** Thirty-three years have passed, but the survivors of an Iraqi poison gas attack on the Iranian town of Sardasht still suffer - and fight for international recognition of the horrific massacre. "If someone lost a leg or an arm in the war, you can put a prosthesis on him," said Saleh Azizpour, who heads an association for victims of the attack. "But when our lungs are burned, who will breathe for us?" he asked.

Tehran on Monday commemorates 40 years since Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein attacked Iran, launching a war that raged for eight years. Iraq's June 28, 1987, gas attack on Sardasht, a Kurdish town in northwestern Iran, is considered to be the first time chemical weapons deliberately targeted civilians in an urban area. "The dead and wounded range from a three-month-old to a 70-year-old man," Azizpour said. "All were civilians."

The official toll is 119 dead and 1,518 wounded. But, according to Azizpour, who was 25 in 1987, many more were affected. Some 8,000 people were exposed to what experts say was mustard gas and many who survived are struggling with long-term health complications. "Even today, there is sometimes so much pressure on my lungs... that I really cannot sleep," said Mahmoud Assadpour, a 50-year-old teacher.

The impact of the novel coronavirus, which has hit Iran hard, is a threat to survivors, said Rojane Qaderi, a doctor who heads Sardasht's public health network. "As their immune system is weak... their chances of survival are low," Qaderi said. Survivors of the attack are asked to stay in their homes for protection against the virus.

### 'As if in a cage'

"We are at home, we do not go out, it is as if we are in a cage," said Mohammad Zamani, 59, who remembers hearing "muffled bangs" as the gas canisters dropped. His wife, Leila Marouf Zadeh, was a volunteer nurse. She recalls cries of the wounded at the field hospital begging

for help, many people that she knew. The skin of some victims turned red from burns from the incapacitating gas. "Some had crimson breasts, others, their whole bodies," she said. But after a few hours helping the survivors, she too felt the stinging impact. The gas had blinded her temporarily.

Rassoul Malahi, a retired farmer who uses an artificial respirator to breathe, tells a similar story. He was left "totally blind" for 18 days. "The consequences of mustard gas are permanent," said Qaderi. "It affects or destroys the lungs. You have to learn to live with it." The list of symptoms include sore and swollen eyes, red and itching skin, as well as a shortness of breath, difficulty in moving and exhaustion, she said. Now there is an extra problem. Since the United States reimposed crippling sanctions against Iran in 2018, it has been hard to find the drugs needed for survivors.

### International silence

Saddam Hussein began using chemical weapons against Iran as early as 1982. But it took the UN Security Council until 1986 to deplore the "use of chemical weapons" in the conflict. Even then, it avoided singling Iraq out specifically for blame. The same phrasing was used after the attack on Sardasht. Survivors say the feeble response from the international community was tantamount to complicity in the attack. The UN Security Council's five veto-wielding permanent members - Britain, China, France, the US and, in 1987, the Soviet Union - all supported Iraq.

Several Western companies and governments are accused of having contributed to Iraq's chemical weapons program in the 1980s. Today, the town of Sardasht has more than 46,000 inhabitants - compared to nearly 18,000 in 1987 - mainly Sunni Muslims from the Kurdish minority. The town, with modest flat-roofed homes built on the slopes of a hill, is surrounded by farmland. At first sight, there seem few signs of what happened. Only a commercial building, its upper floor gutted by bomb damage, offers a clue.

### 'Rotten garlic'

At the time, Iraqi warplanes frequently dropped bombs on the town, a short distance across the border into Iran. People remember the deafening explosions they made. But that June afternoon, when gas canisters



**SARDASHT:** Photo shows a general view of the Hiroshima street, in Sardasht in Iran's West Azerbaijan Province. —AFP

were dropped on four different neighborhoods, they fell without making the usual terrifying bang. "I saw white dust that smelled like rotten garlic," Zamani said. He knew what it was, because he had seen it while a soldier at the front in 1984. "I was the first to say it was a chemical bomb, because I had experienced it before at the front," he said.

But others did not believe that poison gas could be used against civilians. So they did what they had been told to do to stay safe during conventional bombing raids, they took cover on the spot or in underground shelters. But the toxic gas swiftly penetrated them. Some realized what was happening and ran, like Ali Mohammadi, now 56, a street seller of cheese. When he returned a few hours later, he found a nightmarish scene. "In front of the Red Crescent building, the corpses were all piled up," he said, his voice choked up at the memory.

### 'A symbol'

When Saddam Hussein was captured in 2003, Assadpour said he was "happy". But he was "disappointed" to hear the deposed dictator was executed without being put on trial for his gas attack on Sardasht. In 2005, Marouf Zadeh provided moving testimony in a Dutch court during the trial of Frans van Anraat, a businessman found guilty of selling the chemicals that Iraq used in the deadly gas attacks. —AFP

## What is Thailand's '112' royal defamation law?

**BANGKOK:** Thailand's monarchy is protected by one of the world's toughest royal defamation laws, making any criticism of the powerful King Maha Vajiralongkorn all but impossible inside the country. Some student leaders have called for the abolition of the laws as a pro-democracy movement gathers steam, with thousands expected to protest Saturday to demand reforms to the monarchy.

### What is the '112' law?

Under section 112 of Thailand's penal code, anyone convicted of defaming, insulting or threatening the king, queen, heir or regent faces between three and 15 years in prison on each count. But the law is routinely interpreted to include any criticism of any aspect of the monarchy - including content posted or shared on social media. The harshest punishment so far? A man was sentenced to 35 years in jail in 2017 for a series of Facebook posts and comments about the royal family.

### How is it enforced?

Anyone can make an accusation under the law and authorities are bound to investigate. There is no transparent disclosure of the official number of lese majeste complaints, arrests, charges or sentences - only an inconsistent trickle of information from authorities. But the use of 112 has risen dramatically since a 2014 coup by the arch-royalist military. According to legal aid groups, just six people were behind bars on lese

majeste convictions before 2014. That number skyrocketed in the following five years, with 169 convictions. Those charged are almost always convicted. But if they plead guilty, sentences are often halved.

### Why so many cases under the military?

Legal observers and rights campaigners say 112 and other laws like the Computer Crimes Act and sedition, have been used to target dissent in Thailand. The ultra-royalist military has long used its self-appointed role as the defender of the monarchy to justify coups and political interventions. But critics say it has used the cover of protecting the monarchy to stifle political opponents and tighten its hold on power.

UN special rapporteur David Kaye urged the regime in 2017 to stop 112 prosecutions, saying such laws "have no place in a democratic country". The use of 112 has slowed recently. Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha - leader of the 2014 coup - said in June that the king had requested the government to "refrain" from using it. But it isn't just the military - self-appointed ultra-royalist civilian groups also monitor the web and report alleged 112 violations.

### What can be punished under 112?

Prosecutors have dramatically widened what counts as defamation of the royal family in recent decades to include social media and satire. An anti-junta activist was convicted in 2017 after posting a news story on Facebook, even though more than 2,000 others had shared the same article. His two-and-a-half-year sentence was cut short when the king pardoned him last year. One man was prosecuted in 2015 for satirical comments he made about the then king Bhumibol



**BANGKOK:** A masked figure, stained with fake blood, is left hanging from a tree in Bangkok yesterday, following an overnight pro-democracy rally in Sanam Luang. —AFP

Adulyadej's favorite dog. There is no comparative research that shows which countries use royal defamation laws the most, but historian David Streckfuss says Thailand has been "the leader" since 2006 when it comes to its prosecution rate.

### Can the media report on it?

Domestic and international media must routinely self-censor their reporting of lese majeste cases and the monarchy in general, or risk prosecution. Detailed reports on issues such as the list of recent demands from pro-democracy protesters could put reporters at risk. Readers who share the news could also face prosecution, and even repeating or summarizing the details of 112 charges could be interpreted as a violation. —AFP

## More than 30 Taliban killed

**KABUL:** The Afghan air force conducted multiple strikes on Taliban positions Saturday that killed more than 30 insurgent fighters, officials said, as President Ashraf Ghani once again called for a ceasefire. The Taliban claimed the strike had killed nearly two dozen civilians including women and children in the latest mass-casualty incident in Afghanistan that came even as peace talks were under way in Qatar.

"This morning, Taliban fighters attacked (Afghan army) positions in ... Khan Abad district in Kunduz province," the Defense Ministry said in a statement on Twitter. The military "intercepted the attack in accordance with 'active defense' procedures," the statement added, noting that more than 30 Taliban fighters including two commanders were killed. In a statement, the Taliban denied its fighters were hit and said 23 civilians had been killed. The defense ministry said it was aware of the claim and would investigate.

Local hospital director Mohammad Naem Mangal told AFP that three dead and three wounded civilians had been brought to the facility. The attack came shortly before Ghani once again called for a humanitarian ceasefire "to protect our people, prevent violence and terrorist incidents and to achieve a dignified and lasting peace." The insurgents have so far ignored such requests, though they have unilaterally called two short, separate truces this year in the run-up to peace talks, which opened a week ago in Doha. Talks have progressed slowly so far, with the two sides still undecided about an agenda. —AFP

## Lebanon Christian party offers idea to resolve dispute over cabinet

**BEIRUT:** A party founded by Lebanon's Christian president made a proposal to end a dispute that has blocked the formation of a new cabinet and threatened a French drive to lift the country out of its worst crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. The proposal, put forward on Saturday, involved handing major ministries to smaller sectarian groups in a country where power is shared between Muslims and Christians. There was no immediate comment from officials in Shiite Muslim groups, who have insisted they choose who fills several posts. Lebanon's efforts to swiftly form a new government have run into the sand over how to pick ministers in a country where political loyalties mostly follow sectarian religious lines.

A Sept 15 deadline agreed with France to name a cabinet has passed. Paris, which is leading an international push to haul Lebanon back from economic collapse, has voiced exasperation and told Beirut to act "without delay". The leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, the party founded by President Michel Aoun and allied to Hezbollah, proposed "undertaking an experiment to distribute the so-called sovereign ministries to smaller sects, specifically to the Druze, Alawites, Armenians and Christian minorities".

The statement was issued after Gebran Bassil, the party leader and son-in-law of the president, chaired a meeting of the party's political leadership. Bassil is a Maronite, Lebanon's largest Christian community. Prime Minister-designate Mustapha Adb, a Sunni Muslim under Lebanon's sectarian system, wants to shake up the leadership of ministries, some of which have been controlled by the same factions for years. —Reuters