

Stop using monarchy

Thai opposition tells PM after Prayuth slams 'illegal protests' in parliament

REUTERS, Bangkok

Opponents of Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha yesterday urged him to stop using the monarchy to justify his hold on power and resign, in remarks made to a special session of parliament called by the former junta leader to discuss months of protests.

Student-led demonstrations which initially demanded the departure of Prayuth and a new constitution have increasingly turned their attention to the monarchy, calling for reforms to curb the powers of King Maha Vajiralongkorn.

"The prime minister is a major obstacle and burden to the country. Please resign and everything will end well," said Somporn Amornvivat, leader of the opposition Pheu Thai party, the largest single party in parliament.

Members of the opposition Move Forward party accused Prayuth of trying to use the monarchy to keep power - particularly regarding an incident around a royal motorcade that was used to justify tough emergency measures on Oct. 15.

Prayuth called the parliament session this week after the emergency measures - including a ban on protests - only inflamed anger and brought tens of thousands onto Bangkok streets.

He rejected a demand from protesters to step down and said last week it was his government's job to protect the monarchy.



"I'm confident that today, regardless of our different political views, everyone still loves the country," Prayuth said in his opening address.

"Though the people have the freedom to protest based on the constitution, authorities need to control the illegal protests," said Prayut. "We do not want to see clashes or riots in the country," he said, accusing some protesters of "inappropriate actions".

But his opponents and protest leaders are sceptical the parliamentary session will resolve the crisis. His supporters have a majority in parliament, whose entire upper house was picked by his former junta.

Opposition MPs questioned Prayuth's reasons for emergency measures, especially the justification for a fracas around Queen Suthida's motorcade on Oct. 14, when she was jeered by protesters.

"There was an attempt to use the royal motorcade to distort the truth and make people hate and confront each other," said Move Forward MP Suttawan Suban Na Ayuthaya. "Don't bring the monarchy into this conflict."

Protesters are set to march to the German embassy at 5 pm to petition Berlin to investigate the king's use of his powers while in the European nation, where he spends much of his time. The German government has said it would be unacceptable for him to conduct politics from Germany.



Chileans react after hearing the results of the referendum on a new constitution in Valparaíso, Chile, on Sunday night. Chileans voted overwhelmingly in a landmark referendum to replace their dictatorship-era constitution, long seen as underpinning the nation's glaring economic and social inequalities. The result set off wild celebrations across the capital and other cities after voters threw out the constitution left by the regime of 1973-1990 dictator Augusto Pinochet.

PHOTO: REUTERS

US battles homegrown disinformation crisis

AFP, Washington

Russia's coordinated effort to nudge Americans toward voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election caught social media companies flat-footed and remains a stain on the reputation of Facebook in particular.

Four years later, the FBI and other American security officials -- aware of interference but silent last time -- are warning that Russia and Iran are meddling.

In 2020, Americans are playing the leading role, posting the bulk of false or misleading comments, memes, photographs and videos that are spread with the ease and speed of online distribution. And there are signs that it is out of control.

"What the Russians did in 2016 was show a toolkit, where you could use deceptive actors online working in coordination with each other as a political tool," Joshua Tucker, a professor of politics and expert on data science and social media at New York University, told AFP.

"There's been a fixation on foreign interference, but the people who really have an incentive to influence the outcome of an election are people who live in that country -- Americans."

Facebook's latest report about inauthentic behavior confirms the trend.

In the first week of October alone it took down 200 Facebook accounts, 55 Pages and 77

Instagram accounts that originated in the US.

Copying the Russian tactics of 2016, the operators used stock profile photos and posed as right-leaning individuals across the United States. Some of the removed accounts were older, and had pretended to be left-leaning individuals around the 2018 US congressional elections.

The overall effect was to sow political discord and undermine faith in the democratic process.

Research undertaken by Tucker and his colleagues shows that political partisanship



-- heightened by social media algorithms that drive users to one side of a story -- means neither liberals or conservatives are good at sorting fact from fiction when challenged.

As part of a third-party fact-checking relationship with Facebook, AFP has flagged thousands of false or misleading posts in the US. Some had been shared hundreds of thousands of times. User feedback shows that even verified facts are not accepted when they go against partisan political belief.

But social media researchers say the detection of such accounts are the exception rather than the norm.

Professor Russell Muirhead, co-author of

"A Lot Of People Are Saying," a title that plays on words often used by Trump to promote unproven theories, said US disinformation has evolved rapidly since 2016.

He referred to Pizzagate in 2016, the false claim that top Democrats ran a child sex trafficking ring from a Washington, DC pizza restaurant. That story portrayed Hillary Clinton as a concentration of pure evil.

In this election cycle, Pizzagate has metastasized and been succeeded by the QAnon conspiracy theory, which claims that Trump is locked in a struggle with Democratic and Hollywood elites who practice child sex trafficking and cannibalism.

Its adherents are taking aim at Biden. "QAnon is now painting Biden not as a legitimate opponent but as part of this team of globalists who are intent on destroying America, not to be argued with but to be eliminated," said Muirhead.

The most immediate disinformation risk to the 2020 vote, however, according to Tucker, is Trump's repeated claims that the use of mail-in ballots will lead to fraud and a "rigged" election.

He made the same claims in 2016. Subsequent investigations showed no evidence of widespread fraud.

"Who needs the Russians running around casting doubt on the integrity of the democratic process when the president of the United States is doing it?" Tucker said.

Senate set to confirm Barrett to US SC

REUTERS, Washington

The Republican-controlled US Senate was expected to confirm President Donald Trump's nominee, Amy Coney Barrett, as the next justice to the Supreme Court, a move that will tilt the country's highest court further to the right for years to come.

No nominee to the Supreme Court has ever been confirmed by the Senate this close to a presidential election, with nearly 60 million ballots already cast ahead of Election Day on Nov. 3.

The rush to confirm Barrett, 48, has bitterly divided Democrats and Republicans, who are expected to split along party lines on the final vote. Trump has said repeatedly he wants her in place to vote on any election-related cases that go to the court.

With Republicans controlling the chamber 53-47 and no indication of an internal revolt against the conservative appeals court judge succeeding liberal Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Barrett looks almost certain to take up a lifetime appointment on the bench over universal Democratic opposition.

Several Republicans who previously expressed concerns about rushing the process, including Alaska Republican Lisa Murkowski, are expected to approve Barrett's nomination.

With Barrett confirmed, the Supreme Court will have a solid 6-3 conservative majority.

Barrett is expected to participate in a crucial hearing on Nov. 10, where Trump and his fellow Republicans will ask the court to strike down the Affordable Care Act.

The 2010 healthcare law, popularly known as Obamacare, has helped millions of Americans obtain medical insurance and protected those with pre-existing conditions.



Russia strikes kill 78 rebels in Syria

AFP, Beirut

Air strikes by Syrian regime ally Russia killed 78 fighters from a Turkey-backed rebel group in northwest Syria yesterday, a Britain-based war monitor said.

Russian warplanes also wounded 100 people when they targeted a training camp of the Faylaq al-Sham faction in the Jabal Duwayli area in Idlib province, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

In March, a fragile truce brokered between Moscow and Ankara stemmed a deadly months-long Russia-backed regime military offensive on the country's last major rebel stronghold in Idlib.

The National Liberation Front, an umbrella group of Ankara-backed rebels, told AFP that Russian strikes yesterday had hit one of its positions, but did not give an exact death toll.

The March truce has largely held with the exception of some bombardment and intermittent air strikes on the area, according to the Observatory.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Third attempt at Karabakh ceasefire quickly collapses

A third attempt at halting weeks of fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh collapsed quickly yesterday with Armenia and Azerbaijan trading accusations of violating the US-brokered ceasefire within minutes. The latest "humanitarian ceasefire" was announced by Washington on Sunday, after truces brokered by Russia and France fell apart over previous weekends. Azerbaijan's foreign ministry said Armenian forces had shelled the town of Terter and nearby villages in "gross violation" of the truce. Armenia's defence ministry said Azerbaijani forces had "grossly violated" the ceasefire with artillery fire on combat positions in various parts of the frontline. More than 1,000 people have been reported dead in the fighting which broke out on September 27.

China 'to sanction' US firms over Taiwan arms sale

China yesterday said it would impose sanctions on Lockheed Martin, a Boeing defence division and other US firms involved in arms sales to Taiwan, the self-governed island that Beijing views as its territory. The two US giants were involved in a recent sale of nearly \$2 billion worth of missiles to Taiwan, and foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian urged the US to stop arms sales to the island. The status of Taiwan holds potential for conflict between the United States and China, during a wider struggle for technology, security and trade supremacy. Beijing says Taiwan is an inviolable part of China to be reclaimed, by force if necessary.

Japan sets 2050 deadline for carbon neutrality



Japan's Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga yesterday set a 2050 deadline for the world's third-largest economy to become carbon neutral, significantly firming up the country's climate change commitments. Delivering his first policy address since taking office, Suga placed the environment front and centre as Japan plays catch-up with climate pledges made by other major economies. Tokyo had previously only aimed to achieve carbon neutrality some time in the latter half of the century, a goal that critics called vague. But the new target was praised by activists and experts, and puts Japan on the same timeline as Europe and Britain and a decade ahead of China, which last month set a 2060 goal.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS



A woman argues with law enforcement officers during an opposition rally in Minsk, on Sunday, on the final day of an ultimatum set by the opposition for their embattled strongman leader to resign after months of mass protests. Factory workers chanted slogans, students took to the streets and police made detentions yesterday as Belarusians answered an opposition call for a national strike to force President Alexander Lukashenko to quit.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'We will not give in, ever'

Macron vows not to surrender to Islamist radicals amid growing French goods boycott calls

AGENCIES

France urged Arab countries to stop calls for boycotts of French products while President Emmanuel Macron vowed the country would never give in to Islamic radicals.

Comments made recently by Macron about Islamic militants and his reaction to the October 16 murder of a French teacher by a teenaged Chechen extremist have sparked tension with several Arab countries and populations.

Macron said history teacher Samuel Paty was beheaded for showing caricatures of a topic derogatory to Muslims to pupils "because Islamists want our future", prompting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to suggest the French leader have "mental checks".

On September 2, Macron had already presented a draft law to combat "Islamist separatism" in France, an issue that is being widely discussed in the country.

On Sunday, Macron said in a tweet: "We will not give in, ever" to Islamic radicals.

Macron added in comments on Twitter that France "cherished" freedom, "guaranteed" equality, and experienced fraternity "intensely" in a reference to the nation's credo.

"Our history is one of fighting tyranny and fanaticism. We will continue," he said.

His comments came as the French foreign ministry urged countries where boycott calls had been made to stop them and ensure the security of French citizens.

Yesterday, the Turkish leader added his voice to calls in the Arab world for citizens to spurn French goods. French goods have already been pulled from supermarket shelves in Qatar and Kuwait, among other Gulf states, whereas in Syria people have burned pictures of Macron and French flags have been torched in the Libyan capital Tripoli.

As the backlash over France's reaction widened, European leaders rallied behind Macron.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel condemned Erdogan's "defamatory" remarks about the French leader. The PMs of the Netherlands and Greece also expressed support for France, as did European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan accused Macron of "attacking Islam," while the Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, the Taliban, the Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah and Morocco have also spoken out against France.

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Web: www.pragatiinsurance.com