

## **Demonstration on public streets during the Covid-19 Pandemic**

A revolution with pro-democracy movements is what is really happening all over the world in 2020 as well as the spreading of coronavirus disease (Covid-19). Thai people have been forced to live under the control of the junta government or military dictatorship. When Covid-19 began to abate in the country, demonstrators of all ages gathered together to fight against the authoritarian government and call for a return to Democracy; this nationwide situation is known as the Free People Movement or Free Youth. The issue comes up with a critical question “Is it safe to protest during the Covid-19 pandemic?” The answer varies with two different aspects as follow;

The first aspect is that the demonstration should be resumed because freedom of speech is a human right. Thailand is officially a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy. Under the democratic system, the power of decision-making lies with the citizens. Everyone should have the power to voice out what they really want or a proposal for equitable changes. Not only the citizens but also the state have a role in supporting freedoms.

By the offences against the internal security of the kingdom, Section 116 Thailand Penal Code in Thai Criminal law states that whoever makes an appearance to the public by words, writings or any other means which is not an act within the purpose of the Constitution or for expressing an honest opinion or criticism in order:

1. To bring about a change in the Laws of the Country or the Government by the use of force or violence;
2. To raise unrest and disaffection amongst the people in a manner likely to cause disturbance in the country; or
3. To cause the people to transgress the laws of the Country, shall be punished with imprisonment not exceeding seven years.

As of now, unlike the official-stated system, there is a lack of human rights, especially the right to freedom of opinion and expression. The law and the corrupt justice system has been weaponized by the military to serve the ruling class and destroy the less fortunate. Opinions against the government are under strict control and censorship. Consequently, many dissidents are arrested, threatened, attacked and harassed into silence, just because they have called for democracy and reform of the Monarchy. These responsible correspondings come from the problem with section 116 that must be solved immediately. Therefore, with human rights, nobody needs to suffer because they speak the truth.

According to Amartya Sen, expansion of freedoms is a foundation of development. People should be enabled to live more freely within political freedoms, economic equipment, social opportunities, clarity

guarantees and security. With the capability approach, the main focus of poverty eradication is no longer a single issue of income. On the contrary, Sen's theory seems to be opposed to Thailand's system. Many people say that paying numerous taxes to improve the quality of life in return is not worth it at all. Some of them do not even have enough money to gain a better quality of life. Economically speaking, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Thailand is facing the economic fallout. From the publication of the World Bank in June, "Thailand Economic Monitor June 2020: Thailand in the Time of COVID-19," the country's gross domestic product (GDP) is anticipated to decline by at least 5 percent this year. Over ten million people are at risk of losing their jobs; the unemployment rate is expected to be increased. These problems could lead to a higher level of poverty. Being tired of Thailand's economic and social hierarchy, protesters refuse to tolerate the cruelty and incompetence of the rulings any longer. This comes as a protest for a wellbeing economy of the country.

The purpose of this demonstration is to ask the government to consider three requests from Thai people. First, the government must dissolve the parliament and re-elect the new government members who really come from people's voices. Second, the government must redraft the constitution to be more fair. Third, the government must stop threatening Thai people who try to make a comment or speech about their opinions on the government's fault.

Together with the Covid-19 situation, the government uses the spreading of virus as the reason to extend the emergency decree. With violent street protests and military coup, some critics say that it is actually used to stop any protest against the government. They claim that the use of emergency powers to restrict rights of protesters should not become effective because the risk of democracy being destroyed may be much higher than the risk of getting Covid-19 and dying. Similar to the Black Lives Matter, protesters have formed a social movement emphasizing basic human rights and racial equality for Black people. From an article on VOX published by Brian Resnick, a health communications researcher Aisha Langford points out "For people of color and black folks, their cost of not doing something is a lot greater than potentially getting a virus....If I'm quiet, and I do absolutely nothing, I could die because I exist." Living as a black person in America is a risk factor for dying. In this case, compared to Thai Democracy, the risk of being shot and killed by a police officer may be much higher than the risk of getting Covid-19 and dying as well.

By the theory of ball and cup resilience, if the citizens want to create changes, they need to have adequate energy towards continuous efforts. A weak energy does not create any change and does not make it to lead the level of threshold, so that the ball will go back to the cup which is the new normal. Once there is continuous push, the threshold will be reached and finally the citizens can make a new change. To call on Thai government to take actions to follow the demands of its people and bring back

democracy, students and Thai people who fight for their rights and freedom need both strong and continuous efforts to make it happen.

From the book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* by Albert O. Hirschman, the responses to the institution are related to the current situation. In general, the more attempts to repair or improve the relationship through communication of the complaint, grievance or proposal for change, citizens tend to be active and constructive. In other words, the action is to “voice” out towards those who have authority over that institution even though there is a possibility to either win or lose. The reason why they want a change is because they are not satisfied with the rules of the game.

On the other hand, the second aspect is that the demonstration should not be held due to the fact that the Covid-19 virus has not become extinct yet. There is a risk of virus spreading and people getting infected in several ways. The World Health Organization states that “Current evidence suggests that Covid-19 spreads between people through direct, indirect (through contaminated objects or surfaces), or close contact with infected people via mouth and nose secretions.” Only one infected person can infect more than one person and so on. This health problem has not been gone from the world yet. Many countries around the world are still facing the problem so it is unknown whether the virus can severely mutate itself or not. Even though the situation began to abate in Thailand, people should still be aware of the upcoming round of virus spreading.

In the face of the worst-case Covid-19 scenario, a demonstration on public streets can be harmful to everyone, not only in terms of global health and environment but also economic impacts. The more infected people means the worst economic performance. The Covid-19 pandemic shocked the economy due to transmission control and social distancing measures, leading to unemployment and affecting various economic sectors such as business, tourism, import and export industry. As mentioned before, Thai economy is expected to shrink significantly in 2020; this will take more than two years to return to the normal output levels of GDP before the Covid-19 pandemic. If people go out in a large crowd during this tough time, the economy may get even worse than anticipated.

These days, a majority of Thai people are still afraid of the virus. Almost no one does not wear a mask to protect themselves. This makes people look anonymous even though they know each other. Demonstrations take place in public areas like streets. In Thailand, the Free Youth Movement sparked a series of protests in over 20 provinces. Several protests also broke out in the Democracy Monument in Bangkok. By wearing a mask, protesters can be in danger as it opens opportunities for criminals to do illegal acts, regarding their disguise which make it more complicated to apprehend the suspects. For example, in the presence of the victim, criminals can snatch the protesters’ belongings away. With a lack of political freedom, the situation can get even worse if there is a terrorism or the use of violence in

pursuit of political purposes. Therefore, the violence might get involved in the particular events and there is more possibility for protesters to get injured, as a significant protest changed the course of history in Thailand known as the 14 October 1976 massacre. Huge anti-Thanom protests broke out and thus it came to bloodshed.

According to Douglass North's institutional framework, the institutional changes are related to this situation in Thailand. Institutions are made as the determinant of economic performance as well as relative price changes, meaning that people have a chance to choose anything they compare what is best for them first between different alternatives. This refers to the reason why society and economic change over time as well. Incremental change comes from the perceptions of the entrepreneurs in political and economic organizations that they could do better by altering the existing institutional framework at some margin. Currently, Thai protesters are demanding drastic changes in political systems, i.e., the dissolution of parliament, new elections, and changing the constitution. Along with the Rules of the Game, they have to choose whether to stay in silence and being limited in their freedom or to protest and call for a true Democracy. If it is cheaper for them to pay the cost of violating section 116 in Thai criminal code, they will make this choice. Therefore, institutional change affects the choice set at a moment of time, and shapes the way societies evolve through time; this is the key to understanding historical change.

From my point of view, some formal rules and enforcement in the country are still ineffective. Even though the emergency decree has been extended until August 31, in efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19, some people are still assembled for a political protest without any fear of enforcement. This is the weakness of the rules of the game, institution, and enforcement.

Some informal rules in terms of unwritten norms are crucial to maintaining a democracy, which violating them too often inevitably ends up in democracy's decline. The first norm is mutual tolerance. If parties see their opponents as traitorous enemies or think that they are not merely citizens with totally different views, democracy can not be sustained as opposing political parties not tolerate each other and are willing to prevent at nothing to eliminate each other. The second norm is institutional forbearance. The party in power should refrain from systematically abusing authority or the powers of electoral office for its own maximum advantage. For example, the taxes paid by citizens should not be only to serve a convenient life to rulings. Indeed, the money should be spent to improve the quality of Thai people's lives. These norms are constructed in order to help Thailand's democracy survive. If the future electoral leaders wish to avoid another military coup from happening, they have to comprehend ways in which to nurture the method of reconciliation, reduce conflicts and avoid the temptations of using too much power. Citizens should even be willing to defend democratic institutions and to simply accept different political

views. In the end, Thailand will achieve larger levels of economic development and political stability, and get rid of the vicious cycle.

## References

Glenza, J. (2020, June 3). *'Really scary': experts fear protests and police risk accelerating Covid-19 spread*. The Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/03/protests-police-covid-19-coronavirus-spread>.

Resnick, B. (2020, June 6). *What public health experts want critics to know about why they support the protests*. Vox.

<https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2020/6/6/21279592/protest-pandemic-covid-19-risk-second-wave-systemic-racism>.

World Health Organization. *Q&A: How is COVID-19 transmitted?* World Health Organization.

<https://www.who.int/vietnam/news/detail/14-07-2020-q-a-how-is-covid-19-transmitted>.