

THE BIG INTERVIEW

112WATCH interviews scholar, Anusorn Unno, on the royal reform and the role of academics in raising the lèse-majesté agenda in Thailand

112WATCH: The protests kicked off in mid-2020 and lasted until the end of 2021, but seem to have died down. In your view, what did the protesters achieve, particularly in the context of the royal reform? Will there be a prospect of the return of a new round of protests?

Anusorn: The protests might have been in decline or “died down” since the end of 2021 or even since the end of 2020 if we take big rallies as an indicator. However, it might not be the case if we take into account the “spirit of defiance,” the varied continuity or transformation of the protests, and especially the impacts which become protests in themselves.

For the “spirit of defiance,” it is evident that rather than dying down as big rallies did, it remains vibrant or even becomes stronger resulting from harsh measures on protesters. This spirit on the one hand manifests in various and creative forms and on the other hand awaits contributing factors to emerge in large-scale protests. This answers to the continuity of the protests which take various form by various groups of people including previous generations, as seen in such activities as “stand, (to) stop, imprison,” “car mobs” and “Ratsadornprasong fund.” Not to mention the emergence of radical youth groups specifically focusing on royal reforms.

For the impacts, although the protests did not achieve any demands especially the royal reform, Thai people’s especially the younger generation’s stances toward the monarchy have fundamentally changed. Few people stand still when the royal anthem was played in movie theatres. The number of graduates attending the commencement decreases. These are the impacts which became protests in themselves. Not to mention the results of the poll on monarchical topics, which are in line with the protests’ stances. What the protests achieved is therefore the awakening of Thai society particularly with regard to the monarchy.

As such, although there is no prospect of the return of a new round of protests in the near future, due primarily to harsh suppression measures as well as the movement’s new strategy resulting from a lesson learned among protest leaders, defiance against the old regime centring on the monarchy remains vibrant and manifests in various forms including electoral politics. The next general election will be a decisive battle.

112WATCH: How essential are royal reforms? Whether it is possible at all?

Anusorn: Royal reforms are definitely essential primarily because current political crisis centres on the monarchy, and it cannot be settled unless the monarchy undergoes reform. Conservatives’ movements like the PAD and the PDRC on the one hand and the military coups on the other associated themselves with the monarchy in toppling down elected governments. Besides, royalists in collaboration with state authorities employed Article 112, the Thai lese-majeste law, in suppressing the dissidents. These led Thailand to a deeply-divided society, and we are in an urgent need to solve it. The question is therefore how to conduct royal reforms, or to partly answer your question, how to make it possible.

I think maybe we might want to think of the monarchy as a social institution, not just a political actor. Besides laws and state apparatuses, it involves worldviews, beliefs, and values. This means that it is not easy to get it reformed according to our intention as it is relatively independent of human will or determination. But as a social institution in general, it is subject to change, which takes place independent of human will and determination as well. Judging from what I said earlier regarding the impacts of the protests, the monarchy as a social institution is undergoing a fundamental change and no one is able to stop it.

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That way and strategically speaking, royal reforms need to be thought or designed in line with such a change, either in terms of issues and means or with regard to timing and milieus. They need to focus more on socio-cultural terrains, not just political spheres which have not been open yet. It is possible to get the monarchy



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reformed, but it takes viable and proper strategies and tactics.

112WATCH: Given that most of the protesters are students, urban-based, and some are even minors, what are the key elements if they want to succeed in carrying out street protests?

Anusorn: “Successful” street protests in Thailand are rare, and they are dependent on contributing factors which are not comparable or even contrary to current student or youth protests. On the one hand, the “student uprising” in 1973 was led by an umbrella organisation under an overarching political ideology. Particularly, the reason why it resulted in the military’s stepping down has a lot to do with royal intervention. Likewise, the military’s stepping down after the May 1992 Incident was largely due to royal intervention. Current student movements are different as they are loosely organised and orchestrated with no umbrella organisation or overarching political ideology. Importantly, their key demands are royal reforms.

On the other hand, people’s or grass-root movements in the 1990s especially the Assembly of the Poor were strongly organised, carried out activities in their localities, and had their demands tied to the ways they earn their livings. Particularly, their demands were not to change the regime, but to have the regime accommodate their demands. Current student movements differ as they are not organised or operate in these ways. Importantly, they want to change the regime, not to have the regime accommodate their demands.

Considering contributing factors of these “success cases,” current student movements are not likely to succeed in doing street protests, except that they are able to launch a “popular uprising,” which is not likely to happen in the near future. However, given their organisational natures and their demands in conjunction with contemporary socio-political contexts, street protests might not be a key to success either. Rather, the key elements lie in cultural politics especially when taking into account the monarchy as a social institution. These include creative socio-cultural activities in which more people can participate for other purposes and do politics simultaneously.

112WATCH: How to tackle the problem of the increasing use of lese-majeste law?

Anusorn: The use of lese-majeste law or Article 112 is on the rise primarily because those in power think that, when compared to harsh measures, it is a legitimate measure to suppress the dissidents. It is simply law reinforcement. Besides, they are also confident that this legal tactic is effective as the judiciary is on their side or under their control. The dissidents will surely be punished, and later will refrain from committing any challenges to the establishment. Sadly but true, several cases confirm these. The more this legal tactic proves effective, the more it will be used.

To tackle this problem, I think the first step is to delegitimise it. One should point out that Article 112 contains problems too severe to be called a law. To use it then cannot be called law reinforcement in the first place. Particularly, when combined with how it is intentionally used to suppress the dissidents, it is a politico-legal tactic not in line with the rule of law principle.

The second step is to make it less effective. While it remains difficult to change the judiciary from inside, it is possible to affect it from outside. Activities such as “stand, (to) stop, imprison” should be constantly conducted and international supports should be continually sought. With these various forms of pressure, the use of Article 112 will be less effective than intended. However, while this front is being fought, dissidents need to be more cautious in expressing their grievances. They should not let this legal paw maul themselves unless it is necessary or worthwhile.

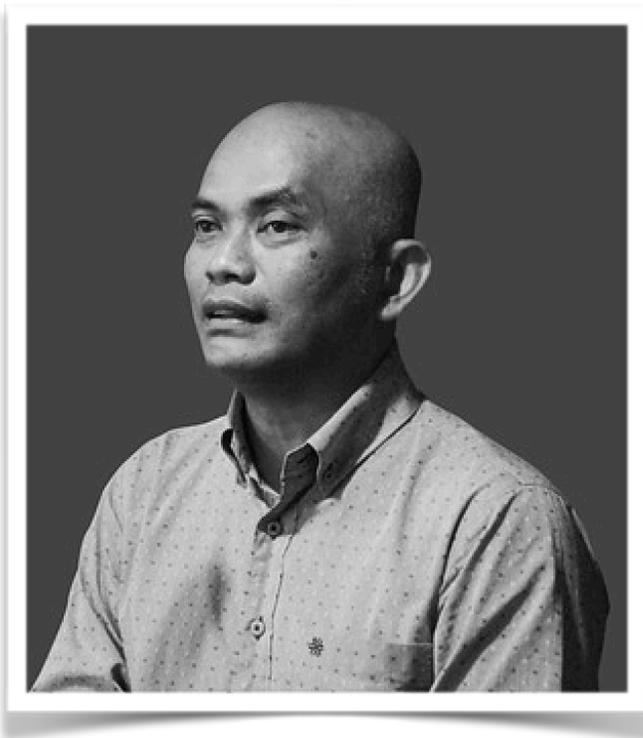
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112WATCH: You are an academic based in Thailand? What role can academics do in terms of raising the critical issue of royal reforms and the abusive use of lese-majeste law?

Anusorn: Given legal tactics plus harsh measures against the protesters especially the ordinary ones, academics need to play roles more vigorously. Basically, we can hold academic talks on these issues. Although we have held academic talks on Article 112 for a couple of times, we still need to hold them more. The purposes are not only to point out that the law is full of flaws and conducive to abusive use, but also to provide a relatively safe channel for the dissidents to express their grievances.

This applies to royal reforms. We actually planned to hold academic talks on royal reforms long before. But due to the spread of COVID-19, we have postponed it for more than two years. Now on-site activities are allowed plus the number those faced with legal charges regarding the monarchy is increasing, I think it is time to hold academic talks on royal reforms. We should be able to discuss royal reforms openly and safe using academic institutions and

discourses, otherwise we will never find a way out of the political crisis. Besides, we may launch campaigns on these issues. Although about ten years ago we launched a campaign on the amendment of Article 112 and did not succeed, we can do it once more but maybe in different ways. We, individually and collectively, can also join campaigns and activities organised by other groups that address Article 112 and royal reforms. And we should make use of our "special" social status, its downside set aside for a while, to push the issues forward and seek support of people across Thai society even the conservatives, primarily because to tackle problems regarding the monarchy as a social institution involves Thai society as a whole.



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