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Police at Thammasat Where Released Activists Plan News Conference



Members of the League of Liberal Thammasat for Democracy, including leader Sirawith Seritiwat, fourth from left, celebrate their Monday night release in the capital's Phuttamonthon district. Photo: League of Liberal Thammasat for Democracy / Facebook

By Sasiwan Mookhasen
Staff Reporter

BANGKOK — All pro-democracy activists arrested Monday on their way to visit the scandal-plagued Rajabhakti Park were released last night, after nearly half of those involved signed contracts vowing to not engage in politics or protest.

Of the 36 activists taken into military custody to prevent them from reaching the park in Hua Hin, the 17 activists who agreed to sign the contract were released at about 7pm on Monday; the remaining 19 were freed at 8:40pm despite refusing to sign the agreement.

Lead by Thammasat University student activist Sirawith Seritiwat, most of the group was arrested Monday afternoon after the train car they boarded in Ratchaburi was disconnected from the engine to stop them from traveling to Prachuap Khiri Khan province to visit the park and symbolically call attention to unanswered allegations of graft in the construction of the billion-baht park.

Military Closes Park 'For Maintenance,' Detains Dozens of Activists

The activists taken into custody said they were summoned one at a time to a room for interrogation. They were told they would be released if they signed the agreement not to be involved in any political movement. Seventeen activists, mostly older supporters of the student-led movement, signed.

"But the other 19 activists, who were almost all students, did not," said Anon Nampha, a leader of pro-democracy group Resistant Citizens. "We were asked to sign many documents, so we agreed to sign only the one confirming we were not abused during detention."

Though they were not physically assaulted, Anon said some activists were forcefully dragged by authorities.

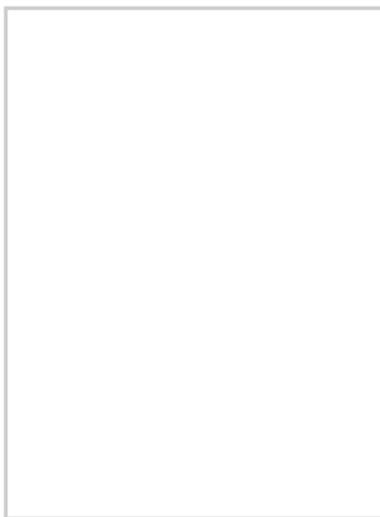
Police are now reportedly gathering at Thammasat University's Tha Prachan campus, where the activists insist they will continue holding those in power accountable by holding a news conference this afternoon to underscore their allegations of human rights abuses.

On Monday, a junta spokesman said the activists were just invited to talk, as the military wanted to prevent a confrontation with counter-protesters who were also planning to protest in front of the park, which was built to glorify the monarchy.

"If they wanted information, there are a lot more appropriate channels to pursue without risking breaking the law," said Col. Winthai Suvaree. "It is believed that some people have tried to use this chance to expand the story in the way they want."

Gatherings of more than five people for "political purposes" have been banned since the junta seized power in May 2014 but unevenly applied, mostly to those critical of its military regime.

Dozens of ultra-royalists in yellow and pink shirts also gathered at Ratchaburi's Ban Pong Railway Station on Monday to condemn the activists, accusing them of being supported by the opposition Redshirt movement that supported the previous civilian government. They also complained that efforts to investigate graft in a facility intended to celebrate the monarchy was disrespectful during the month of the King's birthday.



Excerpt of an infographic published last night by the New Democracy Movement alleging the involvement of high-level officials in graft at the Rajabhakti Park. Junta chairman Prayuth Chan-ocha "it sucks."

The reactions from both sides were reflected on social media under the same hashtag "#ทีมเจนิว" (#TeamJaNew) to support it as a fight against junta corruption or oppose it as sedition. Ja New is a nickname for student leader Sirawith.

The park, which was closed Monday – for maintenance, authorities said – postponed its opening time today from 9am to 1pm.

Junta chief Prayuth Chan-ocha this morning briefly told reporters his government would convene another news conference on the matter this afternoon.

Asked what he thought of an infographic published last night by the New Democracy Movement on Facebook about the alleged Rajabhakti Park graft scandal, Prayuth simply said, "It sucks! I can't help if you want to believe them!"

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