

# Social Inequality and Mobilization in Changing Thailand

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## Abstract

Inequality has long persisted in Thailand and its level reached a peak in 2018. Around the end of 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic began to spread around the world and reached Thailand in January 2020, intensifying inequality with critical socio-economic disruptions. Subsequently, over 2,000 protests took place from 2020 to 2022. The combination of challenges caused rapid changes in Thailand. This article offers explanations of 'who' was doing 'what' and 'how' in response to inequality. The article discusses situations of social inequality and people's reactions during the period 2019-2022, by using Bourdieu's concept of capital to tackle inequality and the demands of the various groups. The article utilized a quantitative method based on measures of frequency and regression techniques. The results demonstrate that the middle classes want democracy, and the working classes want more equality and participation. Key responses to social inequality and the government administration included both online and onsite mobilizations. Findings show that age, residency, and capital have impacts on mobilizations in which young people constitute the largest group to join both physical and virtual spaces.

**Keywords:** social inequality, capital, mobilization, Thailand

## Introduction

Eliminating inequality has been on the top of Thailand's development agenda for over 50 years, and it remains the prime target of the country. Today, the gap between the rich and poor is massive, in which the majority of the population in Thailand earn less than 10,000 USD, but

2.5 percent have an annual income of between 100,000 and one million USD, while 0.2 percent have over one million USD per year (Credit Suisse, 2021: 139). This gap represents a crisis in wealth distribution. Moreover, this intense inequality was also reported in 2018 as Thailand was in the highest ranking for global inequality (Credit Suisse, 2018; Sanglee, 2021). From 2019 onward, numerous protests occurred in which different forms of inequality were addressed. They include the protests in February 2019 demanding the resignation of the prime minister, in July 2019 against unlawful attacks on pro-democracy activists (Zsombor, 2019), and in December 2019 against the banning of a prominent opposition party leader. Moreover, Thailand's inequality has unfortunately worsened owing to the breakout of the Covid-19 virus at the end of 2019. The pandemic suspended economic activities, mostly those of the working and middle classes. The grim ranking of inequality in which Thailand had placed in 2018 and the Covid-19 pandemic that emerged at the end of 2019 are the critical challenges that have aggravated socio-economic problems in Thailand since then. On top of that, there have been over 2,000 demonstrations addressing inequality-related issues around Thailand, mainly in Bangkok as well as in virtual space. Specifically, over 779 protests were held in 2020 (Horatanakun, 2022), 1,516 in 2021 (Mobdata, 2022a), and 502 in 2022 (as of July 2022) (Mobdata, 2022b). Mobilizations involve issues of democracy, politics, gender, LGBTplus, and especially socio-economic problems closely tied with inequality. With reference to the very high level of inequality, the initial limited response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and numerous protest occurrences, the article considers the period from the end of 2019 until 2022, a time of great adversity for Thailand. The article therefore examines social inequality in Thailand from 2019-2022 based mainly on a sociological perspective involving capital analysis. It highlights the intersection of occupied resources, the impacts of social inequality on people, and mobilizations as people's reactions to social inequality. Thus, the article does not focus exclusively on particular social movements or protests, the development of Thai politics, or political conflicts in Thailand as they are beyond the scope of data

collection and analysis. Rather, it offers understandings of factors relating to mobilization participation, both physical and virtual spaces as social action, as well as patterns and demands of each class regarding social inequality in contemporary Thailand. The aims of this article are twofold: 1) to illustrate key demands rooted in inequality of each class during the period 2019-2022, and 2) to identify significant factors having impacts on social inequality and mobilizations. Based on Bourdieu's concept of capital (1979) and on the concept of classes in Thailand initiated by Boike Rehbein (Thongsawang, Rehbein and Chantavanich 2020), the article mainly explores these two concepts to explain social inequality in Thailand during the period of late 2019 through 2022 and elaborates social actions and groups' rationales.

### Different Forms of Capital and Social Classes

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued that class differentiation must be assessed through variations in the accumulation of various capital. Bourdieu's notion goes beyond that of Marx in that it combines other forms of capital to evaluate people's strata. Bourdieu explained that there are four forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. In Bourdieu's terminology, economic capital refers to "material assets that are immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights" (Bourdieu, 1986: 242). Economic capital refers to rather simple forms of assets, such as money, stock, property, and valuable resources. Cultural capital, which he divided into three types (objectified, embodied, and institutionalized), involves familiarity with the legitimate culture within a society (Bourdieu, 1979). Put simply, cultural capital is linked to the possessions of cultural objects, such as goods, books, paintings, and works of art. These cultural objects are embodied as various skills that take time to cultivate, and include language, performing arts, personality and etiquette, and institutionalized reference to what is socially learned and accredited by institutions, for instance, education credentials and qualifications. Social capital is "the aggregate of the actual or potential

resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986: 248). In practical terms social capital consists of participation in valuable reciprocal social relations (Ernst, Weischer and Alikhani, 2017) or being capable of using beneficial networks. Finally, symbolic capital's definition is "the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (Bourdieu, 1989: 17) where symbolic capital is simply glossed as "honor" or "prestige" (Southerton, 2011). With these meanings, this study applies these four kinds of capital into variables to present the association of capital and mobilization in line with potential factors. In this regard, the study converted the various forms of capital into variables: economic capital as monthly income; cultural capital as education-relevant mainly to institutionalized cultural capital; social capital as network; and symbolic capital as prestige. Apart from the four forms of capital, reports on mobilizations in Thailand during 2020-2022 described as youth-led protests, occurred frequently in Bangkok (Hinz, 2022; Kotsan, 2021; Tan, 2020). Previous studies also showed that urbanization contributes to protest (Huntington, 1968; Uitermark, Nicholls and Loopmans, 2012) as the city shapes an individual's relations and causes political instability and social dislocation (Huntington, 1968), and is geographically used as a place to call for equality and freedom (Uitermark, Nicholls and Loopmans, 2012). These potential factors, therefore, are included in the model for analysis.

The amount of capital possessions is related to class differentiation in that those who have a higher volume of capital are more likely to be in higher socio-economic positions. However, the social class of people depends on the fields to which people belong. Some fields, such as that of academics, might value cultural capital, while economic capital is the priority for the business world. The article explores five social classes in Thailand: upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, labor, and marginalized classes where social class refers to a traditional line that recreates itself from one generation to the next. It does so by transferring capital and particular traits and by symbolically

distinguishing itself from other classes (Thongsawang, Rehbein and Chantavanich, 2020: 500). Generally, the upper class refers to those who have the higher/highest volume of all forms of capital and can be found in such occupations as respected politicians, top executives, expert physicians, prominent scholars, high-ranking military and governmental officers, etc. The upper to lower middle classes vary in the extent of capital they possess. The laboring class represents people who have few skills or are non-skilled workers, such as general workers, laborers, or cleaners. The marginalized class refers to individuals who have limited or no resources or opportunities. Jobs held by the marginalized class are generally less desirable and in the lower ranks of society, such as sex workers, beggars, and illegal migrant workers. As the possession of capital becomes the crucial criterion by which to differentiate social class, the article ranks the scale of capital holding of each respondent to reflect their social class, which is discussed in the following section.

## Research Methods

The results come from a survey of people in Thailand. The data were collected to analyze today's trend of capital possessions, values, social data, and mobilization participation and its related demands. A quantitative survey was used to evaluate the impacts of social inequality, capital, and protests. The number of interviewees who participated in the survey was 400. All participants reside in Thailand, are from different regions, and are aged between 18 and 94.

## Population and Samples

According to the National Statistical Office year of 2020, the population of Thailand over the age of 15 was 56.75 million. To follow the representation principle, a stratified random sample of 400 people in Thailand targeted both genders and every region in Thailand. Before conducting data collection, a pilot study was a prerequisite of this research for verification of the planned procedure and clarity of research questions. The pilot study included 30 Thais and it demonstrated internal consistency, that is, Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 implying reliability.

In total, there were 400 samples in this study after five incomplete questionnaires were edited out. Females comprised 52.25 percent of the samples and males comprised 47.75 percent. Respondents aged not over 30 years old comprised 36.00 percent; while 14.50 percent were 31-40 years old. The older groups were 13 percent for 61-70 years old, and 4.25 percent for over 70. The mode for age is 25 years old. Around half of the samples were not over 40. Locations of the samples cover key areas throughout Thailand in which the number of samples varies according to the region's population proportion. Samples from Bangkok made up 8.25 percent, and the largest group was from the Northeast at 34.75 percent. Taking four forms of capital and scoring them, there are five social classes. The marginalized class made up 22 percent, the labor class 26.75 percent, the lower-middle class 46.25 percent, the upper-middle class 4.50 percent, and the upper-class 0.50 percent. The characteristics of samples are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Characteristics of the respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	191	47.75
	Female	209	52.25
	Total	400	100.00
Age	18-30	144	36.00
	31-40	58	14.50
	41-50	62	15.50
	51-60	67	16.75
	61-70	52	13.00
	Over 70	17	4.25
	Total	400	100.00
Location	Bangkok	33	8.25
	Central region	40	10.00
	East	35	8.75
	North	79	19.75
	West	21	5.25
	South	53	13.25
	Northeast	139	34.75
	Total	400	100.00
Social class	Marginalized	88	22.00
	Labor	107	26.75
	Lower-middle	185	46.25
	Upper-middle	18	4.50
	Upper	2	0.50
	Total	400	100.00

## Data Collection

The questionnaires were collected by the research team through in-person and online interviews. The younger groups gave more interviews through the online option, while the older groups selected in-person interviews despite the threat of Covid-19 because they were more familiar with the traditional interview. The structure and content of the survey were based on Rehbein's initiative (Thongsawang, Rehbein, and Chantavanich, 2020) and comprised personal data, habitus hermeneutic sessions—including different types of capital possessions, family background, classification, social data, and lifestyle. There was also a newly added session covering the impacts of social inequality, mobilization participation, and attitudes towards and demands of Thai society. The study employed the survey approach to illustrate capital related to classification of Thai society to explain factors associated with mobilizations. Questions, therefore, required various aspects of personal data, both facts and attitudes. The survey design includes a polar, or yes/no, 0-10 rating scales, as well as multiple-selection and open-ended answers. There are 90 questions in total in which the period of data collection was September 2021-June 2022. The process started after the ethics committee officially issued a certificate of research approval.

## Data Analysis and Processing

The software for the quantitative analysis is SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). The article applies descriptive analysis to present demographic information and the demands of each class together with inferential statistics. As the objectives of this study are to undercover the association of each group categorized by capital possessions and demands as well as significant factors that contribute to mobilizations, the measurements of frequency and logistics regression were applied. The article followed Bourdieu's theory (1984) of four forms of capital, considering the fact that the evaluation of social inequality cannot simply be reduced to a single kind of capital like economic assets; thus, other kinds of capital and social relations need to be considered. Another important work that the article draws on is

Rehbein's initiative of five social classes in Thailand (Thongsawang, Rehbein and Chantavanich, 2020), which has proved to be compatible with the social reality of inequality situations as the sign of the missing middle class (Jitsuchon, 2011; Voice Online, 2020; Tonsakul, 2021; Satayanurak, 2022). The article uses a score of 12 for rating the samples' four kinds of capital from questions concerning capital, which were then categorized into five social classes: upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, labor, and marginalized. Four types of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—are criteria to classify; each type of capital contains relevant questions to screen out with different scores accordingly. Details concerning screening and scores are explained below.

1. Economic capital: there are three questions, a full score of three points. The questions are as follows: 1) monthly income, one gets 0 points if income is less than 80,000 baht, 1 point if income is greater than or equal to 80,000 baht; 2) travelling aboard, asking "have you ever been abroad?" one gets 0 points if never, 1 point if yes; and 3) sufficient facilities in everyday life: one gets 0 points if have little or none, 1 point if having a lot.

2. Cultural capital: it consists of a total of three questions with a full score of three points. Topics cover level and quality of educational institution and ability to speak a foreign language (language-embodied cultural capital.) The score allocations are: 1) level of education: 0 points if education is lower than a bachelor's degree and 1 point if education is higher than or equal to a bachelor's degree; 2) quality of educational institutions at the highest level: 0 points if one reports his/her educational institution (s) were low or of no quality, and 1 point if one describes in another direction; and 3) communication ability: 0 points if the respondent is unable to speak a language apart from Thai, and 1 point if the respondent can.

3. Social capital: this part consists of four questions with a full score of four points. The questions include: 1) Do you have a network? - 0 points if there is no network and 1 point if he/she does; 2) Have you ever made use of the network you belong to? - 0 points if never, 1 point if yes; 3) Are you an organization member? - 0 points if no and 1 point

if yes; and 4) Have you ever made use of or benefitted from the organization? - 0 points if no and 1 point if yes.

4. Symbolic capital: there are two questions in total with a full score of two points. The details are as follows: 1) Do you have a position in the community? one gets 0 points if no, and 1 point if yes; and 2) Respondents are asked to self-assess the prestige of their position in the community—if any—and one gets 0 points if viewed as none/less prestigious and 1 point if considered as prestigious.

All scores obtained from answering questions for each kind of capital are added together. The sum of all scores from these four types of capital was calculated to classify respondents' social class. The upper-class score is above 11; the upper-middle class is 9-10; the lower-middle class is 7-8; the labor class, 5-6; and the marginalized, 0-4. Apart from the descriptive statistics, relevant variables are analyzed by a logistics regression technique. Limitations appear for the measurement as some participants own large amounts of other forms of economic assets or have inherited family property. When combining all forms of property including that from family, the price value might not be precise and the range for calculation can be very large. This implies the affirming of extreme social inequality. In case of counting everything owned by the participants, the range becomes too high to properly manage variables and categories. Instead, we focus on monthly income and remove outliers. Furthermore, some participants might not actually reveal the entire economic capital they own. It is perfectly understandable, and thus, questions regarding property are repeated near the end of the interview. This allows the interviewer to create a relaxed atmosphere and gradually explain the research objective—that the study aims to reflect the social inequality of the country, and not to judge anyone in particular.

Finally, the endogeneity problem is a concern for the regression analysis, and it is inconclusive as there can be other factors that make people mobilize; thus, these variables are only the factors presented. Rather, the article demonstrates variables that have impacts on mobilizations. Before testing the regression, these variables were run

for correlations and showed less than 0.75 with no concern for multi-collinearity. On top of the statistical test, the documentary analysis was further explored. These variables come from the selected concept of Bourdieu (1979) and previous studies reaffirming education-cultural capital (Rodeghier, Hall and Useem, 1991; Dahlum and Wig, 2019), network-social capital (Edwards and McCarthy, 2004: 621; Tindall, Cormier and Diani, 2012: 387), prestige-symbolic capital (Geer, 2013; Feldman, Strier and Schmid, 2014), location, and age (Dahlum, 2019; Renström, Aspernäs and Bäck, 2021) associated with mobilizations.

## Results

Findings showed that respondents' monthly incomes are generally low. Despite the relatively high education of the majority of respondents, their monthly income ranked mostly in the lower level. People earning less than 15,000 baht comprised 54.30 percent and only 2.20 percent made over 80,000 baht. In fact, even those receiving the highest monthly income of this data, from 80,000 to around 250,000 baht per month, were still few, compared to the majority of people in Thailand (Credit Suisse, 2021: 139). The mean monthly income was 18,686 baht. The educational level for those who had attained less than primary school education was 29.50 percent and a bachelor's degree and above 51.70 percent. The samples present the highly educated group measured by years and level in academic institutions. As the article explored the concept of Bourdieu (1979) that the consideration of social inequality relates to the different types of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic—in this regard economic capital is measured mainly by monthly income as well as other assets such as having everyday facilities or accessibility to recreation. Education is a main measurement for cultural capital, while whether one has a web (s) of useful connections is important for evaluating social capital. Those who reported having no networks comprised 62.30 percent, while 37.70 percent replied 'yes.' The measurement of symbolic capital involved the question on respect and prestige, in which there are five scales; those who said they have

the lowest symbolic capital comprised 82.00 percent of respondents and only 1.80 percent ranked themselves as having the highest. Fewer than 10 percent of the respondents were aware of and described symbolic capital.

**Table 2** Capital possession overall

Capital	Level of possession	Percent
Economic: Monthly income (baht)	Less than 15,000	54.30
	15,000-79,999	43.50
	Over 80,000	2.20
	Total	100.00
Cultural: Education	None	6.30
	Primary	23.20
	Secondary	4.50
	Tertiary	9.50
	Diploma	4.80
	Bachelor's	37.70
	Above bachelor's	14.00
	Total	100.00
Social: Network/connection	Having network/connection	37.70
	No network/connection	62.30
	Total	100.00
Symbolic: Prestige	Lowest	82.00
	Low	2.80
	Medium	9.00
	High	4.40
	Highest	1.80
	Total	100.00

As for the wide income gap, 87.30 percent agreed that inequality persisted in Thailand, while 12.70 percent did not. More specifically, the survey further asked if social inequality affected their life. 62.10 percent reported that it did, while 37.90 percent believed it did not. The attitudes towards inequality and its impacts are in Table 3 below:

**Table 3** Attitudes towards inequality

Attitudes	Yes (%)	No (%)	Total (%)
Inequality as existent	87.30	12.70	100.00
Personally affected by inequality	62.10	37.90	100.00

### Key Demands of Each Class

Social classes and demands for society in times of pandemic, high level of inequality, and political challenges reflect the fundamental concerns that could be linked to different types of mobilizations. Variables of each analyzed area, including five social classes, demand for democracy and equality were crossed-based on the descriptive statistics. The percentage of demands for the analysis of each class is shown in Table 4, indicating a high degree of agreement that society should be on the democratic track and there should be no hierarchy in society. The middle classes show the highest ratio of those demanding democracy at 54.80 percent, while the labor class made up 26.70 percent of those prioritizing equality. By contrast, for the upper class, inequality is not a core issue.

**Table 4** Percentage of demands of respondents' social classes.

Social class	Demand for democracy (%)	Demand for equality (%)
Upper class	0.60	0.30
Upper-middle class	4.80	4.60
Lower-middle class	50.00	47.20
Labor class	22.90	26.70
Marginalized class	21.70	21.20
Total	100.00	100.00

One can see that the demand for democracy is by far the highest for the middle class and equality demand is considerably high. These results link to rationales and objectives of numerous mobilizations both online and onsite. The demand for democracy is the core of protests for

the groups, Redem (Thai PBS, 2021) and Thalu Gas, which call for equality and social welfare (Unno, 2021). In an aim to reveal significant factors affecting mobilizations in response to social inequality, the article tests variables based on Bourdieu's concept of capital as well as potential factors including age and location.

### **Crucial Factors Having Impacts on Social Inequality and Mobilizations**

Results showed that age, education, location, and prestige have impacts on mobilizations when inequality is one of the main rationales for gatherings. Findings from the logistic regression analysis demonstrated age, address, education or cultural capital, and prestige indicating symbolic capital having impacts on mobilizations among people residing in Thailand. The six independent variables are categorical variables. In the model, education represents a group with a bachelor's degree and above. The rationale for focusing on this group is that people with a higher education show association with mobilization (Rodeghier, Hall and Useem, 1991; Dahlum and Wig, 2019), while the address is specific to Bangkok because a number of protests occurred in the capital. Additionally, previous studies point out that urban space has impacts on gatherings and protests (Huntington, 1968; Uitermark, Nicholls and Loopmans, 2012). There are two models in Table 5. Model 1 examines the effects of the selected variables on physical demonstrations, while Model 2 focuses on online mobilizations, and the remaining variables are the same as the first model. Model 1 shows the log-odds of age and address variables were significant. The log-odds of age was -0.09, indicating that those of higher age are less likely to join resistance movements, while the log-odds of Bangkok was 1.50 meaning that those living in the capital are likely to participate in demonstrations. To put it simply, younger Bangkokians are likely to participate in physical protests. Model 2 presents data rather similar to the first model. Younger people tended to prefer online movements, the log-odds is -0.07. Moving to the log-odds of education 0.72, the implication is that

people with degrees are more likely than those who have none or only a lower degree to express opinions or actions online related to social inequality issues. Moreover, the log-odds of prestige or symbolic capital was 0.29 and significant, meaning that people possessing symbolic capital tend to engage in online movements. Considering online mobilization, therefore it can be said that younger people with degrees and symbolic capital tend to become involved. The key factors in this analysis then consist of age, education, location, and prestige, for which there are predictive values to evaluate the likelihood of mobilization participation.

**Table 5** Logistic regression predicting likelihood of mobilization.

Independent variables	Model 1 Onsite	Model 2 Online
Age	-0.09**	-0.07**
Education (1): Bachelor's degree or above	0.57	0.72*
Address (2): Bangkok	1.50**	0.39
Income (Monthly)	0.00	0.00
Network	0.35	0.38
Prestige	0.22	0.29*

Notes: \*  $p<0.05$ , \*\*  $p<0.01$ . These models were run twice to compare physical and online mobilizations. Each model used the same independent variables except a mobilization type.

In connection with Table 5, Table 6 presents the predictive value of each variable for physical and virtual mobilization. The crucial factors for onsite mobilization were age and current address, where the odds ratio or  $\text{Exp} (B)$  were 0.91 and 4.48 orderly. All variables are continuous intervals. An age variable was counted from low to high, while education trended in the opposite direction. The mode for age is 25 years old. The statistics showed that the older a person is, the lower chance she or he will join onsite protests, decreasing by nine percent. The address is a prominent factor for predicting physical demonstrations. Living in Bangkok was positively related to onsite rallies by 4.48.

Considering the online mobilization, it was quite similar to on-site protests in which higher age was negatively related to mobilizing online by seven percent. As the mode is 25 years old, it implies that the likelihood of both physical and virtual mobilization participation starts to decline at age 25. However, place of residence is irrelevant for online mobilization as such action can be done anywhere. The important variables to predict online mobilization were education and prestige, indicating cultural and symbolic capital, respectively. The overall relationship was significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Online mobilization participation was positively related to education and prestige for one having a degree, qualifications, and symbolic capital by 2.05 and 1.34.

**Table 6** Logistic regression analysis of predictive value in comparison between physical and online mobilization.

Independent variables	Onsite mobilization	Online mobilization
Age	0.91**	0.93**
Education (1): Bachelor's degree or above	1.77	2.05*
Address (2): Bangkok	4.48**	1.47
Income (Monthly)	1.00	1.00
Network	1.43	1.43
Prestige	1.25	1.34*

Notes: \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; (1) bachelor's degree and above as the reference group, and (2) Bangkok as the reference group.

## Discussion

Our findings show that the demand for democracy and resolution of issues of inequality were by far the highest and these demands were presented as the objectives of key protests in Thailand. The upper-middle class and upper class are fewer in number both for actual society and samples in this study, and according to the findings, they are not concerned about the ideology of democracy or equality as they are not

significantly affected, or they find a way to enjoy their life based on the relatively high capital they hold. By contrast, the lower-middle class, labor class, and to a lesser degree the marginalized class expressed strong demands for democracy and equality. The labor class showed a higher percentage of demand for equality as it mostly involves a way of life and way of working and living, while the marginalized class who have experienced hardship and poverty realize that equality is nearly impossible to achieve; thus, they care less in these demands. Social classes in the case of Thailand are linked to cultural dimensions, particularly way of life and everyday activities. Taking 'class' as a variable to predict a mobilization participation in Thailand in a quantitative way without specific country context would not work. During the years 2020-2022, more than 2,000 "mobs" took place (Horatanakun, 2022), and this number goes beyond the class category. Class can explain mobilizations in Thailand in specific events, for example, in 2020 before the Thalu Gas gathering around Din Dang were driven by middle or upper-middle class youth. However, protests beginning in 2021 were moved by middle and lower class youth (Lertchoosakul, 2021b). In the beginning, the mobilization of the middle and upper-middle class leaned more toward democracy with equality; later as social inequality and poverty increased, the middle and lower classes played a role in protesting. The class variable for mobilization in Thailand is not significant as a whole for the combination of the 'middle' class and lower class already protesting, and the elite as well, since protesters from the upper class were fewer in number.

Elaborating further from class as a mobilization attribution, the article proposes ways in which social classes emerge and interact with social inequality in Thailand. Social classes and inequality have been reproduced through Thai social structures—pre-capitalist and capitalist structures. According to Wungaeo and Rehbein (2016), Thailand and Southeast Asia in general have specific local histories, regional cultures, and national class structure in the formation of capitalism and democracy. Rehbein proposed the idea that there are two structures in Thailand: pre-capitalist and capitalist. These two structures create and reproduce

social classes. Linking social classes with democracy and mobilizations, this idea helps explain why different classes express their demands for democracy and equality where one can see a class notion in Thailand rooted in structure and ideology—democracy and inequality. The pre-capitalist classes include the working class, middle class, and upper class. The gradual transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist structures in Thailand resulted in the marginalized, the labor, and the upper-middle class (Thongsawang, Rehbein and Chantavanich, 2020: 509). In contemporary Thai society, we divided people into five social classes: the marginalized, labor, lower-middle, upper-middle, and upper class as the outcomes of these two structures that intermingle with each other following economic and social conditions of Thailand. At the present time one can see that over 2,000 mobilizations occurred during the years 2020-2022 (Mobdata, 2022a; Mobdata, 2022b). By mobilizing, people try to change the economic and political system and, in the process, create themselves as a class (McNall, 1986). Those who are most affected by social inequality are the groups with fewer resources, including the lower-middle, labor, and marginalized classes which are the consequences of capitalist structures. The adoption of liberal democracies has preserved pre-capitalist classes and compromise between nobility, capitalists, and an upper-middle class in which the majority of the population grows up with the promise of democracy and equality (Wungaeo and Rehbein, 2016). People's hopes for democracy and equality are influenced by contemporary Western democracies and globalized democratic ideology through online media. Not surprisingly, when the political atmosphere is not yet proceeding toward the goals, mobilizations occur with clear demands for democracy and equality.

A general class category, for example upper, middle, or lower class, is an inclusive form that is based primarily on income, career, and education. To be more specific in identifying causal explanations of potential factors for mobilizations and deconstructing class dimensions, one should, instead, examine components of class. Bourdieu's concept of capital together with the analysis of individual characteristics and circumstances can fill these gaps. The participation of mobilization and

class relates to specific cultural aspects, structures, and adopted ideology developed over time, particularly in Thailand. Data present a connection between mobilization and demands as rationales, yet the specific underlying factors by which people join a mobilization remain unclear. This article brings the important demographic factors, including age and address as well as Bourdieu's four forms of capital to demonstrate the likelihood and identify mobilization participation, both physical and online.

### Bangkok Youth Protests

Participation in physical demonstrations is significantly related to age and address as younger Bangkokians are likely to participate in physical protests. The findings show that younger people, under the age of 25, and residing in Bangkok are more likely to join onsite protests. Even though protests appear throughout the country, Bangkok is the area where demonstrations are the most highly concentrated. The questions are why it must be Bangkokians, and why youth. The main focus of motivations for protests later in August 2021 shifted to the severe economic and health impacts of Covid-19 and ineffective government administration (Lertchoosakul, 2022b) and remained as of August 2022. The end of 2021 marked a new type of “*mob*” composed of limited income groups or people with a working-class background (Unno, 2021; Straits Times, 2021; Lertchoosakul, 2022b). Youth rallied because the economic breakdown had impacts on their life opportunities as they lost income and jobs; thus, they came out and called for a better future (Boonlert, 2021; Unno, 2021; Straits Times, 2021; Lertchoosakul, 2022b).

Bangkok has become the key area where people come out to protest because of its geographically close connection to governmental headquarters and its position as a center of business, thus being greatly affected by economic recession. These factors identify Bangkok as spatially interrelated to economic opportunities and urban socio-cultures. Dating back to the pre-capitalist era, it had created the structures of village (*ban*) and city (*mueang*) (Wungaeo and Rehbein 2016;

Thongsawang, Rebhein and Chantavanich, 2020). *Ban* relates to periphery (Baumann, 2020), thus far from the facility accessibility, while *mueang* describes the core and center that benefit from development, and are close to central politics and administration, and businesses. The transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist structure has transformed the spatial surroundings of the city to be more complex, especially the country's capital. Bangkok is the business estate and trading zone. Bangkokians have long had more advantages than other residents in Thailand because they have access to more economic activities, public infrastructure, and medical treatment. On top of that, Bangkok has huge incomes from both domestic and international mobility activities. As soon as policies on lockdown, travel restrictions, or work and study from home were imposed, income-earning activities were suspended, meaning the way of life and income of many Bangkokians collapsed. Before the pandemic, Bangkok had always been the golden area, crowded and busy, where people could earn money 24 hours a day. The swift change and disconnection cut down their income opportunities. Moreover, Bangkokians are also close to politics and familiar with social media. They learn how to exercise their claims. People in other provinces are also affected by the pandemic, social inequality, and economic challenges, but the way of life and economic activities of Bangkokians are closest to business and webs of networks and activities.

Simply put, working-class Bangkokians rely more heavily on commerce, formal exchange, and daily paid basis than others. Residents in villages can still turn to other jobs such as farming, livestock, or informal trading among each other, but it is not the case for Bangkok. Social resentments and antagonisms arose at the time of the economic downturn, and the most political consequences of social inequalities in capitalist societies are privileges and exclusions (Pakulski, 2009). Youth is the generation that has to take the responsibility of social instabilities and challenges. They are angry with the authoritarianism of the school system and political conflicts (Thaipbsworld, 2020), which led to concerns over their economic stability in the future, especially youth from working-class backgrounds. Thus, youth demanded better

structural and political changes (Tan, 2020). When they or their family cannot have enough earnings for everyday consumption, or school fees, they are in positions of hardship and lose hope for the future. Earlier, countless online mobilizations occurred, but economic challenges remain, implying online mobilizations did not suffice. These factors explain why Bangkokian youth are affected most and therefore join physical protests.

### **Cultural and Symbolic Capital in Relation to Online Mobilizations**

The likelihood of participation in online mobilizations differs from that of participation in physical protests. The significant factors for virtual mobilization include age, education, and prestige. Age shares similarity of explanation with the onsite demonstration. Education, which is a kind of cultural capital, and prestige as symbolic capital are components of class, according to Bourdieu, where another two kinds of capital—economic and social—are not significantly included for predicting online mobilizations in Thailand. Class is not the core concept that can explicate the general pattern of mobilizations in Thailand today. Rather, class can identify characteristics of mobilization joiners in particular protests. During 2020-2021, younger groups from the upper-middle and middle classes mobilized in significant numbers for democratic ideology and structural change. However, since August 2021, youths from working class backgrounds had been the main driving force for onsite protests because of economic hardships and concerns over their well-being (Unno, 2021; Straits Times 2021; Lertchoosakul, 2022b). Findings show that cultural and symbolic capital influence online mobilizations. Youth with degrees joined online mobilizations in significant numbers. Technology and the internet have changed the relationships, roles, and power of Thai youth (Thianthai and Tamdee, 2022: 92-93). Educated youth groups realize the power of technology and demonstrate their demands and solidarity via online platforms. They learned that this method was effective, and they protected themselves from the physical harm that might arise onsite. Moreover, online mobilizers could wait because the periods in which they moved were

the initial stage of the pandemic. Even though they were not on the street, they could show their political activeness. This group tended to have a higher socio-economic status, and thus was not seriously affected financially.

Another prevalent factor for explaining online mobilizations is symbolic capital. Respondents who describe themselves as having more prestige or a wider reputation have participated positively in online movements. In the era of the internet and capitalist society, people communicate through online space. They act online and tell the virtual community which many Thai people see as routine. To post or mobilize online is the appearance of social existence for the others and the gaining of recognition. Online mobilizers with symbolic capital are groups impacted by social and political challenges and they take action to protect their interests or preserve the status quo. Furthermore, mobilizing online by posting or expressing opinions online is a sort of action for society implying that they sacrifice their comfort and have sympathy for society, leading to recognition of the existence of others. In the virtual world today, numerous Thai netizens have called out celebrities to stand for less-privileged groups and voice their support for democracy. A number of celebrities continued to do nothing, and netizens responded by not supporting their products or by campaigning against them. These actions affect their image and, of course, their income. On the other hand, celebrities who join online movements or show opinions in favor of democracy or protest gain positive feedback and support, especially from Thai youth. Still, this can be a risk as they could encounter another opposition group or be charged with violating the Computer-related Crime Act B.E 2550 by posting inappropriate messages. In coming out online, their names and acts will be recognized in their wider community and later be transformed into symbolic strength relations and reputation as well as other forms of capital.

## Conclusion

Within the past two years, more than 2,000 protests have taken place (Horatanakun, 2022), involving participants of diverse social classes.

The class of protestors at specific events can be identified. Thus, the comprehensive pattern of mobilizations can be explained through an operative factor. The significant factors related to physical protests are age and address, while those for online mobilizations are age, education, and prestige. Findings reveal that the younger groups under age 25 relate positively to mobilization participation. Geographical location is also a factor in identifying the physical protest, as residents of Bangkok are more likely to protest because of the sudden and lasting economic disruption so long that numerous economic activities and mobilities are suspended. The division between urban and rural is the consequence of the Thai specific social structure of pre-capitalist and capitalist structures that subsequently expanded to urban and rural inequality. In times of crisis, it is in the opposite direction, and urban dwellers suffer greatly. The restrictions of mobility have caused Bangkokians hardships and have negative impacts on urban residents' income, especially working-class people living on minimum daily wages. The physical protest is a later step in the course of mobilizations during the years 2020-2022 as the protestors have been affected in earning a living, and movements for democratic ideology in virtual space are no longer enough in terms of time effectiveness and goals. Education and symbolic capital engage with online mobilizations, where educated people with symbolic capital are more likely to participate. Online mobilizations are relatively safer than physical protests in terms of bodily harm and accidents. With symbolic capital, protesters maintain their status quo by expressing their viewpoint online in order to protect their existing interests and maintain their existence and recognition by others. In so doing, they can preserve their symbolic capital, which can later be converted to other forms of assets that they can explore. This article offers understandings of the current state of social inequality in Thailand, linking the demands of society and factors driving mobilizations. Further research should focus exclusively on the function of social classes, capital possessions, and other potential determinants in order to critically analyze each key mobilization.

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