***Summary of Thailand’s Pro-Democracy Protests***

*What is happening in Thailand?*

Over recent months, an unprecedented wave of protests has swept over this Southeast Asian nation, led by high school and university students demanding major democratic reforms. Students are breaking cultural norms and taboos, while risking imprisonment, to call for a limit to the power and wealth of the country’s long-standing monarchy.

*Why does it matter?*

At the heart of these protests is the concept of free speech. Thailand does not have the free speech rights that many other developed nations enjoy. In fact, people there face up to 15 years in prison for criticizing Thailand’s royal family. Dozens of protesters have been testing the limits of Thai citizens’ rights to freely criticize their government and to assemble and protest, as well as to challenge the traditional hierarchies of Thai society.

A cycle of military coups has dominated Thailand’s political history, and activists say the monarchy’s wealth and power is too closely tied with the military, which they accuse of interfering in the nation’s politics.

“We want a true democracy,” student protestors explain.

Thai authorities have been attempting to contain protests by arresting activists, putting pressure on universities and on parents to stop students from protesting for reforms, as well as by ordering Facebook to geo-block any content that is critical of the royal family.

*Why now?*

Much like protests in Poland, which were sparked this month by the High Court’s ruling on an abortion case, Thailand’s demonstrations began this year in response to a court decision about a prominent opposition party called Future Forward. Young people overwhelmingly supported the party in last year’s elections, which were held allegedly to return Thailand to a democracy after a military coup took control of the nation’s government in 2014. Demonstrations erupted on college campuses in response to what they called “a flawed election” which favored the army, who maintains power.

King Maha Vajiralongkorn assumed the throne following the death of his father in 2016, and has since strengthened the authority of his regime, bringing the wealth of the crown and key army units under his direct control.

Anger amongst young protests increasingly targets the monarchy, with the hashtag “#whydoweneedaking?” posted more than a million times online. Protests ramped up in June when it was reported that a pro-democracy activist, Wanchalearm Satsaksi, was abducted in Cambodia, and while the government and military deny any involvement, critics say he was the ninth activist to disappear in recent years.

*What do protesters want?*

The United Front of Thammasat has issued 10 demands for monarchy reform. Tens of thousands have called for the king’s budget to be cut, to separate his private funds from crown assets, and demand an end to laws that forbid criticism of the monarchy. Protesters say they are not calling for the abolition of the monarchy, only for it to be modernized, but their demands have angered staunch royalists.

*Sources:*

Ratcliffe, Rebecca. "**'We want a true democracy,' students lead Thailand's protest movement**," *The Guardian*, 8-24-2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/24/we-want-a-true-democracy-students-lead-thailands-protest-movement>

Ratcliffe, Rebecca, "**Thailand protests: Everything you need to know**," The Guardian, 9-22-2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/22/thailand-protests-everything-you-need-to-know>