

THAILAND: Tensions are rising and the ball is in Prayuth's hands

- The government still seems to want to pursue a calibrated response to the protests, rather than suppression.
- There are possible two triggers for a hardline government response over the next few months: the continued increase in the movement's size and internal pressure from royalists.
- While the risk of a violent confrontation within the next few months cannot be discounted, the risk is higher at the end of the year or early next year, rather than in the next few weeks.
- Also worth watching are possible movements within the monarchy.

So far, the government's response to the weekend protest remains relatively muted. The police intend to file lese majeste charges against the organizers, which are more serious than the sedition and illegal gathering charges that they previously used. However, suppression of the movement in the streets and schools does not yet seem to be forthcoming. On the side of the protesters, they also appear to be pursuing calculated escalation, rather than a quick rush to confrontation. Therefore, while political tensions will continue to rise, the possibility of violence seems to remain in check.

The key variable now is whether the government will change its strategy in dealing with the protests, given the two data points added by recent events: the unambiguous demand for reform of the monarchy and the visible participation by groups of Red Shirts, the movement associated with former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. These decisions are made without much public discussion, so a change in the tolerance level of the government for the protests will not have much signaling.

On the Red Shirts

As background, the police have over the past few weeks been very vocal about their assumption that the risks to social order from the streets are manageable because most of the participants are students and the youth, who they believe are neither willing nor able to generate unrest as the Red Shirts did a decade ago with their monthlong demonstration.

This view is informed primarily by events of 2010, when the Red Shirts converged in Bangkok on 14 March and then moved to the central Ratchaprasong shopping district on 3 April to force a confrontation. The first attempt to clear the protesters was on 10 April, which resulted in a series of smaller, rolling battles until the main dispersal in mid-May that saw substantial violence in central Bangkok. So far, the current movement does not yet seem to have a similar plan for occupation.

The Red Shirts are sympathetic that some of its members joined the rally. But these appear to be initiatives at the individual and group level, not as an organization. Based on their statements, Red Shirt leaders – or at least those who remain — seem to recognize that open and formal affiliation could give conservatives more leverage to push Prayuth to respond

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more forcefully, as well as alienate voters new to the opposition or protest movement, such as those who supported Future Forward and Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit. The possibility of the Red Shirts joining and becoming a substantial component of the movement is still several months away at least, which makes it likely that their visibility during the weekend will only marginally affect immediate policy towards the protests.

Reform of the monarchy

More disquieting for elite factions that support the government may be the prominence given during the weekend to demands for the monarchy's reform. The institution has for decades benefited from the reverence accorded to King Bhumibol Adulyadej, based on the carefully crafted and protected narrative that all his actions have the interest of the Thai people in mind. Therefore, while he wields little formal power, this has made it difficult to challenge acts done in his name by the military or the government.

The protesters want even his limited powers curbed, now and palace finances audited, possibly even clarifying the funding for the institution and separating the king's wealth from public assets. For the royalists, this outcome would be a defeat; therefore, even now, they may be pressuring Prayuth on the issue, more than the need to deal with the Red Shirt involvement.

Where the risks are

For now, the government appears to be still able to be holding to its line that the movement will eventually peak and weaken, unable to expand beyond its current base. Therefore, the main risk is if the movement continues to visibly grow, expanding beyond the students and the youth to including rural residents, and possibly lower-income groups in the city and the middle class.

The United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, which led the weekend protest action, has called for a general strike on 14 October, to coincide with the 1973 uprising that led to the downfall of the military dictator Thanom Kittikachorn and which turned the student movement into a political force. If the strike is even moderately successful, it will reinforce the view that public support for the movement is growing outside of the students, possibly dangerously so.

Then the internal clamor for Prayuth to act is likely to increase, setting up the possibility of confrontations on the streets and of intensified legal or police action against the movement's leaders near the end of the year or early into 2021. This may be affected by the pace of the economic recovery, which is likely why the government will aim for more fiscal spending, including the plan to subsidize companies that hire 2019 and 2020 graduates – fertile recruiting grounds for the opposition.

An alternative but less likely scenario is for the students to prematurely adopt the 2010 strategy of the Red Shirts and attempt to disrupt daily life and commerce in Bangkok. So far, the students have shown an unwillingness to be confrontational, and an early turn towards this strategy in the next few months would be a signal of desperation and of the movement having peaked.

Finally, there is a risk that could emerge not from the streets but from within the monarchy. King Maha Vajiralongkorn's succession had been smoother than expected, but, as [we had warned years ago](#), the risk of a disruption to the balance of power in the monarchy may continue well into his first few years because of the possibility that he may fritter away the goodwill left by his father. He has spent much of the past few years in Germany, often traveling to Thailand only for special occasions, and pictures of him are often circulated in an embarrassing cropped tank top. Not coincidentally, opposition leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit last week highlighted how the palace has 38 aircraft. If Vajiralongkorn's continued stay proves untenable because of his unpopularity, then monarchists may plan for another succession, either of his more popular sister, which is difficult because Thailand has never had a female monarch, or of his son, with his sister as regent.

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