Perception of Hierarchy Among Student Activists in the Thai Youth Movement 2020-2022

LARA AINA FRANKEN

The 2020-2022 youth driven protests marked a significant upheaval in Thai society. Sparked initially by the dissolution of the oppositional party Future Forward and the disappearance of political exile Wanchalearm Satsaksit, they quickly expanded to demand far broader political reforms – including reforming the monarchy. This paper explores the societal implications of the protests, in particularly in challenging hierarchical structures. While previous research has focused on the political and economic factors and drivers, this paper argues that the demands by the youth movement aim at deeper societal reform. Despite some success, the movement's internal dynamics reveal the persistence of hierarchical structures, highlighting the challenges in dismantling long existing and ingrained social norms and structures.

The protest that rattled the streets of Bangkok in 2020 marked a significant disruption in Thai society, despite street demonstrations not being a novel phenomenon. While students had led the anti-dictatorship protests in the 1970s, contemporary Thai politics had also been shaped by the broadly middle-class democracy movement of the 1990s, and the early 2000s had seen massive street clashes between royalists [yellow-] and supporters of Pheu Thai [red shirts]. The resurgence of student protests after a four-decade long hiatus was remarkable. Spearheaded by university and high school students, the protests were rooted in a multitude of grievances raging from political disenfranchisement to economic hardships. Initially sparked by the forced disbandment of the popular Future Forward Party and later fuelled by the disappearance of activist and political exile Wanchalearm Satsaksit, these protests rapidly evolved to encompass broader demands, including calls for the resignation of then Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha and even more radical monarchical reforms – a drastic departure from all previous protest movements. It is already clear that these protests exerted profound influence in Thai society. As of 2024, we no longer see large protests as activist fatigue spread.

This paper sets out to shed light on an aspect of the protests yet to be discussed in the scholarly literature. It examines the societal implications of protests, particularly in challenging hierarchical structures, as well as attempts to understand how student activists have perceived these structures to impact them in their everyday life and their protest activties. Prior research has focused on the role of social media, drivers and aims of the young protestors, high schoolers participation, the movement in the larger political picture, as well as some of the economic drivers of the protests.

Sawaros and Panarat (2023), Kanokrat (2021) and Bollotta (2023) focus on high school pupils' participation within the movement. Sawaros and Panarat (2023) find that high schoolers' motivation and justification to participate was driven by their own lived experience, yet they were often hindered by adults in their lives, be it parents or teachers, often chastised or even punished. Kanokrat (2021) writes about members of the Bad Student Group, who she argues were driven by the authoritarianism found in their education system. Bolotta (2023) perceives the movement as a struggle against age-patriarchy, arguing that engaged siblinghood is used by activists to counter traditional father-child citizen relations. While this article agrees with seeing the movement as an anti-hierarchical struggle, based in seniority, it will find that breaking through long and deeply engrained structures may take more time. Similarly to Bolotta (2023), McCargo (2021) describes the student protest as having created a generation divide in the understanding of power and legitimacy. Aim (2021) and Janjira (2021) focus on the role of social media in the protests, with Aim (2021) finding that Twitter played a pivotal role in creating collective narratives, as well as a tool for mobilisation (Janjira, 2021). Wichuta (2023) adds that outside the digital realm, protests, and rallies became places of education, where the participants could inform themselves about problems within Thai society.

As main drivers of the protests, the literature

has identified economic reasons and well as dissatisfaction with the political leadership. While Sawaros and Panarat (2022) identify economic inequality, social injustice, and a flawed democratic system as drivers of politicization among students, Chyatat (2023) defines the movement as a primarily politico-economic force, where the youth and students have been advocating for a more egalitarian version of Thai capitalism. Despite the economic grievances playing a large role within the youth movement, this article finds and argues that the demands go much deeper, asking for reforms of structures inherent in society. This article aims to understand how student activists perceive hierarchy in their daily lives and how they challenge perceived hierarchical societal structures through their actions. The Thai youth tried to change more than politics through their protests and rather redefine the societal structure. However, the article also finds that these structures are not easily dismantled and remained within the movement itself.

Methodology

The article is based on the research and data collected for my master's dissertation. At the core this article tries to understand the perceptions and active meaning-making of young political activists. Hence, qualitative semi-structed interviews were deemed as the most appropriate approach, as this places the perceptions of the interviewees at the core of the analytical process (Bryman 2016 470-472). Seven in-depth interviews were conducted during January – March 2022 with student activists from the following Universities and groups: Thammasat, Chulalongkorn and Mahidol Universities and the organisations Free Youth, Bad Student, Dome Revolution, Salaya for Democracy, United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, and Mahidol Coalition. All students interviewed were chosen based on their active role within the protests, as they contributed to the output of these protest organizations and actively shaped the demands posed

by the leadership. The students were between the ages 20 – 25. The interviewees were anonymised and provided alternative nicknames due to the sensitive nature of their comments and work, namely: Tawan and Kla from Dome Revolution, Namtan from Salaya for Democracy, Bow from Bad Student, Kratai from Mahidol Coalition, Phut from United Front of Thammasat and Demonstration, and Tangmo from Free Youth. In addition, the analysis has been updated with observations made after my return to Bangkok in August 2023 to work at Chulalongkorn University, Faculty of Arts. While more interviews would have benefited the research, time constraints and the rise of Covid19 cases and the ongoing trials of many activists during the fieldwork period, made that impossible.

Thai Youth Movement as Social Movement

This article positions itself in the nexus of social movement theory. It follows the proposal of Weiss and Aspinall (2012) who see all student protests inherently as a social movement. They argue that since mobilisation of students through their identity as students does not happen automatically, they are fundamentally a social movement. Student movements, they argue are not born in a vacuum, but rather their identity as between childhood and adulthood makes them uniquely perceptive for mobilisation (Weiss & Aspinall, 2012, 5). A social movement hereby should be understood according to the definition by Snow (2004, 11) as "collective challenges to systems or structures of authority." Undoubtably, the Thai youth movement can be defined as such, as it has challenged political as well as social authority, in forms of mass protests, flash mobs, and online protests. In the case of the Thai youth movement, their experience of political oppression and lack of freedom of expression under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) [2014-2019] were the breeding ground for their politicisation.

Social movements, when viewed from a constructivist and culturalist perspective, as proposed by Kurzman (2008), are active agents in challenging dominant meaning structures. This approach aligns with broader sociological theory that sees humans as agents who actively construct categories of meaning to make sense of the world (Durkheim 1912). Kurzman (2008) understands social movements as "arenas of collective contestation over interpretation". This happens in the process of defining and contesting societal issues (Lehrner and Allen 2008). Events and activities do not inherently carry meaning but acquire it through collaborative processes of interpretation by humans. As meaning is shaped by how right and wrong is conceptualised collectively, social movements can challenge established hegemonic values. This article investigates how student activists have imbued their activities in challenging hierarchy with meaning and how they understand and value their actions.

Through the lens of Thai social order

Since this paper is interested in hierarchical relations within Thai society, a brief investigation of the former is necessary. Sirima, Rehbein & Supang (2020) propose that today's structure is informed by both pre-capitalist and capitalist hierarchies. Modern social hierarchies are rooted in the traditional *sakdina* system (comparable to feudalism) and Thai religious philosophy as well as a capitalist class system. They propose that there are five distinct social classes in Thai society: "the marginalized, the labouring class, the lower middle class, upper middle class and the upper class" (Sirima et al., 2020, p. 511, pp. 493-94). Yet it should be noted that financial means are not the only indicator for class belonging, but rather social standing of professions and one's personal background have defining characteristics (Sophorntavy, 2017, pp. 21-35). *Sakdina,* the service nobility which ruled Siam from 17th century onwards, laid out clear rules for social interactions between individuals (Baker and Pasuk,

2014, p.15; Sirima et al. 2020, p. 495). One's place within the very strict hierarchical order was pre-determined by one's birth and resulting access to land. Even though the system was abolished in 1935, remnants are still seen and felt today (Somsamai 1987, p. 56; Sophorntavy, 2017, p. 8). Jackson (2020, p. 18) explains that all Thais learn how to behave and speak in particular settings according to the notion of kala-thesa (time-space). This notion dictates how one ought to behave and speak (Sophornthavy, 2017, pp. 52-53, 683-684). According to Klausner (2000, pp. 315-18), the way a Thai individual stands, walks, sits, and sleeps is influenced by their proximity or social distance to others. Bolotta (2021) describes it as the constant sorting in *phu yaai* (big people) and *phu noi* (small people), in which *phu noi* should be respectful and grateful towards *phu yaai*. It should also be acknowledged that in Thailand the social order and sorting is not confined to the private and work sphere but expands to the state. It is the Thai monarch who spearheads the societal order (Paribatra 2003, p. 293).

According to the Hofstede Model this strict hierarchical order is accepted by Thai society at large (Hofstede Insights, 2022). It should further be noted that conformity, order and hierarchy are highly valued ideals in Thai society (Prajak, 2012, p. 241). Young (2021, p. 20) argues that this is rooted in Thai Buddhism which teaches obedience and a greater acceptance of a given societal role. Sophorntavy (2017, p. 83) underlines this by arguing that a person's social standing and value is determined by their perceived possession of *bun* [good merit] and *khwaamdii* [good virtue]. It might be this widely perceived acceptance of the social order that caused the public outcry over the taboo-breaking by youth activists.

Perception of hierarchy and the activists

As Weiss and Aspinall (2012) put forward, social movements cannot happen in a vacuum, hence

understanding the activists' backgrounds is nec-essary. The protestors fell largely in the age group born between 1997 to 2007. Hence, their childhood was shaped by rapid urbanisation and globalisation. The proliferation of the internet, as well as the ad-vent of social media, severely changed the control of the Thai state over information consumption. According to Baker and Pasuk (2022) Thai youth has some of the highest social media penetration in the world. In addition, their childhood had been shaped by a highly volatile political landscape, con-flicts between red-shirts and yellow-shirts shaped the early 2000s, and two military coups resulted in constrained democratic spaces (2006, 2014). The older badge of the activist's cohort came of age during the years of the NCPO (2014-2019) regime. Meaning that many of them grew up in an environ-ment that was highly politicised. It should be noted that the worsening of the economic situation most surely influenced in how the ruling competency and societal situation has been viewed by the youth pro-testors (Chyatat, 2023). While the socio-economic background of the protestors is generally diverse, as for example the Thalu Gas group members com-ing from lower-class backgrounds (Anusorn, 2021), the interviewees in this article are mainly from up-per-middle to lower upper-class backgrounds, that have lived abroad or had exposure to foreign media. Notably, student activists involved in academic and operational aspects of the movement demonstrate a strong awareness of academic political literature and external perspectives on their political situa-tion. It should however be noted that not only uni-versity students are aware of the political situation, but high school students were radicalised through research on the monarchy and the government for classroom essays (Kanokrat, 2021). Many of the in-terviewees voiced that they were politicised upon returning to Thailand from abroad and contrasted their home country with their firsthand and bodily experience of both freedom of expression and free-dom from strict hierarchical societal order.

For the interviewees hierarchy influenced and impacted every aspect of their lives, spanning from the private sphere to the public, making it insep-arable from personal and political relations. Phut articulated: "*Hierarchy is at every place, from the beginning of our lives, in the family, in our education system.*" Tawan concentrated more on the social relations: "*relationships like family, even institutions, the places we go, the office, the university, they [in-stitutions] have a hierarchy, that can separate one by power relations.*" All interactions between peo-ple are mediated through hierarchical awareness and social distance is measured through indicators such as age, seniority, or class. For most interview-ees the social distance this created was perceived as harmful or negative. The only exception was Kla, who voiced that it could also be a useful tool for navigating interactions:

> "*Some of its impacts are not too bad, for exam-ple in our organisation [...], the younger refers to the older one using pii. We know that it's a legacy of a traditional society, but we don't perceive it as something hurtful. It's a way of paying respect to your friends.*"

Despite his interpretation of hierarchical sib-lings' relations with his peers as more positive, he strongly opposed having to show deference when it came to his teachers. His denial to use honorifics with his teachers, either *khruu* (school) or *ajarn* (uni-versity), made him unpopular with the staff. Tawan shared this experience, refusing these honorifics and asking critical questions about the monarchy and government got him in trouble. While hierarchy is not uniquely Thai, the activists perceived the ex-pectation of "blind obedience" as harmful.

Several of the interviewees shared how they felt that hierarchy had shaped the way they thought and expressed themselves. They voiced that the strict hierarchical system had hindered their devel-opment of critical thinking. It had kept them from making independent choices critically engaging with their surroundings. Namtan directly connected

the lack of freedom of expression to the hierarchical structure. On the other hand, Kratai related it to being taught how to ask questions:

> "We were taught to not ask questions and to question people who are older than us, and so we don't really get to be critical of things."

For her, the differences between US American students and Thai students that she experienced during exchange studies illustrated this point. US American students were much freer to pose questions whereas her upbringing had made her hesitant, hindering her from asking any herself. Traditionally in Thai classrooms asking questions is not part of the lesson plan, let alone questioning what is being said or taught. Through the societal structure, students are taught to respect their teachers and refrain from talking back. This creates learning environments in which asking questions is not common (Raktham, 2008, pp. 18-19). However, new generations of student and teachers are slowly changing this practice. In my experience teaching at the Department of Western Languages at Chulalongkorn University, it takes students about three months to start asking questions freely.

It is important to note that noncompliance to hierarchical structures can lead to physical punishment. For Bow, this threat of violence creates unsafe learning spaces and takes away the freedom of choice. Everything, she proclaimed is decided for her. "It limits our choices and they [elders and teachers] think for us" and "when we say something against what the authority wants, they may get violently punished." As the Thailand Development Research Institute reports about 60 percent of students have experienced physical violence during their education (Thunhavich, 2020). To avoid harm, adhering to norms both in speech and body language have long been a means to keep safe. However, physical violence is not the only harm that students may experience in educational settings. A study from 2021 shows that 85% of nearly 400 students experienced

sexual harassment from their seniors during orientation (Piyathida & Rhein, 2022). The higher social standing of seniors and teachers fosters an environment in which sexual harassment and victim blaming is normalised. It is no wonder that ending physical violence and sexual harassment in educational settings became a main driver and recurring theme in the protests. Verita Sriratana (2022) laments that feminist and LGBTQ matters have long been pushed back by male protestors by reasoning that democracy had to come first, neglecting that equality and democracy go hand in hand. It should also be noted that when it comes to hierarchy, the private and the public cannot be separated, neither can hierarchy be separated from power.

Contestation of hierarchy

The scholarly debate has largely focused on the political and economic demands directed towards the government and the monarchy. While the voices of the movement have been quite diverse, the opposition against the societal structure is an overarching theme.

Phut explained it as: "the current movement is not just the movement about the king, they [speaking about other youth protestors] are challenging authority and hierarchy, the structure of Thailand, the big picture is the opposition to hierarchy." All the interviewees had a shared this desire for far reaching and fundamental change. Kla depicted it as: "They [speaking about other youth protestors] even try to change the meaning of the nation, they want to it to mean the people, to mean themselves, their lives, they want to replace the position of the people." He hereby placed the challenge of hierarchy within a larger struggle over who gets to define what it means to be Thai – the notion of Thainess. Hence, Kla saw the movement as a struggle over hegemony. For both Phut and Kla, this had already been partial successful. Through the protest the youth reclaimed the power of defining Thainess: They explained that what it means to be Thai was

now in their hands. Furthermore, through break-ing the proverbial glass and pulling the monarchy in the spotlight, the protestors brought the unsay-able to the centre stage. At the moment it seems to have sparked an irreversible change in society. Unlike other protest movements, such as the 1973 student protests, or the 1992 Bloody May which both ended in the removal of an authoritarian Prime Minister, this movement has had little direct political impact. However, their success might be measured by the societal norms that they have shattered. Furthermore, it should be noted that Move Forward party, the incarnation of Future Forward (which dis-solution sparked the first protests in 2020), came out as winner of the general election in 2023. This indicates that the youth have strongly influenced the voting behaviour of their parents. Prajak (2023) proposes that a new time has dawned for Thai poli-tics. McCargo (2023) even divides Thai politics into a before and after these protests.

The challenge to social habit and societal or-der can also be observed is the defiance of hier-archy through language. If *kala-thesa* is the rule book that identifies which speech is appropriate in different contexts (Jackson, 2020), then this has been openly defied by activists. Using rude speech and dropping honorifics, has been a method wildly used. A change of register and language may seem insignificant at first, especially in comparison to big requests that have been made by the activists. Language is however a powerful instrument and in terms of meaning-making it is a crucial signifier. It is culture and language, both together and sepa-rately that influences how humans imbue mean-ing on their surrounding and their actions (Geertz, 1973; Mead 1934; Parsons, 1951; Rabiah, 2019). In the movement, changing how to address someone has become a low-key and low-stake method of disrup-tion and defiance. Changing the use of language was the method mostly used by the interviewees to describe how they would challenge hierarchy. For most of them using crude, informal speech, or deny-ing honorifics was a form of rebellion to the system.

In a society where polite and appropriate language is regarded as fundamental, this is a radical move. For Namtam, it also had to do a lot with the ques-tion of who deserves respect. In her eyes, the Prime Minister and the King had lost all respect, therefore they had lost the right to be referred or referenced to in a certain manner. As a form of protests, the youth used crude or rude language to talk about and to them. The discourse of paying and earn-ing respect was an overarching theme. Deference, most of them found, is not a birthright but must be earned.

Hierarchy in the movement

Despite this movement outwardly challenging hi-erarchy, several of the interviewees observed that protest groups were stuck in the very structures they were trying to challenge. Namtam described that when they would meet, seniority was of utmost importance. Those who were older or had been activists longer demanded to be paid respect and to be followed by younger or newer activists. She stated that it was never directly voiced but through engrained social patterns implicitly expected. "*The older protestors, they would not directly say it, but for how Thai people have been taught, since they were young, they automatically assume that this person knows more than me.*" She experienced that when they met in their spaces, they would fall back into taught behaviour structures based in hierarchy and seniority, despite the movement trying to un-dermine these structures. Kratai shared the expe-rience. She described that when different groups of the movement came together, those who had the larger social media following or those who had been in existence for a longer period could wield more power over the decision-making process. She was left with the feeling that her opinion mattered less than that of others, that the opinion of smaller groups was less valuable than that of larger groups. This means that despite the movement trying to contest hierarchy within the larger society, within

their own structures it was still highly present. No matter the context, *phu yai* and p*hu noi* remain a presence. Bolotta (2023), however observes that traditional hierarchy structures have been reworked, and it's the activists experience over age or gender that matter mostly. He declares the youth struggle as engaged siblinghood against the paternally structured state.

Conclusion

Despite the movement trying to disrupt and dismantle the social order, changing a societal structure is a slow process. Hierarchy and seniority remain a defining factor of the everyday lived experiences in Thailand. It dictates ways of thinking, behaving and acting. To conform to ideals of *kala-thesa* is to keep mentally and physically safe. This movement should not only be seen as a movement with demands directed towards the government, monarchy and the economy, but one that wants to change the structural inequalities and social norms – a radical challenge to Thailand's moral code. Without a doubt some of the demands and activists in this movement don't stop short from demanding and hoping for a revolution (in the context of the hierarchical order – a cultural revolution) that changes the relations youth experience in their everyday life. While the big flashmob protest have vanished and exhaustion has spread among the activists, their political frustration is no smaller than it was in 2020. That Move Forward was hindered from forming a government in 2023 left many with a bitter taste. Nonetheless, smaller protests were held, and youth activists voiced their frustration with the flaws of the election system. Social change is slow, so while the movement itself conflicts with social hierarchies, small changes can already be felt. While some changes pre-date the movement, it can be argued that the mass protests accelerated the change. In its most radical interpretation, the movement can also be seen as challenging the meaning of Thainess. As hierarchy and deference have been fundamental to Thainess, how exactly the young generation perceives or imagines Thainess however, is yet to be explored.

Lara Franken holds a master's degree in Asian Studies from Lund University and is a former lecturer in German Language at Chulalongkorn University. **E-mail:** l.a.franken@outlook.com

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