



Thailand: Respect free speech and right to peaceful assembly

(Jakarta, 13 August 2020) – The Government of Thailand should end its intimidation and judicial harassment of pro-democracy activists, and respect the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, said Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) and Asia Democracy Network (ADN) in a joint statement today.

On 13 August, plainclothes officers surrounded the residence of student activists Panusaya Sithjirawattanakul and Parit ‘Penguin’ Chiwarak, prompting concerns that they would be arrested for organising and participating in recent protests. After several tense hours, the authorities eventually held off their operation. A week prior, police arrested pro-democracy activists Arnon Nampa and Panupong Jadnok under eight charges including sedition and violation of the Emergency Decree.¹ The two were granted bail for 100,000 Baht (approximately 3,200 USD) under the condition that they do not organise and participate in rallies.

‘These tactics employed by the government demonstrate its continuing repression of student protests over recent months. Instead of clamping down on protesters, they should listen to the concerns of the youth, and enable an environment where everyone can participate in public debates and express their views without fear,’ FORUM-ASIA said.

More than 2,000 participants attended a July 18 rally held at Bangkok’s Democracy Monument – the biggest gathering since prohibitions against protests were lifted. The rally organised by youth organisations Free Youth and the Student Union of Thailand, sparked similar demonstrations all over Thailand. Dissatisfied with the current state of democracy, these youth-led movements posed three demands to the Government: the dissolution of the Parliament paving way for a general election, the creation of a new constitution, and the end of state-sponsored harassment against its citizens.

Prior to his arrest, Arnon Nampa had called for a revision of current policies on the monarchy, and to ensure these comply with the principles of a constitutional monarchy, under a democratic society.² Student protesters expanded this call into specific demands towards the Government.³

‘Such calls for reform are unprecedented in today’s society where these discussions are widely frowned upon. The Government should, however, enable a space where free expression is respected,’ the two organisations said.

¹ <https://www.tlhr2014.com/?p=20236> (Thai)

² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-protests/thai-protesters-openly-criticize-monarchy-idUSKCN24Z2JY>

³ <https://prachatai.com/english/node/8709>

Free Youth also released an alleged leaked police document which appeared to contain the names of 31 Thai pro-democracy activists, including Arnon, Panupong, Penguin and Panusaya.⁴ While this led to concerns that more arrests would be forthcoming, the police has denied any involvement with the said list.⁵

Authorities have attempted to suppress these growing protests. Youth organisers in Chiang Mai were charged for allegedly violating the Emergency Decree.⁶ Student protesters in Phrae and Maha Sarakham were threatened that they would not be allowed to graduate if they joined or organised protests⁷. Youth protesters in Phitsanulok were arbitrarily detained by plainclothes officials prior to their planned protest⁸. Students attending these gatherings have also raised concerns of increased surveillance.

‘We support the Thai youth as they demand for the expansion of civic space in their country, which is the only rightful trajectory after the 2019 General Election. We request that the Government remove all impediments against the free expression of Thai citizens, listen and positively act on these calls to realise a meaningful, genuine transition to democracy in Thailand,’ said the Asia Democracy Network.

‘As a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Thailand has an obligation to protect the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. We call on the Government to end its judicial harassment against these protesters and take genuine steps towards enabling a space where citizens are free to question and criticise their government, without fear of reprisals or surveillance,’ said the two organisations.

The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is a regional network of 81 member organisations across 21 Asian countries, with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council, and consultative relationship with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights. Founded in 1991, FORUM-ASIA works to strengthen movements for human rights and sustainable development through research, advocacy, capacity-development and solidarity actions in Asia and beyond. It has sub-regional offices in Geneva, Jakarta, and Kathmandu. www.forum-asia.org

The Asia Democracy Network (ADN) works to promote and advance democratisation and democratic governance at all levels of society through effective solidarity and cooperation among civil society organisations and democracy advocates in Asia. ADN is committed to building a just, equitable and sustainable community of democratic societies in Asia, where all human rights of all individuals, groups and peoples are fully respected and realised. www.adnasia.org

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⁴ <https://mgronline.com/online/section/detail/9630000081099> (Thai)

⁵ <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/news/crimecourtscalamity/2020/08/10/police-wont-comment-on-wanted-list-of-activists/>

⁶ https://www.tlhr2014.com/?p=20071&fbclid=IwAR3p4PGaL9MmjsUFMWqwn8lpWslpm0q0EzdkFD9rCMVQ8EnkYRG09tFN_Es (Thai)

⁷ <https://www.thebangkokinsight.com/400353/> (Thai)

⁸ <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2020/08/10/anti-govt-protesters-detained-given-attitude-adjustment-in-jungle/>

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