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# Exploring the Civil Disobedience Movement of Civilians in Thailand, 2020-2021: Context, Conflict, and Nonviolent Action

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### ABSTRACT

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This study explores the civil disobedience movement of civilians in Thailand from 2020 to 2021, a critical period in Thailand's recent history marked by widespread civil disobedience and political unrest. This period is pivotal for research due to its significant implications. Beyond addressing the contextual and conflictual aspects, the research examines nonviolent action by identifying its types and methods and categorizing them within an applied framework. Using qualitative methodology, the study gathered primary and secondary data for analysis. The theoretical framework was applied flexibly, allowing for a nuanced examination and integration of the data into the established framework. Consequently, five types and thirteen methods were identified within three overarching categories of nonviolent action - protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and intervention. Five types comprised protests and demonstrations, online activism and campaigns, general strikes, the occupation of public spaces, and persuasion. Then, methods were marches on public thoroughfares, signs, slogans and demands, speeches, artwork, symbolic acts of resistance, the dissemination of information about the movement, forming networks and alliances, boycotts, political demands as part of strikes, disrupting and disobeying normal societal functions, drawing attention, and blocking public spaces through public rallies. The arguments in the study that the 2020-2021 Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) of civilians in Thailand was not only a nonviolent action but also involved violent behavior and that the nonviolent CDM failed due to unmet political demands were conclusively validated.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The year 2020-2021 was a critical phase in Thailand's history, marked by widespread civil disobedience and political unrest. This period was significant for several reasons, making it a pivotal focus for research. During 2020-2021, Thailand witnessed unprecedented protests and a CDM primarily led by young activists and students. Demands for democratic reforms drove these movements, the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, and the reform of the monarchy's role in Thai politics. The CDM during this time was characterized by both nonviolent actions and instances of violent confrontation, reflecting a complex interplay of peaceful protest and an aggressive backlash. The protests in Thailand during 2020-2021 captured international attention and highlighted the deep-seated issues within the country's political landscape (Khongkachonkiet, 2021; Wright, 2021). Likewise, the movement's impact on Thai society and politics and the government's response provides a rich context for analyzing the dynamics of civil disobedience and political change.

It is attractive to identify the results of the nonviolent aspects of the 2020-2021 CDM in achieving its political objectives, highlighting the challenges contemporary protest movements face in highly flawed democratic contexts similar to authoritarian regimes (The Economic Intelligence Unit, 2022). It noted that the Thai government's crackdown on protesters involved excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, and a raft of repressive laws, which significantly impeded the movement's ability to sustain its momentum and achieve its goals (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Khongkachonkiet, 2021).

Therefore, this study aims to address a specific academic gap by examining the existing literature and well-known and reliable news media and websites to determine its existence. Previous studies might have addressed various aspects of civil disobedience in Thailand or other contexts. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies specifically focusing on the CDM of civilians in Thailand during the critical period of 2020-2021. Through meticulously exploring the 2020-2021 CDM of civilians in Thailand, the research seeks to provide nuanced insights into the context, conflict and associated nonviolent actions. Additionally, two research hypotheses are presented: (1) the 2020-2021 CDM of civilians in Thailand was not only a non-violent action but also involved violent behavior and (2) Thailand's 2020-2021 nonviolent CDM failed due to unmet political demands.

## **Research Purpose**

This study aimed to explore the CDM of civilians in Thailand from 2020 to 2021.

## **Research Question**

The primary research question that guided this study was: What were the context, the conflict and the nonviolent actions employed by civilians in the CDM in Thailand between 2020 and 2021?

## **Research Objective**

Similarly, the research objective was to identify these elements and utilize the applied methodology in this study by exploring existing literature and well-known and reliable news media and websites to address the research question comprehensively.

## **Significance of Research**

This study aimed to explore the CDM of civilians in Thailand from 2020 to 2021. This period marked a critical phase in Thailand's history, characterized by widespread civil disobedience and political unrest. The protests, primarily led by young activists and students, demanded democratic reforms, the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha, and a reform of the monarchy's role in Thai politics. The international attention that these protests garnered highlighted deep-seated political issues within Thailand and underscored the movement's international impact. The movement involved both nonviolent actions and instances of violent confrontation, providing a rich context for analyzing the interplay between peaceful protests and an aggressive backlash. Likewise, the Thai government's repressive response, including excessive use of force and arbitrary detentions, significantly impeded the movement's ability to achieve its goals. This study fills a specific academic gap by uniquely combining an examination of nonviolent actions, the complex interplay between nonviolent and violent behaviors, and Thailand's specific political and social circumstances during this time. It provides nuanced insights into the types and methods of nonviolent actions, contributing to a broader understanding of nonviolent strategies in political movements. By laying out two hypotheses, the study can explore the nature of CDMs and nonviolence, applying theories to understand the situation and determine contrasting phenomena. Thailand is a unique example, and this research also provides a foretaste of the conflict's aftermath.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW: CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AND NONVIOLENCE**

According to Ryan in *Critique of Nonviolent Politics: From Mahatma Gandhi to the Anti-*

Nuclear Movement, "civil disobedience, a protest tactic involves consciously breaking the law and peacefully accepting arrest or other consequences. Civil disobedience is a dramatic, intense demonstration of protesters' convictions. It is a powerful tool for "drawing public attention..." (Ryan, 2002, p. 142).

Mahatma Gandhi, a pioneer of nonviolent civil disobedience, also employed civil disobedience as a central strategy in the struggle for Indian independence from British colonial rule. Although the independence of India was not primarily the result of Gandhi's nonviolent movement, it is widely believed that Gandhi was politically influential with his nonviolent campaign (Gandhi, 1938; Ryan, 2002, p. 56). Gandhi was able to make nonviolence effective on a national scale (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2017). However, according to Gandhi, since civil disobedience must be nonviolent, nonviolent nonviolence must be perfected by Luther. Nonviolence alone cannot constitute effective civil disobedience; it was deemed impossible at specific points in history. Then, the standardization of the meaning and content of nonviolence would be different (Gandhi, 1938, p. 7). However, disobedience, as defined by Gandhi, is passive resistance. It is the opposite of resistance by arms. His passive resistance included disobeying the government's laws incompatible with his conscience and accepting the penalty for its breach by personal suffering and sacrifice of self (Gandhi, 1938). According to Rawls (1971), civil disobedience is a public, nonviolent, conscientious, yet political act contrary to the law, usually done to change laws or government policies. In this sense, nonviolence as action is a basis for civil disobedience.

Gandhi's nonviolent strategy was a model for the civil rights struggles of the 1960s in the U.S. Martin Luther King applied Gandhi's principles during the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and in many of the dramatic struggles that followed. Gandhi's theory and methods have influenced anti-war and anti-nuclear movements (Ryan, 2002, p. 56). The Salt March of 1930, a peaceful protest against British colonial rule, was a prominent action and even gained potential towards national independence (Ryan, 2002, pp. 87–96). King adopted Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolent action in his situation. Nonviolent action by Luther King against racism, war, and psychological slavery was an excellent example of the success of the nonviolent method on a mass scale (Colaico, 1988). However, for Luther King, nonviolence is the active, nonviolent resistance to evil (The King Center, n.d.). In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr argues that active resistance is better expressed by the term 'body-force' (cited in Burrow, 2014, p. 123). Niebuhr also pointed out that even Gandhi's nonviolent action, termed non-resistance, included methods such as negative physical resistance, civil disobedience, boycotts, and strikes. A critique of Gandhi's approach was that strategies of noncooperation and nonviolence were not different from

those of violence. Nonviolence can also coerce and destroy. However, that is not the intention of nonviolent resistance but rather a consequence or unintentional behavior (Burrow, 2014, p. 122).

In contrast, Rawls' concept (1971, pp. 366–367) is based on morality and involves acting within the framework of existing law, aiming towards a just society. Rawls asserts that the requirement for nonviolence in civil disobedience is authoritative; if civil disobedience were not nonviolent, it would lose its moral force and legitimacy. Rawls emphasizes that civil disobedience must be nonviolent to be morally justified and effective within a democratic society (1971).

Inevitably, civil disobedience tends towards nonviolence. Why? The anti-nuclear movement in the U.S. revealed a few reasons why civil disobedience was believed to be a core strategy. U.S. activists adopted nonviolent occupations due to the success of this tactic in Europe's anti-nuclear movement, the moral force of nonviolence, the empowerment it offers protesters, and the ability to make more robust, more dramatic statements than traditional methods (Ryan, 2002, p. 144). Therefore, there was reason to think that nonviolent civil disobedience, which worked in other places, would also work in their case.

Sharp (2020, p. 113) stated that "repression of a nonviolent group which persists in struggle and maintains nonviolent discipline may have the following effects. As cruelties to nonviolent people increase, the opponent's regime may appear still more despicable, and sympathy and support for the nonviolent side may increase. The general population may become alienated from the opponent and more likely to join the resistance". Continuing his discourse, Sharp delves into how nonviolent action can undermine opponents' sources of power: authority, human resources, skills and knowledge, intangible factors, and material resources (Sharp, 2020, pp. 745–750). The enumerated advantages underscore the rationale behind the imperative for civil disobedience to adhere to nonviolent principles.

Moraro (2007) argued that civil disobedience can commit some degree of violence without losing its 'civil' value. He specified that violence must not be aimed at seriously injuring or even killing other individuals. The intention is essential, as Burrow (2014) stated above. Those in a CDM must be able to accept the punishment for their law-breaking behavior and demonstrate the conscientiousness of their civilly disobedient actions. As they have been motivated by principles of justice, there should be future cooperation with the government for the sake of justice. Civil disobedience might be violent and can be activated until it is justifiable and reasonable. Cases include self-defense and physical violence to protect other vulnerable people (Moraro, 2007).

For Rawls (1971), physical force can cause harm to people or property, and it is inherently violent. Therefore, nonviolent actions avoid physical harm and respect the legal framework while aiming to bring about change. Nonviolence is essential to justify civil disobedience. However,

Rawls allows self-defense and forceful resistance in certain situations. There may be violent actions where the injustice is severe and nonviolent methods are exhausted (Rawls, 1971). He also sets preconditions for justified civil disobedience, including instances of injustice involving the violation of the fundamental equal liberties of citizens and when it is a last resort after legal means have been exhausted.

However, according to Raz's *The Authority of Law* (1979, cited in Moraro, 2007), three main reasons appear to discourage violence for civil disobedience. They are: 1. every form of harm to others, 2. the use of violence that is not justified, and 3. the use of violence which has a high emotional impact. According to Morrell (1976), violence is related to the rights of individuals, such as the right to one's own body, the right to make free decisions, and the right to own and control property. Every right must be protected, and everyone can reasonably protect their rights by committing justifiable violence (Moraro, 2007). According to Bedau's *On Civil Disobedience* (1961, p. 656 cited in Morreall, 1976), violence includes sabotage, assassination, street fighting, deliberately destroying property, endangering life and limb, and inciting riots). These are overt forms of physical violence. Theoretically, the meaning of violent acts is broader than physical violence. Generally, violence alone is not justifiable. However, immoral laws or policies can be violent and still be justifiable. Since civil disobedience has been carried out based on conscience, it is justifiable whether it is violent or nonviolent (Morreall, 1976).

On the one hand, nonviolence is not opposed to violence; civil disobedience can encompass behaviors considered violent and justified within specific parameters. The definitions of violence and nonviolence highlight that civil disobedience is not invariably synonymous with nonviolence. On the other hand, nonviolence may be seen merely as the avoidance of physical violence. However, civil disobedience is always politically correct if it adheres to specified criteria and remains justified (Morreall, 1976, p. 39). These interpretations do not intentionally neglect Rawls' (1971) ideas on the relationship between civil disobedience and nonviolent action; nonviolence provides legitimacy to civil disobedience and contributes towards a just society. Moreover, nonviolence has been employed based on justice and moral responsibility. However, there may be practical gaps in Rawls' (1971) ideas on civil disobedience and justice.

Judging whether civil disobedience is violent or nonviolent, Sharp has made a broad list of nonviolent actions or struggles since 1972 (2020, pp. v–viii). Concisely, it is easier to state categories, types, and methods of nonviolent action or struggle according to the content specified by Sharp (2020). According to Sharp (2020), there are three main categories of nonviolent action: nonviolent protest and persuasion, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention. Each category includes different types and methods of nonviolent action. Nonviolent protest and persuasion

include ten types and fifty-four methods; noncooperation is divided into four sub-categories; there are twenty-two types and one hundred and three methods in total; and nonviolent intervention includes five types and forty-one methods. Therefore, the analysis shows three main categories, thirty-seven types and one hundred and ninety-eight methods.

In this study, Sharp's categories of nonviolent action serve as a flexible conceptual framework for identifying types and methods of nonviolent action. As mentioned earlier, civil disobedience, by some other definitions, may have a potential for violence yet remain justifiable (Moraro, 2007; Morreall, 1976). Furthermore, the study acknowledges that civilians have employed both nonviolent action and civil disobedience and have also found application within governmental structures and their personnel, as well as non-civilians such as government and military personnel (Martin, 2021; Min & Swe, 2021). However, this study applies the lens of CDM, emphasizing its nonviolent nature and that it has been conducted exclusively by civilians.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study primarily focused on the general nature and dynamics of civilians' actions, particularly students and youth, in the context of civil disobedience and nonviolence against the Thai government, monarchy, and military. The research used a desk-based online monitoring approach, incorporating primary data, such as real-time news articles and data from websites, and secondary data, such as information from literature reviews and pre-analyzed data from various organizational reports. News websites and some organizational websites were valuable sources, providing real-world insights and staying current. Therefore, the cited news and reports were selected based on specific criteria, including relevance to civil disobedience and nonviolent actions. Specifically, news articles were chosen for their relevance to the study's focus on civil disobedience and actions by students and youths against the Thai government, monarchy, and military. Additional selection criteria include credibility and reliability, timeliness, current nature, and comprehensive coverage.

A non-Thai perspective with a specific scope and criteria, focusing on civilians and their arguments, was unique, while it also signaled the author's limitations, including language. One reason was that the English language was used exclusively throughout the study. However, this non-Thai perspective and linguistic constraint automatically became advantages, fostering impartiality and a commitment to factual representation.

The research drew exclusively upon open sources and public information, eliminating any concerns related to confidentiality. Presenting and discussing the project within the scholarly community provided an invaluable opportunity for validation while this study was being developed.

The framework analysis method was used for manual data analysis, focusing on nonviolent action types and methods. Sharp's (2020) framework provided a flexible structure for this study. The researchers manually analyzed the data, identifying patterns as well as considering correlations and causal relationships. Sections such as context, conflict, and methods of nonviolent action were examined to support the research arguments.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In the ensuing sections, the outcomes encompass the contextual background, the underlying conflict, and the nonviolent actions discerned during the CDM in Thailand from 2020 to 2021. These outcomes can be construed as the ramifications of re-examining the specific context. However, a comprehensive explanation of the results, aligning with the established methodology, is systematically provided below.

### **The Context**

The CDM in Thailand between 2020 and 2021 was one of Thailand's most prominent civil disobedience movements. It was a pro-democracy movement that gained momentum in early 2020 and to late 2021. Numerous scholars have already recognized the specification of the timeframe of this movement (King, 2022; Msu & Lipilina, 2021; Saragih et al., 2021; Waiwitlikhit, 2020). It was known as a movement for major political reforms, greater democracy and government accountability. It was led by various groups of people and activists, mostly university students and youth. The ages of students ranged from high school to university. In contrast to Myanmar's civil disobedience, which involves participation from civil servants, including government and military personnel, civil disobedience in Thailand consists solely of civilians (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020c; Drechsler, 2021; Msu & Lipilina, 2021; Min & Swe, 2021; Saragih et al., 2021).

The movement and incidents of civil disobedience mainly occurred in Bangkok Metropolis (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020b). The movement gradually progressed, characterized by activities that emerged in waves. It was neither a daily occurrence nor constant clashes between conflicting parties. Instead, the circumstances were shaped by government-imposed anti-epidemiological restrictions and heightened public awareness (Msu & Lipilina, 2021).

This movement was described as pro-democracy, as it came in response to Thailand's Constitutional Court's disbanding of the Future Forward Party (FFP) in an allegedly unfair way. The party was founded in March 2018 and was known as the most popular opposition party led by young people. Since the FFP's successful debut as the third-largest political party in the March



2019 elections, more than twenty legal cases have been brought against it and its leaders (Techakitteranun, 2019). In one, Thailand's Election Commission petitioned the Court to dissolve the Party over loans the founder and leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit made to the party. The party was well known as the pro-reform and pro-democracy party of the country, and young Thais largely supported it. Beginning in December 2019, there was an anti-government flash mob protest in Bangkok in response to the petition (Gunia, 2020).

However, the CDM in Thailand between 2020 and 2021, while sharing the nonviolent principles of Gandhi (1938) and King (Ryan, 2002; The King Center, n.d.), was distinguished by its context and specific objectives. Unlike Gandhi's movement for independence or King's struggle for civil rights, the Thai CDM was a pro-democracy movement primarily led by students and youths against a government perceived as undemocratic. The movement focused on political reforms and greater government accountability, sparked by incidents like the disbanding of the Future Forward Party. Additionally, the Thai CDM operated within a modern digital context, utilizing social media for organization and awareness (Bunyavejchewin, 2020; Duangdee, 2021; Tanakasempipat, 2020), which differed from the traditional grassroots methods used by Gandhi and King.

On 21 February 2020, the court issued an order to dissolve the FFP, with its executives being banned from participating in politics for ten years after they were found guilty of violating election rules over a THB 191 million loan in the lead-up to the 2019 election (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020a). It was claimed that the government exhibited unequal treatment towards political parties. "Observers have questioned why other parties have not been punished for such loans, which are routinely made. Last month, transparency activist attorney Srisuwan Janya demanded election officials investigate 32 other political parties for doing the same" (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020a).

Consequently, beginning on 22 February 2020, several universities hosted demonstrations under the civil and democratic umbrella. In Bangkok, the universities included Chulalongkorn, Srinakharinwirot, Kasetsart, and Ramkhamhaeng. Other universities outside Bangkok included Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, Prince of Songkla, and many more (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020b).

Following the disbandment of the FFP, anti-government rallies spread across Thailand from July until the end of 2020 (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020d).

In general terms, the government's rationale behind this action against the FFP was profound. Outside observers say that the charges were politically motivated, aimed at keeping the military-backed government in power and that the government came down hard on the Future Forward Party because it saw the party as a threat. "FFP's result in the 2019 election, I think,

surprised Prayuth, the army, and its party, and so they responded as they know best—with repression in a facade of judicial rulings, most of which are farcical," said Joshua Kurlantzick, a senior fellow for Southeast Asia at the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations (cited in Gunia, 2020).

"The FFP seems to be preparing for the worst. They say leaders will try to form a new party if it is disbanded. Moreover, they advise members to join other parties to continue carrying on their message if the FFP is banned" (Gunia, 2020).

Most FFP members, especially elected representatives, joined the MFP, which had existed since 2014 under different names and was officially launched under its new name on 8 March 2020. Pita Limjaroenrat, then leader of the MFP, pledged to uphold the principles of the FFP, stating that these would remain unchanged (Techakitteranun, 2020).

The rallies had already become a massive movement against the government in support of not only the FFP but also democracy. One of the significant demands in February 2020 was Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha's resignation (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020c).

In August 2020, protesters were still on the streets in Thailand with a student-issued list of demands, including a clear separation between the monarch's assets and those under the quasi-government Crown Property Bureau (Thanthong-Knight, 2020). Subsequently, in early 2021, there was also a protest in Bangkok against the military coup in Myanmar, but the demonstrators were Thais. Three Thais were arrested during this coup protest outside the Myanmar Embassy. The charges were that the protesters organized a gathering that posed a risk of disorder and disease transmission, violated the executive decree to control COVID-19, and had thrown objects and assaulted police (Ngamkham, 2021).

According to a BBC Thai survey, there had been protests in forty-nine provinces before 16 August 2020, with the participation of pro-democratic and active young people (BBC News Thai, 2020). During the movement, rights abuses committed by the government were monitored and reported by rights groups, including Human Rights Watch (2020).

### **The Conflict**

In this section, conflict is specified as the key rationale behind the movement carried out by anti-government protesters. A simple notion is that there would be no conflict without a government response or confrontation between the government and protestors. The Thai government responded to the protests in various ways. Besides taking legal action against protesters using the *lèse-majesté* law in the Thai Criminal Code, government charges ranged

from noise ordinance violations to sedition (Thanthong-Knight, 2020).

Accordingly, there are a few critical reasons for the movement, including protests and other identifiable activities. First, they were dissatisfied with the government (also known as the military junta), including the leadership of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha. This dissatisfaction involved inefficient handling of the economic situation, the COVID-19 pandemic, and corruption. Second, the demands for the reform of monarchy appeared. The monarchy had been seen as a form of aristocracy, and Thai people suffering under "feudalism" were merely demanding less self-interest and collaboration with the ruling regime, thought of as anti-people. These ties were perceived as antithetical to the principles of democracy (Saragih et al., 2021). Third, the protests were against the dissolution of the FFP on 21 February 2020. According to Coconuts Bangkok (2020a), pro-FFP and pro-democracy people had already tweeted their dismay over the possibility that the party would be dissolved before the court's ruling. They then denounced the ruling coalition headed by Gen. Prayuth Chan-o-cha, who led the 2014 coup and would continue to lead the country by securing the premiership without meaningful opposition. The initial protests took place at Thammasat University in early February 2020. These were later extended to other universities in Bangkok and the provinces (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020b). Reform of the monarchy and resistance against the dissolution of the FFP were connected. These were combined with calls for the resignation of Prayuth and the end of military domination of politics (Rasheed, 2020).

### **The Conflict: Political Demands**

Generally, the overall objective was a set of democratic reforms. Specifically, the movement called for monarchy reform, constitutional changes, and government accountability with the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut. Desires for constitutional changes came in response to government restrictions on gatherings and freedom of expression, calls for the sovereignty of the people as a principle of democracy and institutional change in the Constitutional Court and an end to the military's political power (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Gunia, 2020). The call for monarchy reform on 10 August 2020 was extraordinary, with ten demands that overtly defied the monarchy. The *lèse-majesté* law was a tool for defeating reformists and democrats. Those demands were (1) strip the monarch of legal immunity, (2) revoke the *lèse-majesté* law and pardon all those jailed for the crime, (3) clearly define which assets are held privately by the king, (4) reduce tax-funded budget supporting the institution, (5) abolish or transfer all royal offices, (6) open all money given to royal charities to public scrutiny, (7) forbid the monarch from expressing political opinions, (8) cut all royalist propaganda, (9) investigate the disappearances and murders of critics of the monarchy, and (10) outlaw royal consent to coups (Phaholtap & Streckfuss, 2020).

## **Nonviolent Action**

This section divides the findings and discussions into methods and types of nonviolent action, violent behavior, and government responses. These results are synthesized from well-known and reliable news media reports and websites, providing a foundation for discussing existing literature. The data analysis process was crosschecked against Sharp's analysis of nonviolent action as a flexible framework in line with the research methodology.

### **Types and Methods of Nonviolent Action**

This study cannot delve into the causality of every method of nonviolent action and its process. However, the overall nature of the 2020-2021 CDM of civilians in Thailand - whether it was characterized as violent or nonviolent - can be classified by examining its components.

Protests and demonstrations: marches on public thoroughfares, signs, slogans and demands, speeches, artwork, symbolic acts of resistance

In protests and demonstrations, students and young people marched on the roads and streets, used signs, expressed slogans and demands, held speeches by leading activist university students who were, exhibited artwork (including graffiti) and songs, and took symbolic acts of resistance (the three-fingered salute). Students from dozens of universities, colleges, and high schools participated in protests after early 2020. The various events, protests, and demonstrations across the country were sometimes coordinated, sometimes not, but a consistent set of objectives. Students from dozens of universities and high school students in Bangkok were involved in holding signs and calling out slogans and demands, including for the return of democracy to the people, amending the 2017 Constitution, and the resignation of the Prime Minister. Bangkok's Democracy Monument was a popular central protest site. Among around thirty universities and colleges nationwide hosting these political gatherings, Thammasat University was the most popular host for these protests and demonstrations. A series of speeches by leading activists included demands. A three-fingered salute was also observed. During protests on university campuses, plain-clothes security officials only observed without a violent response (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; Roney, 2021).

Online Activism and Campaigns: Disseminating Information about the Movement, Networking and Forming Alliances

Online activism and campaigns were also used. Information about the protests and

campaign objectives was actively disseminated on social networks. The information could reach audiences beyond students and the young. The online campaigns were a space to gather force for the movement and mobilization on the ground. Amid online campaigns in Thailand, the Milk Tea Alliance (of active netizens mainly from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand and Myanmar) emerged as a popular online movement standing against dictatorship and globally portrayed as a pro-democracy and human rights network. The Milk Tea Alliance was active in Thailand during 2020, in Hong Kong and Taiwan before that, and in Myanmar after the military coup in early 2021. The advantages of online communication include the ability to coordinate decentralized protests and demonstrations as people are active both onsite and on the internet (Bunyavejchewin, 2020; Duangdee, 2021; Tanakasempipat, 2020).

#### General Strikes: Boycotts, Raising Political Demands as Part of Strikes

General strikes include boycotts against the government, especially the monarchy and its businesses and products. The action of shutting down or refusing to follow the normal functioning of society includes blocking public and private spaces. General strikes often ask for specific political demands (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020c; Saragih et al., 2021). According to Ryan (2002) and Burrow (2014), both Gandhi and King initiated civil disobedience, including general strikes and boycotts within a nonviolent movement for change. The 2020-2021 general strikes in Thailand intersected with all categories of nonviolent action, i.e. nonviolent protest, noncooperation, and nonviolent intervention, whether psychological or physical. However, this study has yet to be able to explore how three sub-categories of noncooperation, social, economic, and political, really worked. This study cannot measure how economic boycotts proceeded and were carried out in reality.

#### The Occupation of Public Spaces: Disrupting and Disobeying Normal Societal Function, Drawing Attention, Blocking Public Spaces through Public Rallies

Occupying targeted public spaces is a type of nonviolent action. It includes drawing pictures to get attention and blocking public spaces through public rallies (for example, mass protests at the Democracy Monument and government buildings) (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020b; 2020c). On 19 September 2020, demonstrators occupied Sanam Luang, which is normally used as an open space or for royal ceremonies (cremations, plowing ceremonies).

## Persuasion

In addition to protests and demonstrations contributing to civil disobedience, persuasion was identified as an important approach. A prominent figure among the protesters emphasized this by reading a poster highlighting the presence of political factions in the country, stating, "Whoever you are, from whichever faculty, whether you used to be [Yellowshirt], come and demonstrate with us." He urged increased participation in this movement from individuals with diverse backgrounds (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020b).

### **Violent Behavior and Government Responses**

Violent behavior during the 2020-2021 CDM was reported in the news media. Roney reported that on 21 August 2021, "a peaceful car mob drove to the Swiss, U.S., and Chinese embassies honking and waving flags, but the protest ended in violence again at Din Daeng with rubber bullets and tear gas met by improvised ping-pong bombs from protesters. Similar clashes continued through the weekend" (Roney, 2021). Notably, these protest groups frequently diverged, sometimes even planning competing events throughout the city. Likewise, disagreements over political parties, varying opinions on the lèse-majesté law, and differences in socialist messaging led to mutually detrimental disputes (Roney, 2021).

A teenager and his friend were shot at a protest in Din Daeng. The teenager died after being in a coma for two months. Moving Forward Party MP Police Major General Chavalit Laohaudomphan believed it was unlikely that Warit was shot by another protester (Prachatai, 2021). The perpetrator in this case was never identified, but the case was recognized as the first protest death. There were also clashes between the protesters and both the police and royalists. Pro-government royalist counter-protesters confronted anti-government and pro-democracy protesters in encounters that resulted in many injuries. In a protest outside parliament in November 2020, "paving slabs, bottles and chairs fly...The protests, so far largely peaceful, have taken a violent turn" (Cheng, 2020). During the protests in 2021, "the protesters... destroying or defacing police boxes for over a mile along nearby roads using paint, motorcycle helmets, slingshots, and explosives" (Roney, 2021). Roney noted that protests in 2021 were more irregular compared to the previous year after prominent protesters faced legal charges while violence persisted daily (2021).

The police's response to acts of violence by protesters was severe, using tear gas in a violent way. However, the questions are: Who threw those paving slabs, bottles, and broken chairs, and who destroyed police boxes, and why?

Scholars note that civil disobedience may include violence to some extent. However, to

be justifiable, it must refrain from causing harm, including avoiding the killing of others or intentionally making a high emotional impact. According to Moraro (2007), Morreall (1976) and Ryan (2002), some violent acts may be considered justifiable, particularly in civil disobedience. By definition and nature, some violent acts seem usual and are difficult to avoid in some contexts. The reason for destroying or defacing police boxes may be to harass the police. One protester is reported as saying, "[police] arrest and tear gas ... What about us? We protest peacefully. ... What can we do?" (Roney, 2021).

M. K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. led movements rooted in nonviolence, which was key to their peaceful outcomes. Gandhi's strategy of civil disobedience involved passive resistance, where participants broke laws nonviolently and accepted the consequences. This approach minimized violence and claimed a moral high ground, gaining public sympathy and support. Similarly, King adopted Gandhi's principles, using nonviolent resistance to fight for civil rights in the U.S. This method effectively highlighted the injustice of segregation, leading to peaceful reforms (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2017; Gandhi, 1938; The King Center, n.d.).

The adoption by U.S. activists in an anti-nuclear movement in the U.S. of a moral alignment with nonviolence reflects a strategic choice rooted in ethical principles. This approach draws from historical figures like Gandhi and King, who demonstrated that nonviolent civil disobedience can effectively challenge unjust laws and policies while garnering public sympathy and support (Ryan, 2002). By adhering to nonviolent methods, U.S. activists aim to underscore the moral legitimacy of their cause, making their actions more resonant with broader societal values and ethical standards by trying to win the hearts of the general people.

In certain instances, the government's actions can be considered violence, which may also be justifiable. Violence in this section applies to both anti-government protesters and the government, as well as to the police, pro-government counter-protesters, and pro-monarchy groups. This exploration also aims to understand the responses during the period of the CDM and its aftermath, considering it a bilateral occurrence. Government officials watched and monitored demonstrations initiated at the universities in Bangkok (Coconuts Bangkok, 2020c). It was reported that police water cannons fired water that contained tear gas against protesters in 2020 (Cheng, 2020). More than forty were injured in protests in Bangkok on 17 November 2020 (BBC, 2020), when outside the Thai parliament, which was debating constitutional amendments, protesters threw smoke bombs and bags of paint at police, who retaliated with water cannons. Subsequently, protester Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul articulated their intention, stating, "[it] is not to destroy the monarchy but to modernize it, to adapt it to our society" (BBC, 2020). On 14 October 2020, protesters clashed with police after shouting at the King's motorcade (Al Jazeera,

2020). Twenty-one demonstrators had already been arrested prior to the passing of the motorcade. The demands of the crowd included releasing their friends. It was found that the government used laws necessary for law enforcement towards re-stability, including the lèse-majesté law (Chen, 2023). Prime Minister Prayut threatened protesters in November 2020 by announcing that all laws and all articles would be enforced against protesters who broke the law (Bangkok Post, 2020). There was no official response from the palace to the protests or demands for royal reform.

The CDM in Thailand predominantly adhered to nonviolent principles despite facing significant governmental repression and challenges. Civilians drove the movement, primarily university students and youth, advocating for democratic reforms and government accountability. Unlike other civil disobedience movements involving military or government personnel (Martin, 2021; Min & Swe, 2021), the CDM in Thailand remained distinctly nonviolent (Cheng, 2020; Roney, 2021), emphasizing peaceful protest and conscientious objection to unjust actions by the government (Khongkachonkiet, 2021; Wright, 2021). This moral alignment with nonviolence helped maintain the movement's integrity and garnered domestic and international sympathy, highlighting its commitment to democratic ideals through peaceful means.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), the country's political tension since 2020 remains unresolved, with unresolved political problems, violence and disorder (Chen, 2023). However, according to ACLED, Thailand's anti-government demonstrations declined at the end of 2021 (Chen, 2023). This trend may result from the mass arrest of leading activists, changes in protest tactics by the protesters, and anticipation of the opposition's upcoming general election in 2023. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, since the 2020-2021 protests up to 1 February 2023, 1,895 people related to the protests were politically prosecuted in 1,180 cases on six provisions (Thai Lawyers for Human Rights [TLHR], 2023). Chen (2023), East Asia Pacific Researcher at ACLED, stated that "demonstrations will likely increase if those associated with the 2014 military coup retain power, particularly if the election is not seen as free and fair".

## **CONCLUSION**

Since the movement aimed primarily at system change, including regime change towards a democratic and just society, its methods were predominantly nonviolent (Gandhi, 1938; Rawls, 1971). These methods collectively constituted an act of civil disobedience from 2020 to 2021. However, the 2020 pro-democracy protests in Thailand, sparked by the dissolution of the Future Forward Party (FFP) and other government actions, became the largest in the country's history,



with demonstrators demanding governmental and monarchical reforms (Saragih et al., 2021). This student-led movement, reminiscent of the 1973 protests, leveraged social media to amplify its message and mobilize support, leading to more radical demands as the movement progressed (Msu & Lipilina, 2021; Waiwitlikhit, 2020). The protesters' ten bold demands, aimed at reducing royal privileges and reforming the monarchy, marked a significant shift in Thai political discourse. However, these actions increased tensions between the government and royalist factions (Phaholtap & Streckfuss, 2020).

As Morreall (1976) stated, nonviolent civil disobedience is justifiable, and this understanding has become prevalent. Any activity labeled as civil disobedience may also be categorized as violent. Nonviolence is not the opposite of violence, and civil disobedience should be understood as involving violence to some extent. However, the violence must be justified or justifiable. Therefore, civil disobedience with a degree of violence may still bear civil value and justice. However, according to the literature, there is justifiable and unjustifiable violence (Moraro, 2007; Morreall, 1976).

Those throwing paving slabs and bottles and destroying police boxes were students and young people (Prachatai, 2021; Roney, 2021; Cheng, 2020). Although the CDM may involve various perspectives that include violent behavior, when deemed justifiable, these actions, on the whole, cannot be categorized as violence in the name of CDM (Moraro, 2007; Morreall, 1976).

Although Rawls (1971) argued that if civil disobedience were not nonviolent, it would lose its moral force and legitimacy, instances of violence during protests that challenge Rawls' (1971) perspective. Rawls' ideas on civil disobedience have been critiqued by Morreall (1976) and Moraro (2007), who question whether violent acts committed by protesting civilians undermine civil disobedience's moral force and legitimacy or hinder its goals of achieving a just and democratic society. Little evidence or popular debate suggests that such violence by protestors significantly undermines these principles or thwarts their specific objectives. It is crucial to consider the intentions behind these actions (Burrow, 2014). Moreover, these actions do not diminish citizens' commitment to justice and political accountability, as the individuals involved were willing to face legal consequences (Moraro, 2007; TLHR, 2023). Furthermore, these actions were often reactions to police crackdowns and pro-monarchy counter-protests, with no reports of fatal injuries or deaths among counter-protesters (Cheng, 2020; Roney, 2021). Therefore, it is inaccurate to characterize the CDM in Thailand between 2020-2021 as violent.

Subsequently, the various types and methods of nonviolent action employed during the CDM of 2020-2021 in Thailand illustrate their ability to restrain violent behavior and demonstrate their alignment with Sharp's theoretical framework (2020). It is evident that, despite instances of

violence, the CDM predominantly adhered to principles of nonviolence. Therefore, characterizing the 2020-2021 CDM of Thai civilians as a nonviolent movement remains valid.

Generally, the types and methods of nonviolent civil disobedience of civilians in Thailand during 2020-2021 can be listed under the same categories as Sharp's nonviolent action or struggle methods. Each method is not standalone. They are interdependent, and they can occur in the same event at the same time. The methods can be assigned to more than one type of nonviolent action; likewise, the types can be allocated into more than one category. For example, concerning causality and reasoning, a method involving political demands made by protesters can be placed into different types, including protests and demonstrations, general strikes, etc., and further classified, such as protest and persuasion and noncooperation, as defined by Sharp (2020). Depending on the sources accessed, the analyzed data, categories, types, and methods can be summarized below based on Sharp's framework (2020).

In the following categories: (1) protest and persuasion, (2) noncooperation, and (3) intervention.

In types, they are known as 1. protests and demonstrations, 2. online activism and campaigns, 3. general strikes, 4. the occupation of public spaces, and 5. persuasion.

In methods: 1. marches on roads and streets, 2. signs, 3. slogans and demands, 4. speeches, 5. artwork, 6. symbolic acts of resistance, 7. disseminating information about the movement, 8. networks and alliances, 9. boycotts, 10. political demands as part of strikes, 11. disrupting and disobeying normal societal functions, 12. attention-seeking, and 13. blocking public spaces through public rallies.

In contrast, the government's responses should not be underestimated. The government's actions may be defined as violence. For example, the government used physical violence, but not fatal, as shown by evidence (Al Jazeera, 2020; BBC, 2020; Roney, 2021). However, it is still unclear whether the government's responses were justifiable. I cannot verify that the Thai government itself did not use 'nonviolent methods' by definition against anti-government protesters in 2020-2021. In a similar manner, the royal family gave no overt attention to the protests and protesters. The demands of protesters, such as political reforms and reform of the monarchy, gradually weakened since early 2021. The Thai parliament initiated a process of amending the Constitution, but this has yet to happen. The 2020-2021 nonviolent CDM in Thailand failed, as there was no fulfillment of political demands and the 10-point call for reform of the monarchy (Reuters, 2021). Therefore, it can be concluded that Thailand's 2020-2021 nonviolent CDM was thwarted based on political demands.

However, further study is needed to investigate the consequences beyond 2021, including

how this movement influenced the May 2023 general election.

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