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#WhatsHappeningInThailand: the power dynamics of Thailand's digital activism

In Thailand, pro-democracy protesters have taken their frustrations to the streets and the screens this year. The physical protests have gone hand in hand with a vibrant, fractious debate on social media. Among this authentic activity, there appears to be a significant amount of suspicious and potentially inauthentic behaviour taking place online. For this report, the focus is on Twitter, Thailand's [second most popular social media platform](#), with a penetration rate of about 23.5%.

Our research has found that questionable Twitter activity linked to the protests ranges from the potential use of automation to widespread allegations among Thai Twitter users that real people are engaging in paid or otherwise inauthentic behaviour¹ intended to artificially shift perceptions and shape narratives about the country's political situation. Understanding these complex online dynamics is crucial for any broader analysis of the protest movement and its implications. Given that the protests are [manifesting online](#), relatively little detailed research has been published to date.

The protests in Thailand are an ongoing and rapidly evolving phenomenon, so a comprehensive analysis of this online activity and its broader implications isn't possible at this time. Instead, this report presents a snapshot of activity on Twitter. We analyse two aspects of how the protests are playing out in online spaces: the impact of powerful state-linked accounts (including potential information operations against the tactics of the protest movement) and the increasingly international range of actors who are engaging in the protests.

It's important to note that unusual circumstances drive unusual behaviour on social media. During critical events, such as mass protests, natural disasters and armed conflict, some indicators that might usually seem suspicious can be misleading. For example, waves of recently created accounts could represent inauthentic bot creation but could also be real users driven to platforms for the first time to search for news or participate in discussions. Therefore, such indicators should be analysed with caution and supported with additional evidence, as we have sought to do in this report.

Background to the protests

Thailand has a long history of political instability and civil strife, with democracy repeatedly disrupted by a [strong culture](#) of military intervention and monarchical overreach over the past century. Against that backdrop, the country's political discourse throughout the past decade has increasingly been shaped and amplified by online movements on social media platforms. With more than [52 million social media users](#) among Thailand's 67 million people, the country continues to lead global rankings for online activity and connectivity.

Social media emerged as a key instrument for mobilisation in 2010 during the height of political clashes between [two main political factions](#): the pro-establishment yellow-shirt movement and the populist red-shirt movement. Thai politicians, activists, scholars, civil society and even the government relied on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to access information, influence public discussion, stage political campaigns and engage in information wars against opposition groups.

The most recent coup d'état, staged by current Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha in May 2014 in an attempt to end the coloured-shirt political deadlock and preserve the establishment's power, has been [described](#) as 'the most social-media savvy coup in Thailand'. It was the first ever coup to be announced online, when the military junta declared martial law through the National Council for Peace and Order's official [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) accounts. At the same time, the coup implemented a number of censorship measures, introducing interim media blackouts, televising propaganda campaigns and criminalising public dissent to restrict expression and shape public opinion. When traditional media were restricted by the government, more people joined social media to participate in critical discussions about the country's political situation while [demonstrations against the coup](#) took place around Bangkok.

A new wave of political activism emerged in February 2020 following a ruling by the constitutional court to [dissolve](#) the rising Future Forward Party. Led by Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, the party encouraged political engagement among younger Thais and garnered mass support due to its reformist policies and extensive online campaigning. That wave of activism escalated again in June after the [enforced disappearance](#) of exiled pro-democracy activist Wanchalearm Satsaksit. Those events sparked not only a [countrywide](#) youth-led democracy movement against the military-dominated coalition, but also a nationalist counter-protest movement in support of the establishment. The protests and counter-protests have since [heightened](#) 'the tension on both sides of the increasingly polarised and dangerous political divide in Thailand'.

The current youth movement calls for [three key demands](#) for democratic reform: the dissolution of the current parliament, an end to the intimidation of citizens by the government and amendments to the military-backed Constitution. Reform of the monarchy, by way of reducing the royal family's powers and holding it more accountable to the people, has emerged as [another major demand](#) of the movement. This is significant, considering that open discussion and criticism of the Thai royal establishment have long been silenced due to the country's harsh *lèse majesté* and cybersecurity laws.

In the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, Thai citizens have taken this movement to both online and offline platforms to voice their frustrations and grievances against the government. For months, [digital activism](#) and [public demonstrations](#) (Figure 1) have continued to thrive on a near-daily basis despite mass arrests, emergency decrees that ban public gatherings, physical clashes and aggressive dispersal measures.

Figure 1: Pro-democracy protesters march from the Democracy Monument towards Government House in Bangkok during an anti-government demonstration on 14 October 2020



Source: *Thairath Online*, ประมวลภาพ มวลชนกลุ่มคณะราษฎร เคลื่อนขบวนมุ่งหน้าไปทำเนียบรัฐบาล ('In pictures: Supporters of the People's Party march towards Government House'), *Thairath*, 14 October 2020, [online](#).

Power in online protests

Power operates differently in online spaces. In the physical world, protesters operate in spaces that are almost always controlled by the government. Except in the most extreme circumstances, authorities maintain control through the use of police, military and security agencies. In the digital space, those battles take place on platforms that are ultimately controlled by third parties—the international tech companies. That makes the online dimension of protest movements fundamentally different from their offline component, although both may still complement and influence one another, and in some cases, have prompted governments to take greater control of information flow by censoring content and banning social media networks.

In the online sphere, the power asymmetry between protesters and authorities is both reduced and transformed. Thai authorities are forced to operate in spaces that they can't control to the same degree—spaces in which the social media platforms are the ultimate arbiters. However, authorities can maintain a level of institutional advantage, such as by wielding official and verified accounts with high follower counts and [pressuring platforms](#) to censor content. They may also have access to resources such as bots, paid trolls or other forms of support.

In October 2020, Twitter removed 926 inauthentic accounts that it attributed to the Thai military. Stanford Internet Observatory [found that](#) the information operation sought to promote the Royal Thai Army and coordinate targeted attacks against prominent opposition figures from the Future Forward Party and Move Forward Party. While the network was assessed as being relatively unsophisticated and with low impact, it does help to show that institutional actors in Thailand have both the resources and the will to engage in covert information operations. The Thai Army [responded](#) by calling it a 'misunderstanding', arguing the accounts were anonymous and were not theirs.

That incident also illustrates one of the key ways in which power differs online: the ability of an external actor, in this case Twitter, to disrupt and expose the operation. That disruptive power can, at least to some extent, be co-opted by the protesters. As is discussed below, protesters in Thailand have increasingly begun to wield their ability to report suspected inauthentic accounts to Twitter in a coordinated way, both as a shield and as a weapon against what they perceive as information operations targeting the protest movement. Based on ASPI ICPC's observations, this tactic has resulted in accounts being removed, but the impact and effectiveness of such actions remain unclear.

Institutional power in online spaces

The Thai Government has repeatedly used existing institutional methods, such as [digital surveillance](#), [mass civilian arrests](#) and [lawsuits against major social media platforms](#), to curb online dissent and chill freedom of expression. In September, the government attempted to block more than [2,200 websites and online accounts](#) ahead of organised protests, while another [500,000 posts on social media](#) in support of the pro-democracy movement were targeted for possible criminal prosecutions in November. Access to the Royalist Marketplace, which is a private anti-establishment Facebook group with more than 1 million members, was also [restricted in compliance with a legal request](#) from the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society. Facebook has [reportedly](#) planned its own legal action against the Thai Government in response. However, those measures haven't deterred protesters in Thailand, as they continue to risk their livelihoods and liberty to share their pro-democracy message and shape political discussion online.

The government, in response, is turning to new methods, such as coordinated online activity on social media platforms (Figures 2 and 3). On 25 November, a [leaked briefing presentation](#) revealed that the Royal Thai Army has been training its forces to use Twitter to increase traffic for pro-monarchy hashtags and coordinate targeted attacks against pro-democracy activists. According to the presentation, at least [17,562 Twitter accounts](#) linked to the army were used in a large-scale information operation via Twitter Broadcast and Free Messenger, both of which were [later removed](#) from application distribution platforms. The army has [acknowledged](#) that the leaked presentation is real and claims that it's a training guide for military personnel 'to understand digital media platforms effectively and appropriately'.

Figure 2: Excerpts from a leaked training guide used by the Royal Thai Army for information operations campaigns on Twitter. Left: the organisational structure of the army's Twitter team, divided into 'Operation White', 'Operation Grey/Black' and 'Twitter Broadcast System'. Right: a guide on how to increase pro-establishment traffic by tweet replies

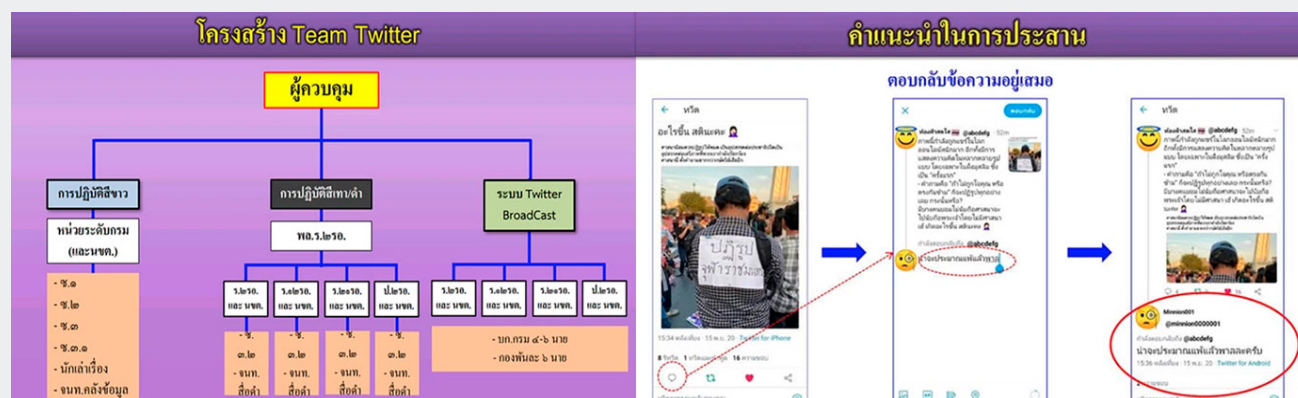


Figure 3: Members of the Royal Thai Army during a briefing titled 'The philosophy of IO'



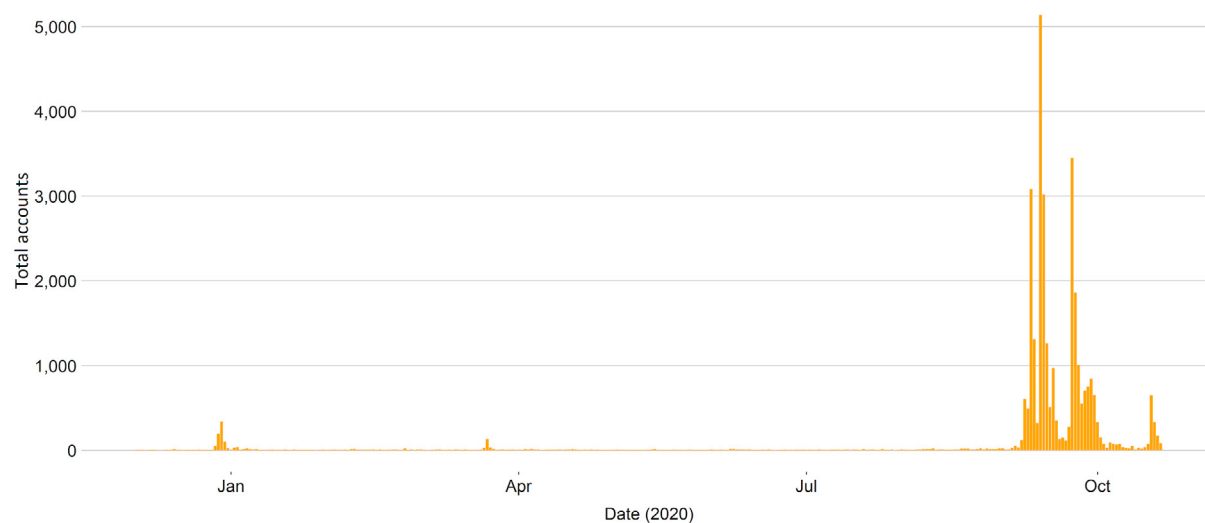
Source: online.

In our analysis of pro-establishment Twitter activity linked to the protests, we found significant indications of coordinated behaviour disseminating content favourable to those in power. Some of that behaviour may be inauthentic by way of repurposed or bot accounts, but it's equally possible that much of it is coming from real users behaving in a coordinated manner. Rapid spikes in pro-establishment Twitter activity could be an indicator of coordination designed to support government interests.

A significant example of the way institutional power offline carries over into online spaces in the context of the protests is the Twitter account @jitarsa_school. The account belongs to the Royal Thai Volunteers School (โรงเรียนจิตอาสาพระราชทาน), which is linked to both the military and the palace under the Royal Security Command. The school is known for its 'Volunteer Spirit 904 Wor Por Ror' training program established by King Maha Vajiralongkorn in 2017, in which civil servants, police authorities, teachers and other community leaders are subjected to 'intensive training in community service and loyalty to the monarchy'. A key component of the training program involves using social media platforms and online chat groups to spread royalist messages.

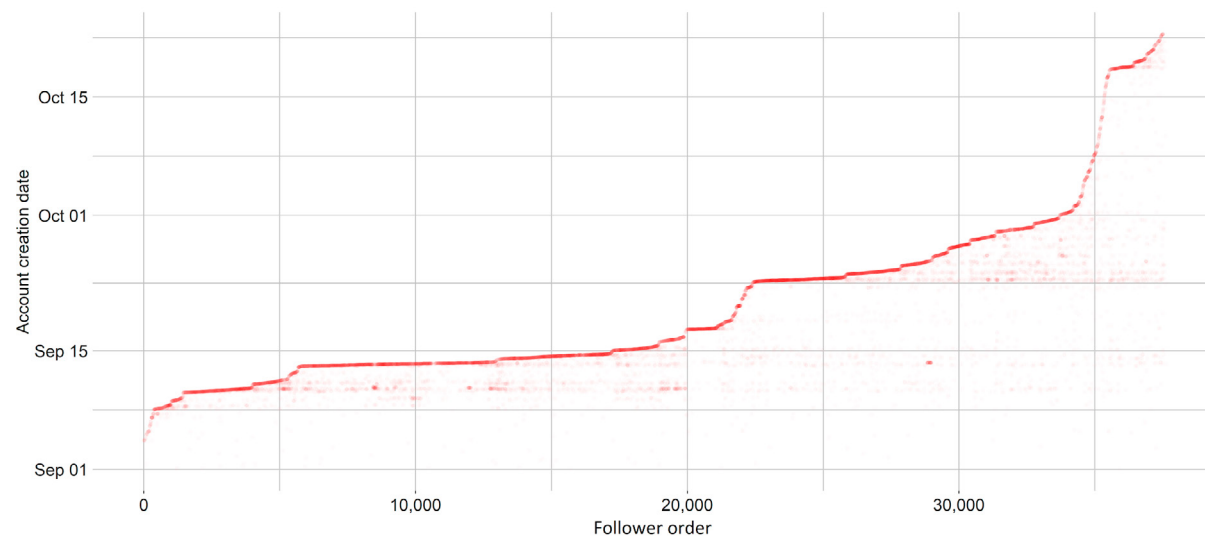
The Jitarsa School Twitter account was created on 4 September and shared positive content about the Thai establishment. As of 23 October, when our analysis was conducted, the account had 37,602 followers. More than 20,000 of them were created in one fortnight between 11 and 25 September 2020. Of the accounts using pro-establishment hashtags in our dataset, 15,072 were also following the Jitarsa School Twitter account (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Account creations by @jitarsa_school followers



Jitarsa School followers that were created on the same day also tended to follow the account sequentially, one after another. Twitter's application programming interface (API) orders the followers list of accounts by displaying the most recent follower first. Figure 5 plots the order in which accounts followed the Jitarsa School and the accounts' creation dates. Mass account creations and the behaviour of regiments sequentially following the Jitarsa School account suggest the likelihood of coordinated behaviour, although it may also reflect coordinated efforts by real users rather than, for example, inauthentic bot creation.

Figure 5: Follower order of accounts plotted against account creation dates



Looking at the followers' behaviour, there appear to be four types of accounts affiliated with the Jitarsa School account.

- The followers: 12,568 accounts (33.4%) had no likes or tweets and simply just followed the Jitarsa School account.
- The retweeters: 3,876 accounts (10.3%) only retweeted and had no likes.
- The likers: 5,654 accounts (15.0%) only liked content and had no tweets or retweets.
- The remaining accounts (41.2%) behaved more human-like and tended to both like and retweet content.

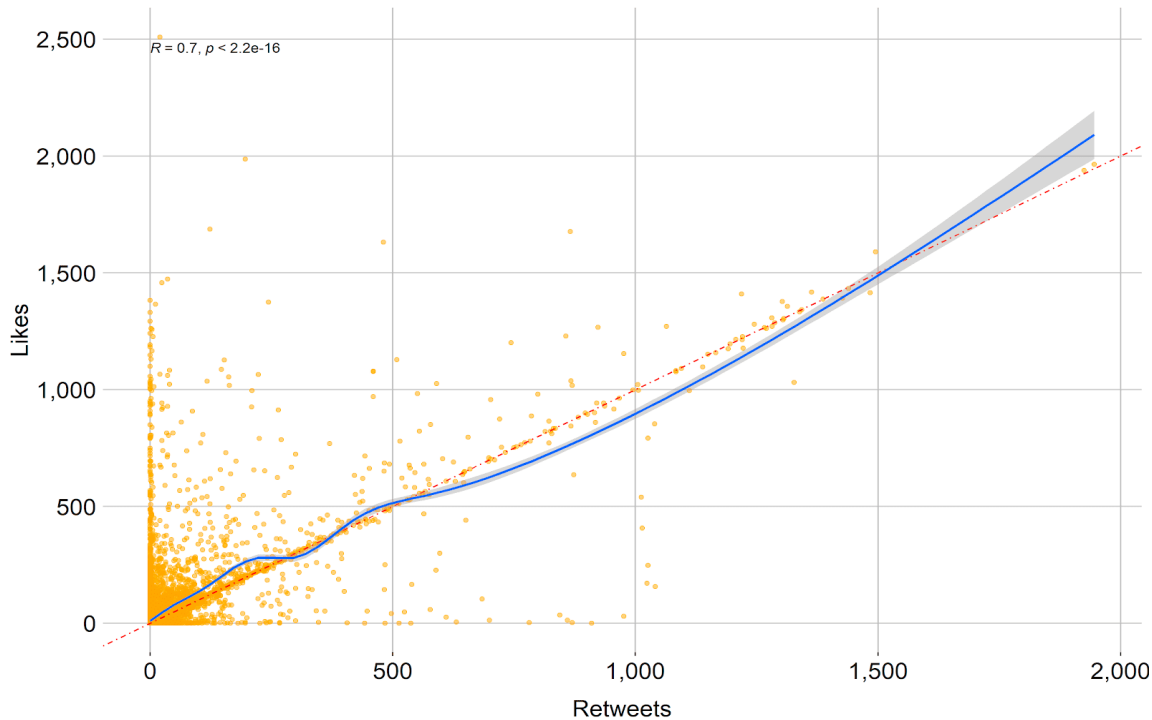
The Jitarsa School account's activity is unusual, in that its tweets routinely generate high levels of likes and retweets but proportionally very few comments (Figure 6). Organic tweets that generate similarly high levels of likes and retweets are usually accompanied by a higher proportion of comments.

Figure 6: A tweet on 25 October from the Jitarsa School account, which garnered 1,100 likes, 546 retweets and just one comment



The engagement profile of Jitarsa School followers can also be analysed to determine unusual behaviour. In Figure 7, each orange dot represents one account's historical engagement. The number of times an account has retweeted is shown on the horizontal axis, and the number of times the account has liked a tweet is shown on the vertical axis. The followers mostly engaged with the Jitarsa School account but have also retweeted and liked other pro-establishment accounts. Accounts on the red dashed line have equal numbers of retweets and likes. The blue line represents a correlation model of the relationship between retweets and likes for accounts in this dataset. For example, for accounts with fewer than 300 retweets tended to like more than retweet. Note also several accounts on the 'Likes' axis with many likes but no or very few retweets.

Figure 7: Number of retweets plotted against likes for each Jitarsa follower



Taken together, these indicators reflect highly unusual patterns for organic social media activity. This pattern of behaviour may be indicative of a bot network. In this case, however, it may also be that real people are being organised or encouraged to promote the account's content, which presents a positive view of the Thai Government and broader pro-establishment movement.

This behaviour may not be deemed as inauthentic under a strict interpretation of [Twitter's policies](#), and it raises questions about where the lines are between offline coordination that is considered acceptable and that which is not, such as the use of paid online trolls or supporters.

Twitter ultimately [suspended](#) the Jitarsa School account on 30 November for spam and platform manipulation. The account had more than 48,000 followers at the time it was suspended. Prasit Jeawkok, businessman and guest lecturer at the Jitarsa School, later [disclosed](#) on 1 December that the school and several of his software development companies were linked to the army's information operations campaign.

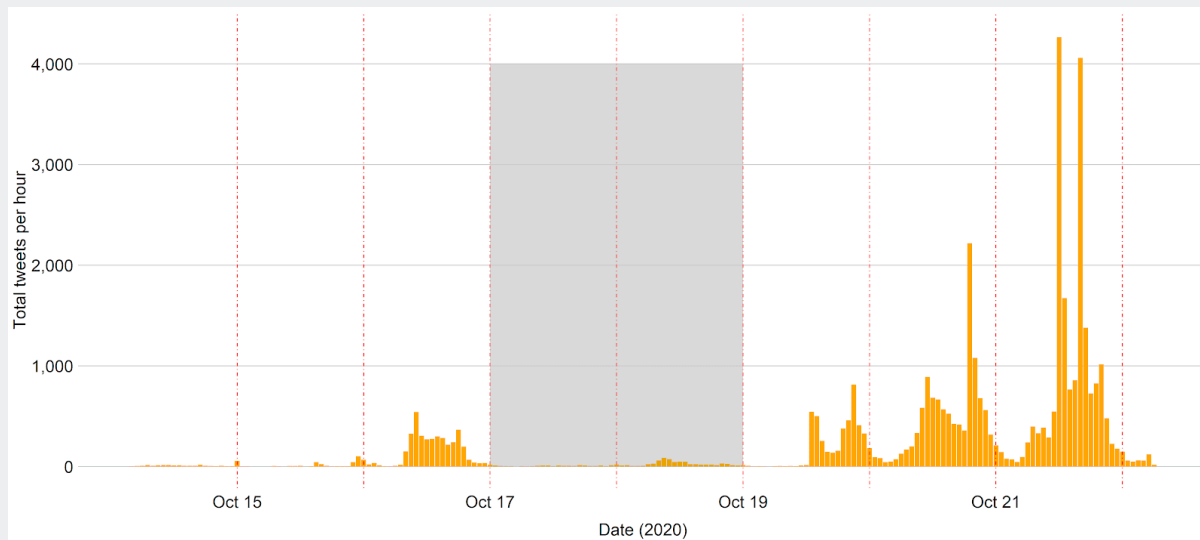
Pro-establishment activity

Looking at the broader pro-establishment Twitter discourse, ASPI ICPC collected 40,455 tweets and retweets between 13 and 22 October 2020 that were using the following pro-establishment hashtags:

- [#เรารักในหลวง](#) ([#WeLoveTheKing](#))
- [#เรารักสถาบันพระมหากษัตริย์](#) ([#WeLoveTheRoyalEstablishment](#))
- [#อนุชนคนรักชาติศาสน์กษัตริย์](#) ([#NextGenPeopleLoveTheEstablishment](#))
- [#ราษฎรไทยใต้ร่มพระบารมี](#) ([#ThaiCitizensUnderRoyalGrace](#))
- [#สำนึกในพระมหากรุณาธิคุณใต้ร่มพระบารมี](#) ([#ProfoundGratitudeForTheRoyalBenevolence](#)).

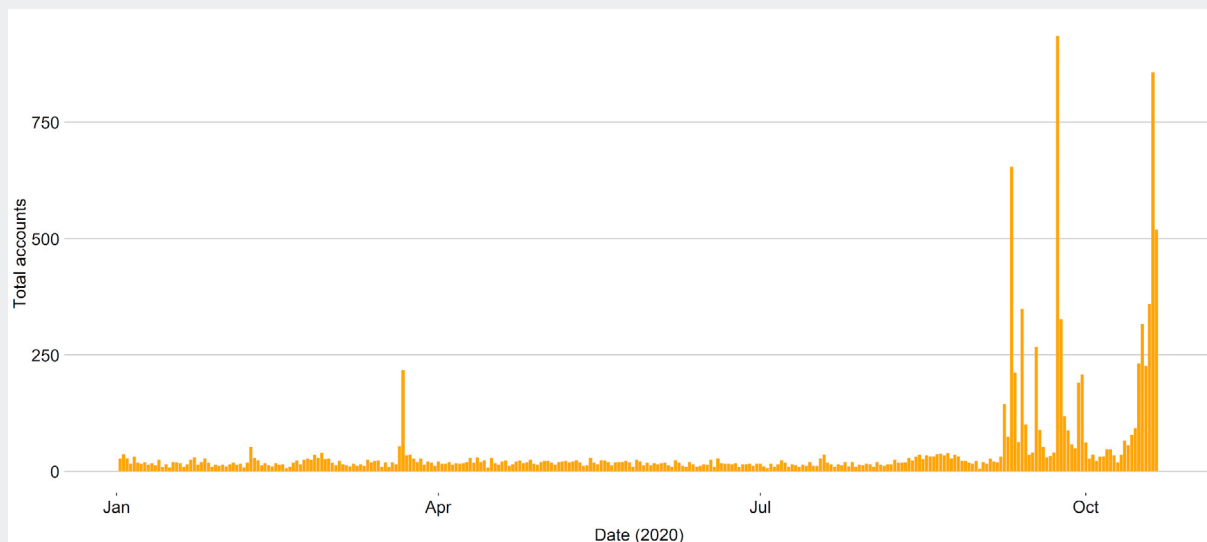
Tweeting activity in Thailand tended to peak during daytime (Figure 8), with quieter times around 4 am (UTC +7 Thailand time). In the figure below, tweeting activity appeared to drop off on the weekend, where casual tweeters would normally be expected to either increase or maintain their levels of activity.

Figure 8: Tweeting activity for the five pro-establishment hashtags by hour (UTC +7 Thailand time); weekends are shaded grey



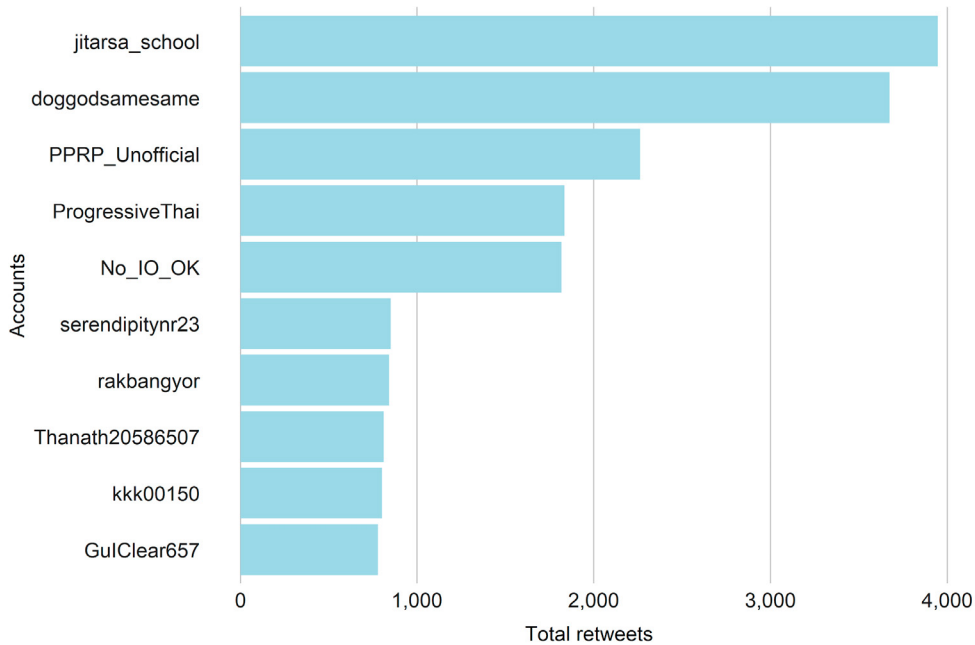
Of all the accounts using these hashtags, 12.97% (2,446 accounts) were created on three days: 10 September, 23 September and 10 October (Figure 9). Specific days with unusually high amounts of account creation may be an indication of coordinated behaviour, whether authentic or inauthentic.

Figure 9: Creation dates for accounts using pro-establishment hashtags



Of all the tweets, over 92% of the collected posts associated with pro-establishment hashtags were in fact retweets (Figure 10). The most popular accounts using the hashtags and being retweeted were pro-government affiliated accounts, [anti-establishment accounts](#) and [K-Pop fan accounts](#).

Figure 10: Accounts being retweeted ordered by number of times retweeted



There are reasons to suspect that some of this activity may be inauthentic and designed to amplify a pro-establishment narrative. For example, there are cases of what appear to be former marketing bots being repurposed to support the pro-establishment narrative in the Thai protests. There's a vibrant global market in such bot accounts, which can be purchased relatively cheaply and in bulk. The account shown in Figure 11, for example, advertised products and services in English in 2012, went dormant for eight years, and 'woke up' in January speaking Thai and engaging in political discussions. The account's banner and profile pictures have also been changed. This is suspicious behaviour and could signify inauthentic activity.

Figure 11: @voravito's account timeline



In other cases, the same profile pictures have been used for multiple recently created accounts. Those accounts have then gone on to engage with similar or the same content, such as by retweeting the same tweet in quick succession (Figures 12, 13 and 14).

Figure 12: Timelines and activity of accounts with identical profile pictures

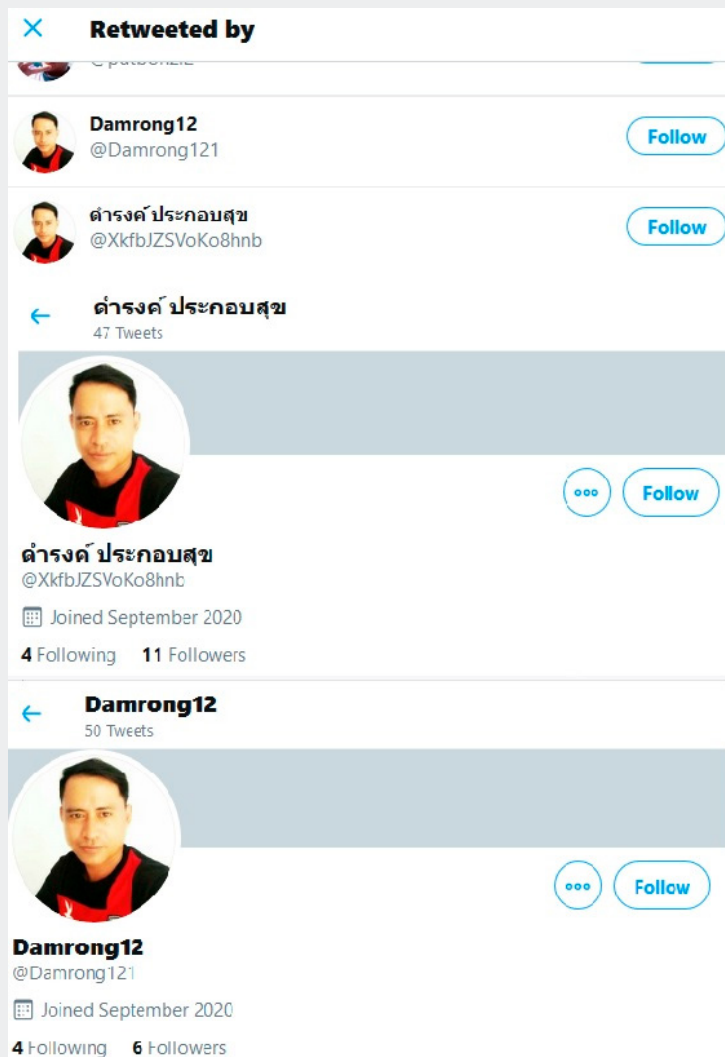


Figure 13: A tweet by user @keanureevesmore identifying coordinated inauthentic activity by unusual accounts under the hashtag #พลังเงียบ (#SilentPower)



Figure 14: A tweet that's been shared by unusual accounts



Note: While the caption is identical, the tweets end with a combination of different symbols, possibly to avoid being flagged as spam by Twitter. The caption translates to 'Before, we were just a #SilentPower. Now, it is time for us to protect the establishment for our father. Bless be the King as the source of our strength #KeepFightingKing'.

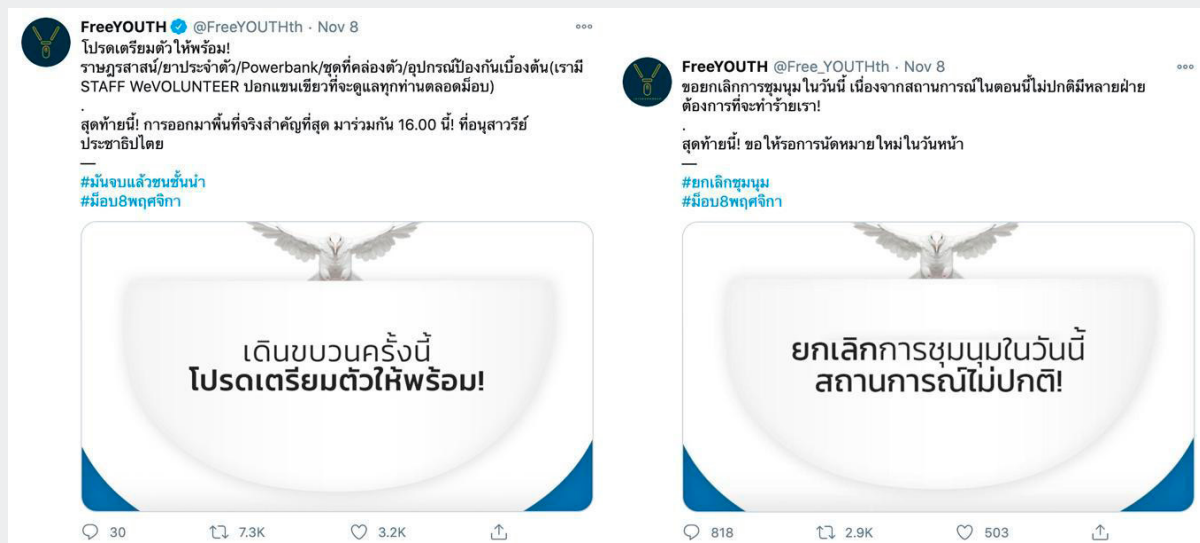
Truth and trust in the online protest movement

The protesters are extremely aware of the potential use of inauthentic bot accounts and information operations (referred to by many protesters as ‘IO’ or ‘ไอโอ’) promoting pro-establishment narratives and working against the protest movement. That heightened awareness has driven coordinated pushback against suspected IOs, mostly by way of mass-reporting accounts that are deemed suspicious. The effect of this tactic remains unclear, as both the precise numbers of accounts removed and the specific reasons for removal by Twitter are often opaque.

For example, a fake account purporting to be the pro-democracy activist group ‘Free Youth’ attempted to spread misinformation online with the likely intention of undermining the pro-democracy movement and confusing protesters to deter them from joining the demonstrations. The fake account adopted a near-identical persona and posted substantially similar content to the original account—a potential violation of [Twitter’s platform manipulation and spam policy](#).

On 8 November, the official Free Youth account posted a tweet urging pro-democracy protesters to come prepared for a public demonstration with essential goods and protective gear, while the same fake account announced that the scheduled demonstration had been cancelled due to a heightened risk of violence by unnamed parties (Figure 15). A number of Twitter users identified this fake account and called for mass-reporting. The fake account was consequently [suspended](#) by Twitter.

Figure 15: Left: a tweet made by the official Free Youth Movement account, which has been verified by Twitter (@FreeYOUTHth). Right: a tweet made by the fake Free Youth Movement account (@Free_YOUTHth)



Multiple accounts have since been created to share the handles of suspected inauthentic accounts and encourage others to mass-report them to Twitter. For example, the account @IOwarningbotTH was created on 17 October and had amassed more than 17,100 followers by 23 November (Figure 16). The account seeks to provide an ongoing list of accounts and hashtags suspected of being involved in inauthentic information operations.

Figure 16: Account profile and timeline of @IOwarningbotTH



The pro-democracy movement was also subjected to multiple [coordinated online attacks](#) from the nationalist pro-establishment side. In one case, three high profile pro-democracy Twitter accounts owned by Free Youth (@FreeYOUTHth) and its leaders Tattep Ruangprapaikitseree (@FordtattepRuang) and Panumas Singprom (@JamesPanumas) were suspended soon after the group announced the organisation of a large-scale demonstration in Bangkok. While Twitter [stated](#) that the three accounts violated the platform's policies, it later reversed its decision and quickly reactivated them. Several cybersecurity experts and political commentators suggested that the suspensions may have resulted from mass-reporting, causing the accounts to be [temporarily suspended](#) pending further review. It was later found that several pro-establishment accounts had been [openly discussing](#) the mass-reporting of accounts that they deemed to be 'IOs seeking to destroy the establishment'. While Twitter has yet to provide an official statement on its actions, this incident suggests that differentiating authentic behaviour from inauthentic behaviour can prove difficult, even for social media platforms.

This kind of citizen-led activism against organised information campaigns is a double-edged sword. Increased awareness of the risks of disinformation campaigns and how they can be used against protest movements can help support democratic values and free expression (Figure 17). Seen through one lens, this grassroots response is a way of shifting power away from those controlling potential information operations and back to the people.

On the other hand, accurately identifying bot accounts is complicated, and identifying real people behaving in an inauthentic manner is even more difficult. There's a risk of genuine, authentic Twitter users being swept up in such mass-reporting campaigns, thereby undermining their own rights to freedom of expression.

Figure 17: A tweet by user @kung_hun recommending that newly registered pro-establishment users undertake organic activities such as tweeting, retweeting, mentioning and direct messaging to reduce the likelihood of being reported and suspended by pro-democracy users



The general erosion of trust, the growth of polarisation and the tendency to dismiss dissenting opinions as something that could only be the result of duplicity or disinformation are all potentially harmful long-term implications of the focus on hunting and reporting suspected IO accounts. The complicated dynamics of the debate over IOs in the Thai protests raise questions that extend far beyond Thailand's borders. One of the commonly posited 'solutions' to disinformation is education and raising awareness. However, heightened or even hypervigilance against disinformation and information operations can come with unintended consequences, as this case demonstrates.

International elements in national protests

Another key difference between online and offline protest dynamics is the participation and engagement of a broader range of actors online. There's no evidence to suggest that there's been any significant involvement of international actors on the ground in Thailand. However, diverse voices, including global leaders, international activists, social media platforms and even conspiracy theorists, have been joining in online to shape information, discussions, narratives and opinions surrounding the protests. This is in large part a result of increasing efforts by Thai Twitter users to share content in various languages and seek international support, both for and against the pro-democracy movement. English-language hashtags such as [#WhatIsHappeningInThailand](#), [#PrayForThailand](#) and [#RespectThaiDemocracy](#) have been used by pro-democracy protesters to boost international visibility and pressure authorities to refrain from violence, while nationalists and ultraroyalist groups have used the hashtags [#KingdomOfThailand](#) and [#SaveTheKing](#) simultaneously (Figures 18 and 19).

Figure 18: A tweet by user @218rinbw_ sharing pro-democracy infographics in multiple languages and amplifying the post via the English hashtag #WhatsHappeningInThailand



RAINBOWHOPE

@218rinbw_

ooo

#whatshappeninginthailand



9:23 PM · Oct 15, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

9.9K Retweets 62 Quote Tweets 2.7K Likes

Figure 19: Screenshot of a tweet by user @mycutestkittens sharing a video of Thai authorities firing blue-coloured water laced with a chemical agent to disperse pro-democracy protesters



Note: The caption translates to 'This clip has 7.9 m views, nearly 8 m. Keep retweeting. Don't let it disappear from your timelines. Let the whole world know they are attacking citizens #16OctMob #17OctMob #16OctToPathumwanIntersection #17OctToRatchaprasong #WhatIsHappeningInThailand'. The tweet garnered more than 41,000 retweets, while the video received 19.5 million views.

International solidarity

Perhaps the most significant example of international engagement with the protest movement has been through the Milk Tea Alliance, which is an online movement that started as an [overnight war](#) of viral tweets, internet memes, spam posts and popular culture references between Chinese and Thai users over the recognition of Hong Kong and independence for Taiwan. The [alliance](#), which was popularised by Twitter users in Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan through their shared love for the popular Asian drink, became a symbolic movement for young people in the region pushing back against authoritarian governments and fighting for their democratic rights. A number of users from other countries have also participated in the alliance amid rising tensions with China. Australia, for example, was included as an [honorary member](#) of the alliance in April 2020 after its government faced backlash by the Chinese Government for proposing an independent inquiry into the Covid-19 outbreak.

The alliance has become a powerful online movement, having transcended from digital activism to physical action in multiple countries within just six months. As the pro-democracy movement in Thailand gained momentum, Thai protesters mobilised the hashtag [#MilkTeaAlliance](#) on Twitter to amplify their demands, goals and rhetoric to a wider global audience. This led to waves of support by international activists, foreign media outlets and human rights organisations. It also contributed to the organisation of [simultaneous Thai pro-democracy protests](#) in major cities around the world, including [Berlin](#), [London](#), [New York](#), [Sydney](#) and [Tokyo](#). Grassroots movements in the region have also relied on the alliance to [draw parallels](#) and inspire one another through [protest-sharing](#). For example, Hong Kong users have encouraged Thai protesters to deploy fluid and adaptable [tactics](#) to confound the authorities during demonstrations, while Thai activists have organised [mini-protests](#) and [flag raising](#) in solidarity with Hong Kong, Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang (Figure 20).

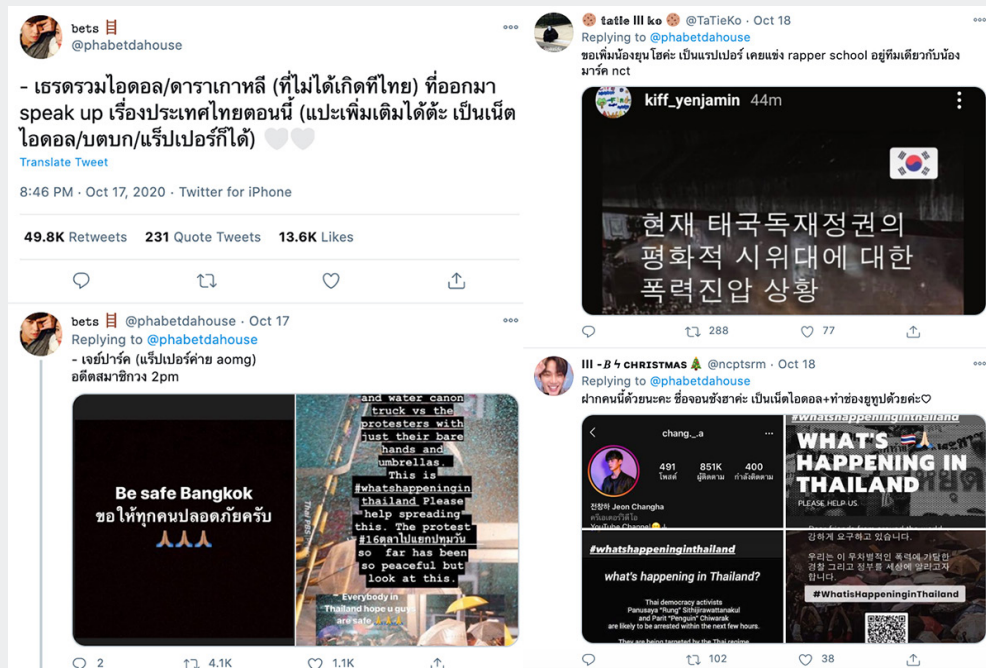
Figure 20: A tweet by user @KuroElse sharing a video of the Hong Kong Black Bauhinia, Taiwanese Independence Movement, Tibetan and the East Turkestan Movement's flags in support of the Milk Tea Alliance at a pro-democracy protest in Bangkok



International solidarity for the protest movement has also been widely promoted through [K-Pop fandom activism](#). Twitter is the most popular social media platform for the global K-Pop community, with around [6.1 billion K-Pop related tweets](#) made between July 2019 and June 2020. Thailand currently ranks first in the world, ahead of South Korea and the United States, as the largest

market of K-Pop by tweet volume. Young pro-democracy activists in Thailand, many who are highly engaged K-Pop fans, have [taken to the platform](#) to attract international support from overseas fan communities, as well as Korean idols and celebrities. Over the past few months, Thai K-Pop fans have mobilised their vast social media presence to collectively raise political awareness, spam pro-establishment hashtags, and donate money in support of the protests, often in the names of their favourite stars.

Figure 21: Left: A Twitter thread by user @phabstdahouse compiling a list of Korean idols and celebrities that have supported the Thai pro-democracy movement. Right: Other K-Pop fans contributing to the thread



International conspiracies

While extensive international support and media coverage have led to greater awareness about the Thai pro-democracy movement, there also appears to be a growing web of internationalised conspiracy theories surrounding the protests.

A key element of the disinformation campaigns that have previously targeted the Hong Kong protests and now Thailand's pro-democracy movement on Twitter is the spreading of conspiracy theories about the supposed 'black hand' of shadowy Western actors, whether that be the Central Intelligence Agency, the US's National Endowment for Democracy or billionaire philanthropist George Soros (previously analysed in our reports [Tweeting through the Great Firewall](#) and [Retweeting through the Great Firewall](#)).

Those rumours tap into a rich history of conspiracy theories regarding covert foreign interference and intelligence involvement by the West in protests and other emerging social movements around the world. As the pro-democracy movement is receiving public support from high-profile Hong Kong protesters such as Joshua Wong, Nathan Law and Badiucao, specific links are being drawn between the protests in Hong Kong and Thailand by a wide range of actors.

In an [opinion piece](#) in the Chinese state-run media outlet *Global Times* titled 'Behind-scenes funding of Thailand protests show invisible Western hands', the deputy director of China's Military Diplomacy Research Center of the College of International Relations, National University of Defense Technology Yu Qun wrote that:

[I]t is not hard to find that the current riots in Bangkok resemble the 2019 Hong Kong turmoil ... It is worth noting that some Hong Kong rioters, including their leader Joshua Wong, have publicly supported Thai anti-government protests ... The Thai government and mainstream media believe that anti-government forces in the country have colluded with the US and other Western countries to use young people with the ultimate goal to overthrow the current political system in Thailand. Those forces aim to bring in pro-West political proxies to rule the country with Western-styled democracy. It is essentially a 'colour revolution'.

In October 2020, Brian Berletic, an American industrial designer living in Thailand, [revealed himself](#) to be behind several pseudonyms that he used to write multiple blogs and articles focused on Thai politics. That included writing as 'Tony Cartalucci' for outlets such as *New Eastern Outlook*, which has been [identified](#) by the US State Department as a source of Russian disinformation and propaganda.

Some of Berletic's accounts have been [removed from Facebook](#) for using 'fake accounts to create fictitious personas and run pages, increase engagement, disseminate content, and also to drive people to off-platform blogs posing as news outlets'. Berletic's audience [reportedly](#) includes prominent pro-establishment figures such as Suthep Thaugsuban, former deputy prime minister and leader of the People's Democratic Reform Committee, who led the [anti-government shutdown protests](#) that would later set the stage for the 2014 military coup.

Berletic's blogs and videos have been spreading the conspiracy theory that Western backers are behind the current protests in Thailand. Between 22 October and 8 November 2020, Berletic published at least 16 articles on his *Land Destroyer* blog claiming that the US was responsible for arming and training protesters. The articles were then cross-posted on his *Alt Thai News* blog. That followed an August blog entry titled '[The complete guide: US Government role in Thailand's "student protests"](#)', which claimed that 'Virtually every aspect of "student protests" in Thailand are funded and backed by the US and aimed at destabilizing a key partner of China, reversing Thai-Chinese relations, and advancing Washington's Beijing containment policy.'

The international conspiracy theories swirling online are affecting the situation on the ground in Thailand. For example, Haruthai Muangboonsri, a high-profile supporter of Prime Minister Prayut, has led several [small protests](#) accusing the US Ambassador to Thailand Michael George DeSombre and George Soros of interfering in Thai politics and attempting to change Thailand's constitution. Several Thai politicians including Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, Social Development and Human Security Minister Juti Krairiksh and Senator Charnwit Polcheewin have also been [pushing these conspiracy theories in parliament](#).

Figure 22: A tweet by user @NightPhoomin using old images taken years before the 2020 protests to claim that prominent Thai activist Parit Chiwarak (Penguin) was chosen as the ‘figurehead’ of the pro-democracy movement with the support of Finland, Hong Kong and the US



Note: The first image is of Sondhi Limthongkul, a former Thai media tycoon and leader of the pro-establishment People's Alliance for Democracy group. Sondhi, who was charged with corporate fraud but released from prison last year on royal pardon, now hosts a talk show that regularly promotes right-wing conspiracy theories. The other images show Parit with former US Ambassador to Thailand Glyn Davies, former Finnish Ambassador to Thailand Kirsti Westphalen, and Hong Kong activist Joshua Wong.

Furthermore, the Internet Law Reform Dialogue (iLaw) civil society organisation, which has [submitted](#) a constitution amendment bill to the Thai Parliament, has been [accused](#) by ultraroyalist groups of receiving foreign funding from 'the Open Society Foundation, of Jewish financial wizard George Soros and, hence, its draft amendment was crafted to favour foreign interests' (Figure 22).

Figure 23: Tweets promoting the conspiracy theory that George Soros is directing or influencing iLaw's proposed constitutional amendments to benefit the United States; note that the tweet on the left cites Berletic's Land Destroyer blog as its source.

blue.nave @blue_nave

George Soros คนที่ทำเศรษฐกิจไทยเสียหายอย่างหนัก เมื่อปี 40 ดังนั้น เราจะให้ iLaw ที่เป็นองค์กรที่ได้รับเงินสนับสนุนจากต่างประเทศ มาเปลี่ยนแปลงรัฐธรรมนูญไทยไม่ได้ **#ต้องช่วยกันเอาความจริงออกมา #ไม่เลือกพวกล้มเจ้า**

Translate Tweet

iLaw
ไม่ใช่พ่อแล้ว iLaw มาจากไหน?

USA เป็นฝ่ายต่อต้านรัฐบาลจีน

เงินทางไปหาเสียง 19-25 ก.ย. 2561

สนับสนุนมือไม่ออก

George Soros

iLaw

ตั้งใจรวบรวม 5 หมื่นรายชื่อ

แก้ไขรัฐธรรมนูญ

นำ 'พลเมือง' เริ่มร่างแก้ไขรัฐธรรมนูญ

จีนต้องให้ 'โอเพ่นซอร์ส' ไม่รู้ก็ไปเข้าจีนเรื่อง

เดลิเวอรี่ต่อต้านรัฐบาลจีน

จีน

สุดท้ายก็ไปอยู่ที่สุดของไทย

นโยบายต่อต้านเงินของสหรัฐฯ พยายามดึงไทยให้กลับไปหนุนสหรัฐฯ

สหรัฐฯ สนับสนุนให้มีการแก้ไขรัฐธรรมนูญไทย เพื่อให้จบต่อพรรคการเมืองที่หนุนหลังสหรัฐฯ (ทักษิณ, เป้งไทย)

เว็บไซต์ 'iLaw' ระบุข้อมูล Open Society ของ George Soros เป็นผู้สนับสนุน

รัฐธรรมนูญเป็นกฎหมายสูงสุด ไม่ควรถูกแทรกแซงจาก สป.ก.

แหล่งข้อมูล: Land Destroyer

2:21 PM · Nov 10, 2020 · Twitter for Android

Umeke @Umeke19014765

Replying to @Umeke19014765 and @SpokespersonCHN

Tomorrow the youth will pressure Government to pass draft of iLaw's constitution and throw away Thailand constitution. iLaw supported by Groge Soros of OSF, NED, Heinrich Boll Stiftung. If it pass Thailand will be slave of USA and Soros. Please save us.

๗ เหตุผลที่ต้องคว่ำข้อเสนอแก้ไขรัฐธรรมนูญของ iLaw by Soros

7:37 AM · Nov 17, 2020 · Twitter for Android

two sides of coins @Nandy114

Well, for those who still have not aware the fact that ILAW's draft constitution is not legitimate, it's bcos the organization is funded by foreigners where George Soros who attacked n ruined thailand's financial is one of them! **#ไม่เอาiLaw #WhatHappenInThailand**

Aorsome @Aorsome15 · Nov 16

No free country would let any organization funded by foreign entities draft their constitution!#ไม่เอาiLaw #whatishappeninginthailand กระจายหน้าจาก iLaw : Sondhitalk (ผู้เผยแพร่เรื่อง) EP.59 youtu.be/9Kiz2hsmptc via @YouTube

3:23 PM · Nov 16, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

7 Retweets 2 Quote Tweets 5 Likes

These conspiracy theories, which have been **openly anti-Semitic** in some cases, are influenced by the much broader panoply of conspiracy theories around the world that use George Soros as a bogeyman, from **anti-vaxxers** to **far-right movements** across Europe and the US. This cross-propagation of conspiracy theories can be mutually reinforcing. Local variants are used as 'proof' for internationalised conspiracy theories and vice versa. In Thailand, this feedback loop of garbled information, misinformation and conspiracy theories continues to be spread at the local level by those whose interests it serves, including **royalist groups**, **conservative right-wing media** and **members of government** who seek to undermine the legitimacy of the protest movement and spread mistrust among those involved in the protests.

Summary

Social media and digital activism have been crucial in Thailand's tumultuous politics for several years, and the steady evolution of tactics on the part of the government, the military and protesters reflects an increasingly sophisticated new battleground for democracy.

In this report, we've analysed samples of Twitter data relating to the online manifestation of contemporary political protests in Thailand. We've sought to explore key ways in which the online manifestation of the protests differs from its offline counterpart. That includes how power dynamics operate differently in online spaces, where institutional actors such as the government wield power through censorship measures, repressive laws and coordinated information operations and where protesters can use the weight of numbers to push back and fight for their democratic rights. We've also explored how the international range of actors engaging in the protests online shapes the evolution of both solidarity and conspiracy theories.

Note

- 1 Here we draw the definition from [Twitter's policy](#) on the inauthentic behaviours that constitute platform manipulation: "You may not use Twitter's services in a manner intended to artificially amplify or suppress information or engage in behavior that manipulates or disrupts people's experience on Twitter".

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