Thailand - Pro-democracy Protests

Why in news?

Thailand is witnessing protests for months, with protestors targeting King Maha Vajiralongkorn as well as Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha.

How did the protests start?

- Opposition politician Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit was disqualified as a Member of Parliament in 2019 after which a ban was put in place on his party Future Forward.
- Anti-government protests began after the disqualification.
- Notably, the party was largely supported by the youth of Thailand.
- It was also the most vocal party opposing the government of former junta leader Prayuth Chan-ocha.
- After a pause during measures to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus, protests resumed in mid-July 2020.

Who are the protesters?

- Most of them are students and young people and there is no overall leader.
- Key groups include -
    - the Free Youth Movement, which was behind the first major protest in July 2020
    - the United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, a student group from Bangkok's Thammasat University, which has championed calls for monarchy reform
    - the Bad Student movement of highschoolers, which also seeks education reform
- Most protest leaders are in their 20s although one of the most prominent figures, human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa, is 36.

What are their concerns?

- **Monarchy** - Pro-democracy activists say Thailand is backtracking on the constitutional monarchy established when absolute royal rule ended in 1932.
- They say the monarchy is too close to the army and argue that this has undermined democracy.
- **Elections** - The current ruler, Maha Vajiralongkorn, became king in

December 2016.

- Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha came to power through a coup in 2014 that is said to be endorsed by the king.
- Protesters complain that the king endorsed Prayuth's premiership after elections in 2019.
- Opposition figures say the elections were engineered to keep his hands on power.
- Prayuth, however, says the election was fair.
- **Powers** - Protesters also want to reverse a 2017 increase in the king's constitutional powers.
- Besides these, protesters have also voiced anger that the king spends much of his time in Europe.
- They have also challenged the spending of the Palace and lifestyle of the king, who has been married four times and last year took a royal consort.
- ***Lese majeste laws*** - Protesters also seek the scrapping of *lese majeste laws* against insulting the king.
- They want the king to relinquish the personal control he took over a palace fortune estimated in the tens of billions of dollars, and some units of the army.

What do the Lese majeste laws mean?

- The lese majeste law protects the monarchy from any criticism.
- The monarchy is protected by Section 112 of the Penal Code.
- It says whoever defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent shall be jailed for 3 to 15 years.
- In June 2020, Prayuth said the law was no longer being applied because of "His Majesty's mercy". [The Royal Palace has never commented on this.]
- But Rights groups say opponents of the government including the protest leaders have recently been charged under other laws such as those against sedition and computer crimes.
- The government has said it does not target opponents but it is the responsibility of police to uphold the law.

What do the protestors demand now?

- The protestors call for Prayuth's removal, a new constitution and an end to the harassment of activists.
- Some protesters went further with a list of 10 demands to reform the monarchy.
- Protesters say they do not seek to end the monarchy, only reform it.
- However, conservatives are horrified by such attacks on an institution the constitution says is "enthroned in a position of revered worship".

What is the government's response?

- The government had earlier said protests would be tolerated but that they must keep within the law.
- But that changed suddenly after it accused protesters of obstructing Queen Suthida’s motorcade and as thousands gathered at Government House to demand the removal of Prayuth.
- The government imposed emergency measures banning gatherings of more than five people in Bangkok.
- It forbade publication of news or online information that could harm national security.
- It also freed up police to arrest anyone linked to the protests.
- The Royal Palace, meanwhile, has made no comment on the protests and the demands for reform despite repeated requests.

Source: The Indian Express

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