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Thailand’s “Tom Yum Kung” generation -- young people born in the 1990s -- have known little but crisis. During their formative political years they have witnessed two coups, street protests, a bloody crackdown in Bangkok and a shutdown of the capital. Now, the political party created to give them a voice -- Future Forward -- is facing dissolution. Frustrated with an increasingly autocratic, right-wing and royalist government that is shutting down political space, this generation could, finally be about to come of age politically.

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Chotiros Naksut is a Bangkok-based writer whose work deals with controversial themes. “I was scared initially, and had to deal with critics who insulted me,” she says. “But not anymore.”

ON THE COVER

YOUTHQUAKE TREMORS

Silenced and sidelined for generations, young Thais are beginning to voice their rage

MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR Asia regional correspondent

Chotiros Naksut is a Bangkok-based writer whose work deals with controversial themes. “I was scared initially, and had to deal with critics who insulted me,” she says. “But not anymore.”
Thailand’s younger generation has come of age politically in an era of near-constant crisis, shadowed by two coups, years of street protests, and tightening military control.

The government, headed by former coup leader Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha, has struggled to contain this growing discontent. Instead, it has turned to classic authoritarian tactics, such as trying to delegitimize a youth-focused political party and building new political apparatus for monitoring dissent. But while previous generations have been cowed by such moves, this time is different, said Kan. “After years of silence, the young generations have reached a threshold, a trigger point.”

RISING REBELLION On a recent Friday evening, Chotiros Nakut left her office in Bangkok’s Pathumwan business district wearing a T-shirt that read, in bold English lettering: “Free—Prayuth and if you like Prayuth f--- you too.”

Such open provocation is not without risks. The junta that Prayuth led, and the elected government that followed, have used authoritarian tactics to stay in power. Political activities and public assembly were restricted. Critics were summoned to military compounds for “attitude adjustment” sessions. Social media was censored, and citizens leaving critical comments on social media platforms were hit with charges of sedition. Pro-democracy activists have been attacked in broad daylight. The perpetrators are rarely brought to justice, creating a sense of impunity.

More and more young Thais are turning to provocation, despite the danger of backlash. “They are courting risks to openly criticize anything that comes in the way of their future,” said Orapin Yingyongthana, editor in chief of The Momentum, one of the country’s leading Thai-language digital current affairs platforms. “They have reached a threshold, a trigger point.”

“Thailand ... is a land of smiles and happy people, which is a myth and propaganda of Thailand’s tourism ministry”

Chotiros Nakut
A 28-year-old writer

Thaksin reelected prime minister

2001

Opposition groups stage mass protests, shutting airports and clashing with security forces; Prime Minister Somchai Wongsvat forced to step down in vote-buying scandal

2007

Mass protests in April see 100,000 people take to Bangkok’s streets

2010

Military violently puts down protests; more than 80 civilians are killed

2014

Constitutional court nullifies 2014 election result in March; in May, the military seizes control

2019

Billionaire entrepreneur Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit founded the youth-focused Future Forward Party

Source: Future Forward Party

13 coups

in 88 years, an average of every 6 years

Source: Future Forward Party, as cited in Bangkok Post

Crisis generation

The outspoken Chotiros Nakut is constantly on the lookout against backlash.

BANGKOK Just as dusk spread across Bangkok on a recent Sunday evening, the mood in a cavernous warehouse near a busy traffic intersection was electric. The crowd chanted anti-establishment slogans in response to the provocative hip-hop blasting out from the stage, as headlines Rap Against Dictatorship built up to their signature song “Prathet Ku Mee” — “What My Country’s Got.”

The song, an angry denunciation of the Thai government, has become an anthem for young people frustrated with years of political and economic chaos. Its lyrics call the capital of Bangkok a “killing field” and declare the junta-controlled parliament a “playground for soldiers.”

Released in October 2018, the music video for the song was watched 17 million times in its first week online, and has now reached more than 77 million views.

Nuthapong “Liberate P” Srimueng, one of RAD’s frontmen, still shakes his head with disbelief at the song’s success. “We touched young Thais in a way we never knew,” he told the Nikkei Asian Review after the concert. “If you see the online media, you can see their frustration. And we echo that frustration.”

Prathet Ku Mee’s success is totemic of a rising discontent among young Thais, who have come of age in an era of near-continuing political crises. Those born in the 1990s have lived through the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis, two coups, sweeping constitutional change—and now a wave of authoritarianism and conservatism that has swelled since the military took power in 2014. Rather than stay quiet, young people in Thailand are starting to raise their voices, online and at events like RAD’s.

“If you don’t criticize openly, you are out of fashion now; it is cool for young Thais to be outraged, angry and frustrated at what is happening in the country,” said Kan Yuenyong, executive director of Siam Intelligence Unit, a Bangkok-based think tank.

“Black Cherry,” Chotiros’ debut collection of erotic fiction, was published in 2019.
think Thailand is stagnating."
Economically, at least, it is. Thailand’s gross domestic product growth, which has been relatively robust even through the past few years of political disruption, is stuttering. The economy limped to 2.5% growth in 2019. This year it could slump further, as the coronavirus outbreak hits tourism. From 2019 to 2019, household debt rose from 377,100 baht to 552,500 baht ($12,000 to $17,600), according to the central bank. Total household debt is now equivalent to nearly 80% of GDP.

At the same time, the country’s educated urban youth are already struggling to find work. According to the Thailand Development Research Institute, a respected think tank, the unemployment rate for young Thais with diplomas between 15 and 24 years old rose from 3.7% in 2018 figures to 5% in 2019.

And many are in debt:

- 50% of indebted Thais are 30 or under
- 17% of degree-holders unemployed, while 4.7% is average among youth overall
- 9.5 million Thais between 15 and 24 years old are more likely to be out of work:

Wasted youth

More than 50% not in the workforce

Educated youth are more likely to be out of work:

17% of degree-holders unemployed, while 4.7% is average among youth overall

And many are in debt:

- 50% of indebted Thais are 30 or under

2018 figures: Source: Thailand Development Research Institute, Bank of Thailand

Young Thai concertgoers raise the three-finger salute, banned by the government as a symbol of resistance.

**Young Thai concertgoers raise the three-finger salute, banned by the government as a symbol of resistance.**

**We joke that we were born during the financial crisis, and are now having to look for jobs when there is an economic crisis**

Aomthip Kerdplanant, a final-year student at Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University

Satirical cartoonist Khai Maew’s work often lampoons the military government.

FAUGHT FUTURE

The lightning rod for young Thai people’s support – and the government’s backslash – has been the Future Forward Party, which was founded in March 2018 and contested the election 12 months later. Led by the telegenic 41-year-old billionaire Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the party pitched hard to younger voters. It pushed for an amendment to the military-backed constitution, to break up the country’s oligarchies, and to trim the size and power of the army. One policy that particularly resonated was an end to compulsory military service for Thai males of the age of 21. The party also rewrote the political playbook. Rather than relying on a ground game of grassroots canvassers and patronage networks – tactics that have historically delivered votes in Thai elections -- the FFP threw its resources into social media campaigns, targeting urban areas and university towns.

“We tried to maximize the power of online platforms, and many ‘futurists’, our online supporters, helped to carry this task by hashing and sharing our content,” Pannika Wanich, a party spokesperson, said in an interview. “People in urban areas tend to lean less toward the politics-canvaser network and are more open-minded to new political parties.”

The military establishment, which had hoped to dampen the democratic spirit, was unprepared for the party’s rise in popularity and support. The military’s countermove has been to manipulate the political discourse, focusing on the issue of coup politics, or the politics of the 2014 coup, which many Thais believe has been responsible for the country’s stagnation.

The military has also attempted to discredit the party through a smear campaign, using social media to spread false stories about its members, including its leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, who is depicted with a Hitler-style toothbrush mustache.

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In 2009, Bangkok was thrown into turmoil as thousands of anti-government protesters demanded the dissolution of the party for its failure to reform. Thaksin Shinawatra, the party leader, was toppled in a coup that year, and his younger brother, Tharaned, became the leader of the newly formed Future Forward Party (FFP). Tharaned attributes the shift to the formative years of Thailand's younger generation. They have been influenced by the same influx of international ideas and values that have shaped the political landscape of the country for decades. The party's success triggered a backlash by ultraconservatives, who have found ways to challenge the party's legitimacy. In November, Tharaned lost his place in parliament after being found guilty of violating an election rule limiting candidates' shareholdings in media companies. Thanathorn said that he had sold his stake in V-Luck Media before campaigning began, but the court said there was no evidence of the transfer. The party itself narrowly avoided being disbanded in January, after a court ruled that it had not, as had been alleged, tried to undermine the monarchy. In total, more than 25 legal cases have been leveled against the FFP by allies of the ultraconservatives. Its next test comes on Feb. 21, when the party faces the Constitutional Court over a case involving 191 million baht received from Thanathorn before the March elections -- and where, again, the party's dissolution hangs in the balance. “If they dissolve us now, they are shutting the door for a peaceful democratic transition, and that is dangerous,” Thanathorn said. “Thailand will not have political parties.”

The security establishment has also turned to time-honored authoritarian tactics in the battle for control. “The political boundary is no more,” said the document, which was prepared by the National Security Council. “The political reach of FFP’s online campaign. They had estimated the new party returning 10 to 20 seats at the polls “because they were not using the traditional voter canvasser networks, and we have always been accurate with our forecasts before,” one intelligence official said. “The outcome was completely unexpected. We were proved wrong by the young voters who backed FFP.” They conceded “It also confirmed the impact of social media in Thai politics.” The FFP won 81 seats in the 500-seat parliament, finishing third and establishing the party as a genuine political force in its first-ever election.

Thanathorn attributes the shift to the formative years of Thailand's younger generation. They were born in the shadow of the 1997 "Tom Yum Kung" crisis -- named for the searing heat of the popular national dish -- which decimated the Thai economy. In the febrile years that followed, protest movements rose and fell, and they witnessed bloody street clashes between anti-government protesters and the army. Since then, they have seen the results of two elections overturned by the military.

“Social media is more powerful than the armed forces’ weapons,” warned Gen. Apirat Kongsompong, the head of the army, in a speech last April. ‘A NEW DIVIDE’ It seems unlikely that old tactics will solve new problems for Thailand's military government, as traditional vectors for control are breaking down.

“Young people are reimagining the kind of relationship they want to have with Thai politics,” said Panchan Phiboonrat, a Thai communications scholar at California State University, Fullerton. In universities, young Thais are increasingly willing to challenge their elders. “They cannot be challenged anymore, because the students come prepared and will challenge you with their facts,” said Wasana Wongsurawat, a Thai historian at Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University. “Even among the alumni, the old social protocols are being challenged, because younger graduates are quick to jump in and criticize the senior alumni in online forums.”

Online, young people are even willing to mock the monarchy, long regarded as taboo. Twitter users have openly questioned the closing of roads and resorts for the royal household, despite the threat of jail terms under Thailand’s harsh lese-majeste laws. The government made a rare acknowledgment of the shifting cultural tide in late 2019, when it released its security plan, “The new generations have not had a bond to the monarchy, since they lack understanding and correct awareness of the importance of the royal institution as the national soul of the country,” said the document, which was prepared by the National Security Council.

One insider told Nikkei that the military establishment, having leveraged social and political divisions – conservative against reformist, poor voters against the ultrarich – to secure an enduring influence over Thailand’s democracy, now faces an almost insurmountable challenge. “They have been confronted by a new divide in Thai politics – a generational divide,” the source said. “The political boundary is no more the city versus the village, or the capital versus the provinces, but the boundary is social media,” the source added. “And the younger generation is winning on this front.”

Chotiros, the writer, expects this generational divide to become more entrenched if the ruling class turns to a deaf ear to the rising rage of Thailand’s youth. “We want honest answers to questions about why the country is stagnating,” she said. “Their way of doing things has seen the society collapse over the past 10 years, and our generation will not sit silently.”

“People here know the system of power has been fixed to favor one side and shut out our hopes”

A Bangkok tech-sector worker participating in January’s “Run Against Dictatorship"