



Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Thailand's simmering political discontent

Description: Protesters returned to the streets of Bangkok in late 2021 – after a hiatus due to COVID-19 restrictions – with anger over curbs to civil and political rights as well as calls for reform of the Thai monarchy. In response, Prayut Chan-o-cha's government has sought to quell the pro-democracy protests by restricting and monitoring internet use, and by ramping up enforcement of lèse-majesté laws. Analyst of Thai politics Dr. James Gomez joins presenter Jane Hutcheon to decipher the complex political landscape of the predominantly Buddhist nation. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

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Voiceover:

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Jane Hutcheon:

Hello, I'm Jane Hutcheon. This is Ear to Asia.

James Gomez:

So in Thailand, what we see is a pattern that is becoming regular in the region - the rise of hate speech, hate sites, as well as the use of this internet gateway, one stop turning off the internet tap, so to speak, as emerging ways young voices on the internet or social media will be controlled.

Jane Hutcheon:

In this episode, Thailand's simmering political discontent.

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute. The Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

In late 2021, protesters returned to the streets of Bangkok after a hiatus due to COVID-19 restrictions. As before, there was anger over curbs to civil and political rights, including limits on free expression. But added to the mix were frustrations with the government's handling of the pandemic, as well as calls for reform of the Thai monarchy.

The current administration led by former military general, Prayut Chan-o-cha, who in 2014 toppled a democratically elected government, has sought to quell the pro-democracy protests by restricting and monitoring internet use and by ramping up enforcement of lèse-majesté laws.

Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist nation of 70 million people. It's no stranger to political quarrels and protests in recent decades. But what's the backdrop to the latest round of public anger, who are the protesters, and what are the issues, economic and political, they seek to question. Joining us to decipher Thailand's complex political landscape is Dr. James Gomez, regional director of the Bangkok-based think tank, Asia Centre.

Dr. Gomez, welcome to Ear to Asia.

James Gomez:

Thank you very much for having me here.

Jane Hutcheon:

James, Thailand from a news perspective appears relatively quiet at the moment. What's happened to the mass anti-government protests that rocked Bangkok last year?

James Gomez:

We had protests starting in August 2021. The trigger was really the constitutional court's verdict to dissolve the Future Forward Party. That took almost a few years in the making, following the last elections. As a result, it brought youth and students onto the streets, not only to protest the constitutional court's verdict, but also calling for several points of reform, both in terms of the constitutional amendment, a reform of the monarchy, and also called for the prime minister to resign.

Now, that has been a good six months ago. Things have quieted now, because the attention now has been to Thailand's slow reopening of the borders. And a lot of the attention has been focused on that. And in particular, to a recently concluded Bangkok governor elections.

Jane Hutcheon:

So do you think the reopening of borders is going to make much difference in terms of protest activity?

James Gomez:

On the contrary, I think it may enhance protest activities because a lot of the protests were muted on the back of emergency decree that were continuously renewed. We see that as Thailand, like many other countries in the region and beyond, approaching the pandemic situation in relation to the virus and the easing of border controls, it will also mean an easing of social distancing, crowd sizes in public transport and in the street. As a result, the parameters are there once again for public activities, including street protests.

Jane Hutcheon:

James, I'd like to look at the broader political landscape first. You mentioned a short time ago, the Future Forward Party. Take us through the major power players in Thai politics. Let's start with some of those parties. What is the Future Forward Party?

James Gomez:

Now, the Future Forward Party is one of the new parties that came on back of the previous elections that was in the 2018. It appealed to the young, as opposed to the older generation. And most of its supporters have been socialised through the internet and social media, in particularly.

So you have a lot of young candidates essentially trooping towards the Future Forward Party. It's very attractive for young candidates to run on the party list, as well as for young voters. So to some extent, it has become really the third wheel in Thai politics, compared to traditional political parties, such as the Palang Pracharath, which is in power now with the coalition. And the other one that was founded and led in many forms by Thaksin Shinawatra, currently in its form as the Pheu Thai Party. So I would place the Future Forward Party in a strong third position and likely to remain there in the foreseeable future.

Jane Hutcheon:

You talk about that party being a party of young people. Essentially, the other two big forces in Thai politics would be the monarchy and the military. Let's talk about the military first. How is their influence being exerted at the moment?

James Gomez:

The military is essentially an old boys club. We can't just look at the military. I think by extension, we will also have to look at the police force. It's sustained through its large budget. It's one of the largest sort of military budgets and police budgets anywhere in the world, and comparatively also in the region. It's got huge resources. It also has the Thai Military Bank, for example, just to demonstrate how extensive it is; it purchases a lot of military equipment and increasingly also looking at partnerships with China to build submarines. So the military is all encompassing and its role is also to support the monarchy. In many of the royal projects, you will find the military forces are dispersed. Even in municipal projects, such as the building of a very well known park in Bangkok, you will see young military cadets and soldiers being deployed to do public works and contribute to just literally the bureaucracy, as well as the processions associated with the monarchy, and even sort of infrastructure development project. So the military in that sense is omnipresent in many, many aspects of Thai society.

Jane Hutcheon:

And I'm guessing for young men, it would be a draw card in terms of putting down roots for a good future.

James Gomez:

Well, one has to make a distinction between rank and file, and of course, the elite military officers in power. I think in terms of its popularity, I think many young men, and Thailand now has a draft system for national service, do try their best to get out of. It's not something that people rush into. Of course, it also helps alleviate poverty, makes contribution towards jobs. So especially youth from the provinces, may for a moment, for some years, veer towards a career, or just being with the military. But I don't see it as something very popular among current day youths in Thailand.

Jane Hutcheon:

Right. So you've summarised for us the role of the military in Thai society. Take us through the business elite. One gathers that this is largely ethnic Chinese, is that correct?

James Gomez:

Yes. To understand the contemporary business strength of the Thai Chinese elite, and also what I would call Thai Chinese privilege, I think we need to understand the Thai Chinese in the context of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia. And the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia have been coming for many years, but especially after the Boxer revolution in China, there was an out migration. Colonialism also added on to the buoyancy of migration into the region.

However, they have had a difficult journey. Throughout Southeast Asia in the '60s, the Chinese community were vilified because of their business acumen. The schools that they set up to facilitate the continuance of Chinese culture, Chinese language, these were burnt down. Many Chinese businesses were forcibly closed in countries like Indonesia. And Thailand. The Chinese couldn't adopt or use their Chinese name. They had to sort of change it to make it sound local.

So the Chinese community had difficult challenges, but over the period of six decades, they made a radical transformation, both in terms of the economic success, they were able to rehabilitate the role of the Chinese diaspora within the psyche of the Southeast Asian community. And in many cases, in almost all cases, they've managed to occupy elite and privileged positions in many of the communities in Southeast Asia. But it has been a hard journey and hard slog, but they have arrived.

So to understand contemporary Southeast Asian politics, we need to look at one, their journey, how they got there, and their current role. And I think in the Thai context, they're very important. And we have to sort of see it from a perspective of Thai-Chinese privilege in Thai society.

Jane Hutcheon:

So approximately, how large would the Chinese Thai business elite be, 10% to 15% of the population, do you think?

James Gomez:

In terms of demographics, it's about 11% to 14% in Thailand, but of course, the business elite, it's a dozen families or less that occupy key business from pharmaceuticals, to property development, to food processing. Some of it is mix and match. And these are the big influences in Thai politics, and also increasingly into the bureaucracy.

Jane Hutcheon:

And one would presume too, that they are pro CCP, Chinese Communist Party.

James Gomez:

Well, again, this is not something that has happened overnight. Again, we will have to see the evolution. So who spoke to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia? The country that spoke to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia for the last six decades were the Taiwanese. The Taiwanese gave scholarships to the diaspora community because they were nurturing, support. Apart from scholarships, they also contributed financially to the setting up of Chinese language vernacular schools, including providing a curriculum, a design, sometimes teachers, and also supporting community activities through the Taiwan Economic and Cultural Office, their defacto embassies across the region.

But over the last two decades, the Chinese community across Southeast Asia, Thailand included, have pivoted towards China. Partly because of the business elite connection. They see China as a big market. So they want to sell their products in China. China also actively courts these big businesses because it also wants to do business and also wants to have influence. The Chinese diaspora generally has a positive view about China. They are sending their children to China to pick up Mandarin. And China has also contributed financially to the setting up of Confucius Institutes around the region. Thailand in particular has almost above 40 Confucius Institutes, one of the largest in all of Southeast Asia. And also, the setting up of Chinese studies, programmes and departments in several of the key universities in Thailand.

Jane Hutcheon:

So we are walking through the Thai political landscape with Dr. James Gomez. James, we have another wheel that we haven't spoken about yet, and that is the Thai monarchy. In 2022, how strong is their attachment still to the country?

James Gomez:

Having been in Thailand, in and out for about 20 years, the way I understand the monarchy is how it has been socialised and grafted onto Thai society. Now, if we look at Rama IX, the late King Bhumibol, he was in the throne literally for 60 years. And most of the adult population in Thailand were socialised positively about the monarchy. Mostly through mainstream media, through announcements over radio, or when they go to the cinemas, before a film is shown everybody has to stand up to this short video about the monarchy. And as well as through processions, celebrations, commemorations that are all nationwide. So we had over 60 years of traditional media socialisation, and a lot of the affection and solidarity around the institution comes from this very uninterrupted, singular socialisation on the status of the monarchy, and its value and contribution to Thai society.

But I think to understand the monarchy's place in contemporary society, and especially to understand why young people in Thailand, as manifested by the protesters and when they called out for a reform of the monarchy, I would put it down to the fragmentation of the socialisation around the institution of the monarchy a la the introduction of the internet in the beginning and the metamorphosis into social media. So you will see the young people over the last 20 years were not subjected to a single socialisation message

from traditional media. Their socialisation experience is fragmented and continues to be fragmented in many, many ways.

Jane Hutcheon:

So how big a fault line is the role of the monarchy to these younger people in Thailand and the protest movement?

James Gomez:

I think because young people are socialised differently and for them, the monarchy is not the centre, there's a divide between their parents and grandparents and the young people. So the political values are different, the aspirations are different. So that is why when you look at new political forces, such as the Future Forward Party, they're supported by the young, the protestors are young led. Whereas the counter forces, the royalists who also turn up at these protests tend to be much, much older. If you just look at the videos and so on, you will see the generational divide. So I would say that the internet, social media, young people will be the key forces for change in the next years, visibly the Thai political system or any other changes we envision in Thai society.

Jane Hutcheon:

What has been the impact of the lèse-majesté law, known as Section 112 of the Criminal Code, which I believe a lot of the protesters simply refer to as 112?

James Gomez:

It's an important tool for the current government. And also, it's used during the coup to criminalise any form of criticism against the institution of the monarchy or any other action deemed offensive. And there has been a lot of criticism both domestically, internationally in the disproportionate use of Section 112. But over the last few years, we see that there's an additional law that is being used – the Computer Crime Act.

The Computer Crime Act is targeted at internet users, usually young people. And you will see most of the protestors who have been hauled in and are in jail or seeking bail, the offences usually centre around infringements of the Computer Crime Act. What it means is, the content that they post and they share and they distribute over social media in order to mobilise numbers, to strengthen their push, and calls for reform is seen as criminal. So you will find that young people are increasingly criminalised because of the stuff they post. And increasingly, a lot of young women who are also becoming not only members of the protest movement, but also leaders.

Jane Hutcheon:

And how is this then policed in terms of the Computer Crime Act? I hear that there's around 1,800 people who've been prosecuted from participating in the protests. Has that number then hugely increased because of their online activities?

James Gomez:

I think the numbers have peaked because I think we also need to understand how the changes that are occurring in how content distribution over social media is being policed. The traditional way, and this is what we have seen in the last few years, has been to use law and to criminalise action. Now, this is not only cumbersome in terms of the human resource needed, weighs down on the court. And it takes a lot of time to identify someone, to criminalise them, and take them through the due process. So increasingly, governments are shifting. So governments' approach now is not to prosecute the numerous infringement of content distribution online, but increasingly, to turn off the source. So a not too recent example; in Myanmar, it was just literally turning off the internet.

So what Thailand has done or is thinking of doing is to kind of follow what Cambodia has done. Cambodia has passed the National Internet Gateway, where it has the option to exercise a one stop solution. So

whenever there are protests or a spike on internet dissatisfaction, it can turn it off. Thailand is now discussing amendments to the Computer Crime Act to introduce something similar, like a National Gateway, so they can turn it off at source. So we need to look at this, changing landscape control.

The other tactic that we need to keep in mind is the rise of hate sites, or information operations. Now, it takes place at two levels. One, it takes place formally; usually an element in the secret service, or the military. There's enough public information that the Thai military runs information operations against protestors and critics of the state, or the powers that be. So that's one. And then of course, you have the hidden hands of cyber troopers who also set up hate sites or troll protestors, including female protestors and activists online. So what we see is a pattern that is becoming regular in the region. The rise of hate speech, hate sites, as well as the use of this internet gateway one-stop, turning off the internet tap, so to speak, as emerging ways young voices on the internet or social media will be controlled.

Jane Hutcheon:

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I'm Jane Hutcheon, and I'm joined by seasoned analyst of Thai politics, Dr. James Gomez. So James, do you think this scene of mass protestors on the street, have we seen the end or are we seeing the end of that?

James Gomez:

We can't say for now, because what we need to look for is the trigger, the signs of the trigger. If we go back to the last round of protests in August '21, the trigger was really the constitutional court dissolving the Future Forward Party. So now, there are a couple of things that we need to look at in the Thai political landscape.

Firstly, is the results of the elections, the Bangkok governor elections that literally concluded just last week. Some of the interesting features about the election was there were about 4.4 million registered voters. The turnout was about 2.6 million. But the lead candidate got nearly 1.4 million votes above 52%, he is Chadchart Sittipunt, who was formally with the Pheu Thai Party, but ran as an independent. Now, we'll have to see whether he is allowed to run the full term and whether he will face any challenges. So that's one trigger.

The second trigger is how the current government will respond to the call for more governor level elections for the other provinces.

And finally, we will see what is the run up environment to the next elections, which are, on paper, supposed to be called next year, 2023. If we look at this election as an indication of popularity, we can see that the current ruling party, the Palang Pracharath, is nowhere to be seen in terms of its vote check. So what will it do to continue to stay in power? Another coup, or would it annul any political party or leader who's written legibly through the poll results? When such actions are taken, they will cost the trigger. So we'll have to look out for that. And given that we are opening up in Thailand, we will see the rise in protests for sure, if the conditions trigger it.

Jane Hutcheon:

James, what's the attitude towards the Prayut government at the moment?

James Gomez:

It continues to be a generational thing. One, it's seen as not legitimate in the eyes because it came on the back of a coup, and the fact that the Future Forward Party was dissolved and the leader is no longer able to officially participate in politics because there's a time limit on when he can come back. So those are the

issues that make many in Thailand and youth in particular unhappy with the status quo. Until such time I think they feel confident that they can trust the electoral process, I think the angst among the younger voters will remain.

Jane Hutcheon:

James, let's move on to talk a little bit about the media. You talked about the growing use of social media, the crackdown on the internet. How is the mainstream media faring at the moment and who do they support?

James Gomez:

Media is very much fragmented. It's mostly gone digital. So a lot of the media is online. In fact, many don't even have a website. They are simply social media pages on Facebook and other iterations over other social media channels, and we have a range of it. Some of them are purely business concerns, others have political backers. And we have a plethora of such sites in Thailand and their reach is limited. So what we have is really not mass media, but really niche media, mostly in Thai, but increasingly also in English language over social media.

Do they have political influence? It's hard to say because, they are so fragmented. But at the same time, it's a generational thing. TV and cable TV continue to have sway, especially in the provinces and also among the older generation. So we continue to have messages of government, information about royal family activities. These are put across cable and free to air TV.

But we also need to look at the role of external forces. China is also a player here. It takes air time in some of these media outlets, its offices – especially from embassies – would sometime appear on TV programmes at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was some concern around the Sinovac vaccine, and you have embassy officials speaking in Thai from China, trying to dissuade the Thai public, that this criticism of the Sinovac vaccine were really efforts of the minority and really the vaccine was okay. So I think this other dimension of foreign interference or malign influence also need to be considered when we talk about media and how the Thai public may be socialised.

Jane Hutcheon:

And so, presumably, it's the older generation that I suppose adheres to, listens, is the audience for state owned media.

James Gomez:

Yes, they are. It's also a form of entertainment; talk shows, variety shows, sitcoms, the whole lot. So the message comes in a variety of form, but over this traditional media platforms.

Jane Hutcheon:

We spoke a little bit before about the regions. I wonder, in terms of the protest movements, to what degree is the dissatisfaction limited to Bangkok and the other larger cities?

James Gomez:

Traditionally, there's been a lot of dissatisfaction in the Northeast, because it's a poorer area. A couple of decades ago when Thaksin was in power, he came on the back of populous policy and a lot of support comes from the Northeast. Bangkok being the capital, has traditionally had a lot of support. You have in the south, Chiang Mai, so on and so forth.

So I wouldn't say that it's limited to only certain provinces. I would say it's fairly widespread. In the height of the red and yellow shirts protest, we could see that many provinces had their own sort of satellite protests. Even when the students took to the streets in August 2021, there were pockets of protests in different provinces. With social media, the transmission of information is instant. There's no digital divide

because internet penetration over mobile phones... In Thailand, many of the members of the public use Lime, Facebook is also popular. So information spreads like wildfire. It touches every part of the country.

Jane Hutcheon:

I'm guessing misinformation spreads like wildfire too.

James Gomez:

Oh, absolutely. And here, I think the Computer Crimes Act once again plays a part. But what is different here in Southeast Asia, Thailand included, is unlike 2016 and 2018, the Brexit incident in the UK, and also in the rise of Trump in the U.S., fake news then was directed at traditional mainstream media. Traditional fact based media was accused of peddling fake news, and this was Trump's main line of attack.

Over here in Southeast Asia and Thailand included, the attack is on activists, critiques of the state. So civil society, activists, academics, opposition politicians, the media, journalists in particular, they are bearing the brunt of the state led fake news attack. Now, the concerning element really is, will fake news become the official narrative? Because if the political powers that use fake news to attack legitimate critiques and they win and come into power, like in the case of a recently concluded elections in the Philippines, then the real danger is fake news can become mainstream, into the body politic, and the state itself stands on fake news. And I think that's the danger and concern in Southeast Asia, that fake news will become national news.

Jane Hutcheon:

Yes, it seems that's a problem battled in pretty much every corner of the globe at the moment.

Jane Hutcheon:

James, we couldn't leave any discussion of Thai politics without talking about the former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. He's currently in exile. Is he still pulling strings in Thailand? Is he likely to make, not of reappearance obviously on Thai soil, but in the elections to be held next year?

James Gomez:

Thaksin continues to engage in Thai politics from afar. He has often done a lot of live videos, especially over YouTube and Facebook, and these are watched by thousands. But what many people don't know is that he has a huge following over Clubhouse. So when he opens up a Clubhouse room to chat, there are literally thousands and thousands that sign up to his Clubhouse chat. So he continues to be influential. Although, I think he tries to be strategic and not make any direct intervention. I think he will continue to monitor. I think he will wait to be rehabilitated. We are not sure how this would be done, whether he will receive some kind of pardon. If he does receive that, or if he's rehabilitated in some way, legally speaking, then there's a good chance that he may come back. But I think at the same time, there are enough political forces here in Thailand that want to keep him out. So it remains to be seen, but he's active.

Jane Hutcheon:

How far has the government of Prime Minister Prayut, come to give the sense that he has de-militarised his administration?

James Gomez:

I think effort certainly has been made from moving away from wearing military garb, to civilian, and setting up a political party and being in government, in partnership with other smaller political parties. But because the role of the military is so central for many years, particularly because of the military coup, the military as an icon continues to be very, very visible in people's eye. And any form of political reform that involves the military or opens a back door for the military to come back by way of a coup would be not seen as true reform.

So I think you can't shake off the military garb, so to speak, from Thai politics. Prayut certainly can't do that either. So the grafting of the military imagery around Thai politics, going to remain for some time. And this is why people are calling for a rewriting or the drafting of a new constitution, because one of the things they're looking for is towards Indonesia. Although not ideal, but to kind of keep the military in the barracks, so to speak, and not have them come back in any form to the centre of politics.

Jane Hutcheon:

We hear about Buddhism and the Buddhist community. What's their part in Thai politics at the moment, and how do they see this growing discontent in the youth of Thailand?

James Gomez:

Buddhism, like the monarchy, is very central. The monarch is the patron of Buddhism. The monarch appoints the Buddhist patriarch. And the monarch is also the defender of the faith and the Buddhist institution. The constitution provides for this and also requires the king to be a Buddhist. So the role of Buddhism is fairly central.

However, its practise is waning. And one has to sort of see it in perspective with Europe. If we see that Christianity and Catholicism is on the decline, towards a more sort of secular outlook, then we are seeing similar processes happening around Buddhism. Now the elites, the Thai-Chinese in particular, prefer not to send their children to enter monkhood. They rather send their kids overseas to do an intensive English language course or something like that, rather than send them to a two week monkhood or a month's monkhood. That is the trend.

If you walk around Thailand, in any city centre, in any province, as early as 5:30 or 6:00, you'll see the monks are out and seeking alms. But unfortunately, they seek alms from the poor, because it's the poor that are out at 6:00 AM, getting their street stalls ready or getting their market stalls ready. So alms are literally collected from the poor, because the rich, they are not up yet, and shopping malls open after 10:00 or 11:00. So these are structural observations one has to look at in terms of what's happening with Buddhism.

In terms of symbolism, it's still there, very much there. But we can see this creeping threat of secularisation and disinterest. Again, it's generational. It's not unique to Thailand. And that's why I mentioned that to understand Thailand, what's happening with Buddhism and the young people, one just has to look at Europe.

Jane Hutcheon:

Fascinating insight into the jigsaw puzzle, I guess you could say, that is Thailand today.

James, do you get a sense that the mood for change in government is approaching? Are we on the edge of transformation there?

James Gomez:

I think it'll be incremental. And often, we look at societies such as Thailand purely in a domestic manner. We look at their key institutions, we look at citizens. But for someone who has looked at Thailand, both inside and outside over a couple of decades, what is also unspoken is the indirect influence of the tourists, who number in a good year, before COVID, at 45 million. So I think the type of people who come to Thailand, the money they spent, the values they bring in, and their interaction with Thai society, it's also a form of impact on how Thailand would change.

I briefly mentioned about China. China is one of the largest sender of tourists. Chinese people invest very strongly in Thailand. They send their children to universities here, both in English, Chinese, and Thai language. They buy properties. They invest in business. They make the largest number of tourists in Thailand, plus tourists from other parts of the world. The tourists from India is expected to increase to about half a million in latest figure projections. So I think the values they bring, both culture and political, will also be something to watch in terms of how Thai politics and society would evolve.

I think what we need is informed engagement with Thailand and Thai society. And I think it's also important to call out some of those negative dimensions that may affect not just Thai people, but human beings at a whole. I think as the world shrinks, as people travel post-pandemic, many countries unashamedly say that they are waiting for the return of the tourist dollar. Then I think the tourist also has a role to play, because if his or her dollar is important, then I think that dollar can be used for good.

Jane Hutcheon:

Well, James Gomez, I think that's a fascinating tour of Thailand, the political landscape and beyond that we've done here today on Ear to Asia. Thank you so much for your time.

James Gomez:

Thank you, Jane.

Jane Hutcheon:

Our guest has been Dr. James Gomez of Asia Centre, a think tank based in Bangkok, Thailand. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne, Australia. You can find more information about this and all our other episodes at the Asia Institute website. Be sure to keep up with every episode of Ear to Asia by following us on the Apple podcast app, Stitcher, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts. Please rate and review us, this helps new listeners to find the show, and put a good word in for us on social media. This episode was recorded on the 30th of May 2022. Producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel of profactual.com. Ear to Asia is licenced under Creative Commons copyright 2022, the University of Melbourne. I'm Jane Hutcheon. Thanks for your company.