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Junta Closes Controversial Rajabhakti Park Monument after Student Protests



An anti-coup activist is escorted by security forces at Ban Pong train station in Ratchaburi province, Thailand Photo: Wasawat Lukharang

HUA HIN – Dozens of student activists were taken into military custody yesterday after a failed bid to stage a political stunt to highlight alleged corruption in the construction of Rajabhakti Park and demand that the government take action against it.

Thailand's ruling junta declared without warning on Monday morning that the scandal-tainted complex was temporarily closed for maintenance barely two months after it opened.



Statues of seven former Thai kings are silhouetted against the sky at the official opening of Ratchapakdi Park in Hua Hin, 240 km south of Bangkok

The abrupt closure was announced as a group of anti-coup student activists headed to the site to highlight a deepening corruption controversy engulfing the junta's prestige project.

Indeed, to ensure the students did not even make it to the roadblocks manned by soldiers outside the park, the train on which they were travelling was stopped and their carriages were then detached.

About 38 students were detained on the journey from Bangkok to Rajabhakti Park, built on military land near the seaside town of Hua Hin. It was the second time in a week that the military has intercepted activists en route to the park after two leaders of the opposition red shirt movement were also taken into custody as they left the capital.

National Council for Peace and Order spokesman Winthai Suvaree said the intention was not to detain the group but merely bar them from travelling to the park. He said the move was designed to prevent a possible confrontation that could have become violent.

The Bt1-billion park has become a hot political issue after claims of corruption and irregularities in raising funds for its construction. Deputy Defence Minister Udomdej Sitabutr, who presided over construction of the park, admitted that commission fees were taken by someone involved in the project before being turned into 'donations'. The government set up an in-house committee to investigate but the public has demanded an independent body be set up to look into the matter.

Rajabhakti was built by the armed forces after seizing power in May 2014 as a project to promote national unity around the hallowed institution of the monarchy.



Sirawith Seritiwat (C), an anti-coup activist is taken away by security officials at Ban Pong train station in Ratchaburi province, Thailand Photo: Wasawat Lukharang

But it has instead become a symbol for growing anti-junta sentiment after allegations of rampant corruption were aired last month.

The controversy has prompted a series of contradictory defenses from the ruling generals and been fueled by the military's efforts to quash the protests.

The relentless leak of information about the normally highly secretive world of military affairs has fueled speculation about splits within the junta or the higher echelons of Thai society.



People shout at anti-coup activists at Ban Pong train station in Ratchaburi province, Thailand Photo: Wasawat Lukharang

Since the coup, the junta has increasingly deployed the country's strict lese majeste law to prosecute any perceived insults to the royal family.

The Rajabhakti Park scandal has grown during a broadening investigation into individuals alleged to have exploited ties to the monarchy for personal benefit. Four people have been arrested so far in connection with the alleged plot, two of whom have died in military custody.

At Rajabhakti, there have been persistent reports that a middleman described only as an amulet trader demanded lucrative commissions from the foundries contracted to cast the seven statues.

The junta initially declared last month that its investigation had cleared officers of any wrongdoing, but has now launched a new investigation in response to the public outcry.

Two senior officers accused of being involved in the diversion of funds have disappeared. And Gen Udomdej Sitabutr, the deputy defence minister who oversaw the park's construction as then army commander and is a long-time ally of junta leader Gen Prayuth Chan-o-cha, has been fighting off calls for his resignation.

Maj Gen Sansern Keawkamnerd, the junta spokesman, said the students' planned trip amounted to a political activity that violated a law banning public meetings of more than five people for political purposes.

He earlier said that ill-intentioned people who want to use Rajabhakti Park as a venue for political activities that could harm the country faced legal action.

"Thais have the liberty of being able to go anywhere," he said. "But if their intentions are to cause unrest then they will have to take the consequences according to the law."

"The park was built with the faith and loyalty of the Thai people toward the monarchy, and all Thai people should visit it at least once in their lifetime. But those with ill intentions should keep away from it."

By Philip Sherwell – The Telegraph, Asia One

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